



*Mr. Darcy's
Christmas
Letters*

A PRIDE AND PREJUDICE NOVELLA

MELANIE RACHEL

Mr. Darcy's Christmas Letters

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Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Epilogue

About The Author

Other Books by the Author

Chapter One

Darcy gripped the blotted letter in his hand and stared out the window of his study into the dark London night.

It was the twenty-sixth of November.

A year ago this very evening—nearly this very moment—Darcy had danced with Elizabeth Bennet. They had spoken around one another as they joined hands, but he still recalled that dance with a sort of reverence that only deepened the longing in his heart.

Elizabeth had been wearing a pale-yellow frock that fluttered gracefully as she moved confidently through the steps. They had quarrelled a bit as they waited their turn to lead, though all he could recall now was how her hair shone in the candlelight and how her dark, luminous eyes had met his own in challenge.

After her stinging rejection of his marriage proposal in Kent last spring, Darcy had never believed he would have another chance with her. But he had done what he could to attend to

her reproofs, to become the kind of man she would esteem, even if she could never love him.

And then in August she had appeared at Pemberley with her aunt and uncle, and while Darcy could not determine precisely what it was, or why, something between them had changed.

Perhaps she had changed. Or he had. Whatever the case, he had foolishly allowed himself to hope. Until Wickham once again threw Darcy's life into turmoil.

Darcy had been in high spirits when he rode to see Elizabeth at the inn in Lambton that bright, warm summer morning. Darcy had intended to speak with her, to inquire whether her sentiments towards him had undergone any material alteration, whether he might, despite all that he had done wrong, hope to one day secure her hand in marriage. It had all suddenly seemed possible, that they might yet be happy.

He had been announced and stepped into the antechamber to find Elizabeth in acute distress. Between tears, she had told him everything, how Wickham had run off with her careless youngest sister and the consequences she feared for herself and all her family. It was the most private, the most painful of admissions, and yet she had trusted him with it. That moment would forever live in his memory, joy blended with pain, knowing how he loved her but unable to reveal it, for how could he ask for a return of that love when she was so distraught and when his prideful unwillingness to lay open his business to the world was the cause?

Darcy had made it right, as far as was possible. Lydia Bennet had not wanted any help of his. She had wanted Wickham, and though Darcy urged her otherwise, she had chosen to bind herself to the villain for the rest of their lives. Elizabeth and her other sisters, though, were safe.

After the Wickhams had left for the north, Darcy had returned with Bingley to Netherfield, but when they called at Longbourn, Elizabeth would not even look at him. His disappointment was extreme, but he could not be surprised. How could any woman forgive the man who had seen Wickham among her friends and family and not warned them? That he had kept quiet to protect his own sister was no excuse, for it had cost Elizabeth hers. In that terrible letter he had written after he had proposed, he had told Elizabeth all about Ramsgate, yet not given her leave to tell anyone. It had not even occurred to him to do so.

He had returned to London, alone, and here he remained. The page he held in his hand offered him the relief that at least one thing had gone as it should: Bingley and Miss Jane Bennet were to be wed.

I am to be married on December 9th, Darcy. You must stand up as my witness. Do say you will come to Netherfield.

Elizabeth was certain to be her sister's witness. Could he bear to stand at the altar and pretend that he did not want to speak his own vows to her? Had he not already paid enough for his arrogance, his conceit, and his selfish disdain of the feelings of others? How much must he endure?

Apparently, more.

Bingley had generously forgiven Darcy for separating him from the eldest Miss Bennet, and Darcy was relieved not to have lost a good friend. To stand up with Bingley would be a trial, but it would also be an honour.

He would go to Netherfield.



Elizabeth sat on the deep sill of her chamber window with her knees pulled up to her chest. She wrapped her blanket tightly around her and leaned her head against the glass, watching as the stars winked at her.

It was the twenty-sixth of November.

A year ago on this very night—indeed nearly this very moment—she had danced with Mr. Darcy. Argued with him, more like. What a fool she had been, taking the word of a scoundrel when she ought to have been taking the measure of the man before her. Not that Mr. Darcy would have stayed in Hertfordshire after the ball. He had still been too proud for that. Even so, she now recalled that night with a deep, aching sort of yearning.

No one would expect that she ever thought about Mr. Darcy at all, and yet Elizabeth longed for him every day. Was that not the worst of ironies?

The night of the ball, Mr. Darcy had been in evening dress, more impressive and handsome than she had wished to admit.

When they had met again at Pemberley, months after she had rejected his offer of marriage so forcefully, Elizabeth had allowed herself to imagine seeing him so formally attired again. Perhaps they might dance once more, or he might escort her to a dinner party. But in the end, they had only been in company for three days before Lydia's folly had required that she and the Gardiners return home in haste. Three days and her entire world had changed.

She had dreamed of Mr. Darcy the night before Jane's letters had arrived in Lambton. The two of them were in the same drawing room at Pemberley where she and her aunt had visited with Miss Darcy, but they were quite alone. She had been sitting on the settee with a book. Mr. Darcy had taken the seat beside her and kissed her temple before opening a book of his own.

It had been the perfect portrait of domesticity. Never before had she wanted anything so much.

Then the letters had arrived and put an end to all such illusions. Lydia had ruined everything, and worse, she had not the faintest hint of remorse for having done it. As Mr. Darcy had left her at the inn in Lambton that terrible day, Elizabeth had felt two things. One, that she might actually be in love with Mr. Darcy, and two, that Lydia's wild behaviour had made any future with him impossible.

"Can you bear it, Lizzy?" Jane had asked this morning, taking Elizabeth's hand. Apparently Mr. Bingley had written

to ask Mr. Darcy if he would come to Netherfield and stand witness to his marriage.

Jane was the only one who knew that Mr. Darcy had proposed to her in Kent. However, even Jane did not know that she would welcome his addresses, and Elizabeth had never bothered to correct her sister's understanding. What would be the point of confessing that she loved Mr. Darcy when it could come to nothing?

“Of course” had been her reply.

Mr. Darcy would not wish to come, she was sure. But he would. For he was a gentleman in every way that mattered, and he would see this as his duty. If nothing else, perhaps she might at least be allowed to thank him for saving Lydia and rescuing her family's reputation.

When her aunt had written to tell her all that Mr. Darcy had done to repair what Wickham had broken, Elizabeth had harboured a secret hope—that Mr. Darcy had done it all for her. But he had neither met her eye nor spoken a word when he arrived with Mr. Bingley in September, and then he had removed to town without explanation or farewell.

He had gone away, and he had not come back.

When Mr. Darcy returned for the wedding, Elizabeth would offer him her gratitude, for she was sure he did not desire any more than that from her. She would endure the loss of his good opinion—if indeed she still owned it—with the grace she possessed but had not previously shown him.

She wondered where Mr. Darcy was tonight. If he ever thought of her, she hoped it was with kindness.

Chapter Two

The wind was picking up as Darcy descended from the carriage. Netherfield loomed above, foreboding where it ought to be welcoming, a warm house out of the cold, the amiable Charles Bingley inside.

No matter. He just had to endure one evening and half of tomorrow. Then he could be on his way to Pemberley, where he was most at home.

Pemberley, where he had not returned since his abbreviated visit in August.

Elizabeth had been there then, wandering the grounds when he walked up from the stables. He had not been expecting to see anyone but the servants. He had been dirty and tired, and Elizabeth could not have missed that he smelled strongly of horse. Yet she had been nervously polite.

He had been so struck by the sight of her. Elizabeth, at Pemberley.

The following day he had taken Georgiana to meet Elizabeth at the inn. The day after that, he had rushed back from fishing with the other gentlemen when he learned that Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner were returning Georgiana's call. When he entered the room, not at all his usually composed self, Elizabeth had been sitting in the northern saloon with Georgiana and the other ladies, coaxing a smile from his retiring sister by telling her a story about how a cat had stolen into Longbourn's larder when she was just a girl. He could see the falsely polite expressions on the faces of Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst from the corner of his eye, but they were quickly banished from his thoughts. Mrs. Annesley was listening attentively, and Mrs. Gardiner was shaking her head fondly, interjecting that the cat had not slipped inside, that *someone* had very kindly opened the door for him.

And Elizabeth had laughed.

The scene had made his heart beat wildly. All he had ever wanted had been there before him.

And then, the very next day it had all been lost.

Elizabeth had been trembling, so great was her distress. What mortified Darcy the most was not that he had lost her through his own inaction, but that she had been so materially wounded by it. The woman most precious to him in the world, even more than his own sister, and he had allowed Wickham to destroy her family's reputation to protect his own.

Well, at least he had been able to put that right. As right as the foolish Lydia Bennet would allow. But it was done.

“Darcy!”

The warm voice pierced the fog of his ruminations, and Darcy realised he had been standing outside his coach in the cold for some minutes like an idiot. He shook his trepidation away, took a deep breath, and pressed forward.

“Bingley,” he called as he mounted the steps. “How fares the groom?”

Bingley stood at the top of the steps, a wide smile on his lips, beckoning him inside. “I am well, Darcy. Anticipating having my Jane home with me.”

Darcy offered his friend a half-smile. He knew precisely how anxious he must be. At least Bingley had a definitive end to his waiting. “Will your family depart for London afterward?”

Bingley shook his head, his expression a mix of displeasure and wry understanding. “They are not coming. Louisa wrote to say that they had planned to spend the festive season in Scarborough, and there would not be time to travel here and back.”

“I had not realised the Hursts enjoyed Scarborough so very much,” Darcy replied. “Do not they generally spend December in town?”

“They do,” Bingley responded tartly, quite uncharacteristic for him. “This fascination with the north is quite new. Perhaps Hurst’s father requested that they remain.” Unspoken was the fact that the larger Hurst family did not appreciate Caroline

Bingley's company. They had never hesitated to send Hurst and his wife on their way if it meant being rid of Miss Bingley.

Darcy was surprised that Hurst had not accepted the invitation if for no other reason than he would be fed and lodged at no cost to himself. It was always possible, of course, that the ladies had not mentioned the wedding to him.

Though Darcy was affronted on Bingley's behalf, it was a great relief to him that Miss Bingley was not in residence. Her rapid pettiness reminded him of how he had acted when first he arrived here and how that behaviour had set Elizabeth against him from the beginning. It was not a pleasant memory.

"I am pleased that *you* are here," Bingley was saying. "Although I do wish you had planned to arrive last night. We had the most wonderful dinner with the Bennets. It would have been good for you to meet them again before seeing them at the church tomorrow."

The timing of the dinner had been the very reason Darcy had delayed his journey until today. "They are *your* future family, Bingley, not mine." There was almost a tinge of melancholy in his voice, and he commanded himself to banish it.

Bingley clapped him on the back. "The Bennets are not so bad when you get to know them. Mrs. Bennet is excitable, I grant you, but soon Jane will live at Netherfield, and we will not have to meet her mother every day."

Darcy doubted very much that Mrs. Bennet would distance herself from her eldest and advantageously married daughter.

But then, it was not his business, was it? Mrs. Bennet would never be making a nuisance of herself at Pemberley.

“As you say,” he agreed.

Bingley walked him to the chambers that had been prepared for him, which were in a wing on the opposite side of the house from Bingley’s chambers. Darcy smiled broadly at that. “I will not be here, you know, when Mrs. Bingley enters the house.”

“An overabundance of caution, let us say,” Bingley replied, nudging Darcy in the ribs with his elbow.

Bingley was normally a jovial sort of fellow, but today he was downright giddy. And why not? He was about to marry the woman he loved. Darcy put his own desires aside. Bingley was not the reason for the jealousy that burned in his chest like a hot fire banked low. He had it in him to be truly happy for his friend. There was no man of his acquaintance who deserved a loving woman more.

“Well,” Darcy said, “allow me to change my clothes, and then we shall spend this evening eating a fine meal and toasting your future felicity.”

“Not too many toasts.” Bingley’s countenance was nearly shining. “I want to remember every moment of my wedding day.”

Bingley was a far better man than he. “I have always been in favour of quality over quantity, Bingley.”

“One of many reasons I knew you were the right man for the job.” Bingley offered Darcy a shallow bow when they reached the chamber door. “I will see you shortly.”



Elizabeth was so absorbed in her thoughts that she did not hear her father calling her name.

“Lizzy,” he said with a sigh, gently taking her book from her hands. “You are terribly distracted.”

“My apologies, sir,” she told him. “I was wool-gathering.”

“I should say you were.” He sat down in the chair beside hers, searching brown eyes meeting her own. “Lizzy, you went away this summer your usual charming, witty self, but you returned to us quiet and subdued. If it were not for Jane’s wedding plans, I do not think we would see you at all other than at meals.”

Elizabeth’s protests were weak, and her father lifted one shaggy eyebrow. “Ever since Lydia’s folly, you have not been yourself. I cannot recall the last time I heard you laugh. Jane may not notice because she is so caught up with your mother and her intended, but Lizzy, will you not tell your old papa what is troubling you?”

Elizabeth wished that she could, but she was still angry with her father. A folly, he called it? It had been dangerous to send Lydia to Brighton with no one but the young Mrs. Forster as a chaperone, and she had told her father so. He had dismissed her warning out of hand, only desirous of his own peace. Papa

had his book room and Jane had her Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth alone was paying for his negligence. When her father had returned from London, his search for Lydia a failure, he had admitted Elizabeth had been right to warn him, but what good was that after the worst had already happened?

“There is nothing the matter,” Elizabeth said, “other than I grieve for Lydia’s future and feel sorry to be losing Jane’s company, even to so fine a man as Mr. Bingley.”

Her father watched her carefully, speaking not a word. At last, he sighed. “Very well, child, but understand that if you do wish to speak of it, you know where to find me.”

Elizabeth offered him a slight smile. It was all she could summon. Instead of remaining in the drawing room where any of her family might find her, she wandered to the family parlour at the back of the house.

Her father had noticed her anguish, and that was something, she supposed. Mamma would only ascribe Elizabeth’s sorrow to jealousy and scold her for it. Mary and Kitty were wrapped up in their own concerns, Mary praying more because she did not understand how Lydia had broken all the rules and yet wound up with everything she wanted, Kitty shyly following Jane about and involving herself in the wedding plans since she had not been able to do so with Lydia. Neither of them yet possessed the insight to realise how unsatisfying Lydia’s married life would be. Their youngest sister would pay the price for her impetuosity, and do so among strangers, very

far from home. Elizabeth did have it in her to pity Lydia for that.

She closed her eyes and attempted to banish the melancholy that was overtaking her, but it was no use, not today.

Elizabeth found herself staring out the one window that looked to the northwest and Netherfield. She stood before it. Had Mr. Darcy arrived yet? It was cold, but there had been neither rain nor snow to prevent his journey.

Though she would never have asked Mr. Bingley about his friend's travel plans, Elizabeth had nourished a secret hope that Mr. Darcy would attend the formal family dinner the previous evening. She had taken special care with her toilette, earning herself a scolding from Mamma, who had told her not to bother, as there was nothing for *her* at Netherfield.

It had stung. In fact, all of Mamma's little slights, intended and unintended, had bothered her more these past weeks than they ought. Elizabeth knew this was simply how her mother was, and she ought not allow the insults to discompose her, but after the events of the past year her emotions were rubbed raw, and she knew not what to think or do or say. She had thrown herself into assisting Jane with preparations for the wedding, not only because Jane deserved such attentions but to keep herself from running mad.

What would she do when Jane was gone? Although a three-mile trek across the fields was of no matter when the weather was mild, it was still a good distance away from having her

sister in the room next to her own. And Jane would have her own concerns and duties as a new wife.

Elizabeth wished she might be able to do the same. But how could she when she had so abused the man she now understood she cared for, accusing him of a lack of feeling and a dearth of integrity? To her shame, she had learned that he felt more deeply and had more integrity than any other man she had ever known.

She had not been wrong about his interference between Jane and Mr. Bingley, but had he not also rectified that error by bringing Mr. Bingley back again? Mr. Darcy was not perfect, but what would she do with a perfect man? More to the point, what would a perfect man want with her? No, that was Jane's lot, to have a husband so uniquely complementary, to create the serene marriage that best suited her.

Elizabeth preferred the storm. But it had not served her well.

She went to her writing table and drew one of the drawers forward. Behind the false back there was a keyhole, and she fit a little key into it, turning it all the way to the right until the lock popped open and she could withdraw two letters. She sat on her bed with them, reading them both through. The first was showing signs of wear, but she could not resist tracing her finger along the farewell.

I will only add, God bless you.

Fitzwilliam Darcy

The next was a letter from Aunt Gardiner, extolling Mr. Darcy's efforts to find Lydia, to bring her back to the family without marrying such a terrible man, and then seeing that the marriage took place when it was clear Lydia would not be convinced. A tickling wetness on Elizabeth's cheek had her refolding both letters hurriedly so as not to smear the ink with a wayward tear. She held them in her hand for a moment, fragile reminders of what she had thrown away, talismans that proved an honourable man had loved her once, even if she had not recognised it.

He had loved her, and she had never seen it. "How clever do you think yourself now, Elizabeth Bennet?" she whispered.

Chapter Three

“Elizabeth Bennet,” Mamma cried out from the hall. “**E***You* are not the one being wed tomorrow! Come down at once and help your sister with her bouquet!”

“Coming, Mamma,” she called back in an almost steady voice.

She opened her door to see Mamma standing outside. “I knew Jane would save us all, and so she has, no thanks to you.”

“No thanks to me,” Elizabeth murmured, then took a deep breath. She could be cheerful for Jane. Nothing must mar her wedding day. “I will help Jane.”

“Good.” Her mother turned in the direction of her chambers.

Elizabeth tripped lightly down the stairs and squared her shoulders as she entered the family parlour where Jane sat alone, working on a bouquet to carry in the morning. As talented as Jane was in the stillroom, this was more Elizabeth’s

skill than her own, and she smiled when Elizabeth approached with a single lifted brow.

“Where are Kitty and Mary?” Elizabeth asked.

“Oh, everyone has gone up to bed,” Jane replied, frowning at the dried foliage spread out before her on the table.

“What have you done to those poor flowers?” Elizabeth inquired teasingly. “Here, you had better allow me.”

“Thank you, Lizzy,” Jane said gratefully.

Elizabeth tried to ignore her sister’s assessing gaze as she deftly arranged the dried herbs and flowers into a beautiful array. She then drew a yellow ribbon from her own hair and tied the whole up with it.

“Oh, Lizzy,” Jane said quietly. “No, that is your favourite one.”

“Do you think I would give you my least favourite to carry at your wedding?” Elizabeth gazed fondly at her sister. Jane’s eyes began to mist, and Elizabeth said quickly, “I am of a mind not to give you up to Mr. Bingley after all.”

“Lizzy,” Jane said with a half-laugh. “I love him.”

“A great pity, for now I must allow the wedding to go forward.” Elizabeth arched one eyebrow. “At least you will not have to change the initials on your handkerchiefs.”

Jane dabbed at her eyes with one such cloth. “You will make me cry.”

“Oh, you had better not,” Elizabeth warned teasingly, “or in the morning your nose will be red and your eyes puffy. You want your groom to be enraptured when he sees you walk into the church, not concerned that you do not wish to marry him after all.”

Her sister’s eyes grew wide, and her tears stopped. “I had not thought of that.”

“I am in jest,” Elizabeth assured her sister with a soft laugh, taking Jane’s hand and planting a kiss on the back of it. “As if a little water could do anything but enhance your loveliness. You are marrying the man you love tomorrow, and he *almost* deserves you. I am very, very happy for you both.”

“And you will not be made uneasy by Mr. Darcy’s presence?” Jane inquired for the second time, all kindness and compassion.

“Mr. Darcy’s presence will not affect me one jot.” Elizabeth was emphatic. “Not a bit.”

“Good,” Jane said. “For I would not like it if you were not entirely happy on a day that promises so much joy.”

“Do not worry for me, Jane,” Elizabeth assured her sister. “Worry about Mamma weeping during the ceremony, for if she does, no one will be able to hear your vows!”

Jane closed her eyes and shook her head. “*Elizabeth.*”



Darcy sat up to look at himself in the glass once Scripps, Bingley's valet, had finished his shave. He would accompany Bingley in his friend's carriage, walk from the church to Longbourn with the others, participate for a time in the wedding breakfast, and then he would be done. Anders had instructions to load the Darcy carriage and meet him at the Bennets' estate. By noon they would be on their way to Pemberley.

“Are you ready, Darcy?” Bingley cried cheerfully as he burst into the room.

“The question is whether you are ready, Bingley,” Darcy said drily, “but I can see that you are.”

“I have been awake for hours. I cannot believe it is happening at last.”

Darcy studied his friend. “I am very glad it has worked out so well, Bingley. I feel I must apologise once more ...”

“None of that, Darcy,” Bingley said, waving a hand dismissively. “I forgave you completely the moment my angel said yes.”

“You are a generous friend, Bingley.”

“As are you. Jane will be quite pleased with all the fabrics you brought her as a wedding gift, as will Mrs. Bennet.” He smiled enthusiastically.

“It was nothing, Bingley. I asked my sister and Mrs. Annesley to select them, and they enjoyed themselves immensely. Please do not mention it.” He truly hoped Bingley

would not speak of it. He would not wish Elizabeth to think he was attempting to purchase her sister's good-will.

He brushed his hands down his jacket and nodded. "To the church, then?"

"At once," Bingley said laughingly, turning on his heel and marching out to the waiting coach.



Elizabeth entered Jane's room as the last strand of her sister's golden hair was being woven into an intricate style perhaps more suited for a ball than a solemn ceremony. Still, Mamma would have her way, and Jane would not mind.

Elizabeth placed her hands lightly on Jane's shoulders as her sister sat at the glass. "Are you ready, Janie?" she asked, addressing her eldest sister as she had not since they were small.

"Oh, Lizzy," Jane said softly, "I was up hours ago. I am ready, dearest." She turned in her chair and grasped her sister's hands. "You must come to visit me in a few days. Charles still has much to do around the estate, having been gone for so many months and then spending so much time at Longbourn. I will be happier if you are there to help me sort through my own duties. Do say you will come."

The Bingleys had postponed their wedding trip until the late spring, when they would travel north to meet his family.

“Are you sure, Jane?” Elizabeth asked. “Will you not have company?”

“If you mean Mr. Darcy, no, he means to leave today. Will you come?”

Elizabeth smiled, though her heart broke anew. Mr. Darcy could not even bear to be in her presence for an entire day. He had done all he could to spare her reputation, but even if he did wish to wed her, surely he would not connect himself to a family that included Mr. Wickham. “I would be pleased to come, if you wish it,” she said.

It was not fair, to judge Mr. Darcy so harshly when she had been the one to drive him away. Lydia, too, but Elizabeth had been first.

“Thank you, dearest,” Jane said fervently, squeezing Elizabeth’s hands and allowing herself to be helped to her feet. “Shall we go?”

“Indeed,” Elizabeth said affectionately. “Let us not keep your groom waiting any longer.”

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Papa smiled a little tearfully. “My eldest birdie is leaving the nest,” he told Jane softly. “I am pleased to give you to a man so well suited to you.”

“Of course he is suited!” Mamma exclaimed. “He has five thousand a year! Oh, Jane, he is the handsomest man I have ever seen!”

“Thank you, my dear,” Papa said drily, but Mamma did not hear him.

Jane touched the corner of her eye with her handkerchief but lowered it when Elizabeth smirked and tapped her own nose.

“Do not cry, Jane!” Mamma exclaimed. “My goodness, Mr. Bennet, what can you be thinking? Her eyes must not be red at the wedding or people will talk!” She dabbed none too gently at Jane’s tears. “She will be mistress of Netherfield. We shall all meet very often!”

Mamma was soon distracted by a question from Kitty, and Papa leaned down to murmur in Jane’s ear. “Not too often, my dear, at least for the first month or so. That shall be my gift to you.”

Jane’s smile was all that was proper, but Elizabeth could see that she was relieved.

“You go ahead with the other girls, Mrs. Bennet,” her father said in a voice loud enough for everyone else to hear. “I will walk with Jane to make sure every eye is upon the bride when the doors open.”

“Yes, yes,” Mamma agreed happily, fluttering around the younger girls. “Off we go, then.”

Papa offered one arm to Jane and the other to Elizabeth. It was a difficult five minutes as they walked to the chapel in Longbourn village. Elizabeth did not know whether the deep chill that settled in her bones was from the winter weather, the imminent loss of Jane to her betrothed, or the thought of being

once again in Mr. Darcy's company and knowing that she could no longer mean anything to him.

Chapter Four

Bingley was reciting his vows, and Darcy closed his eyes as he tried not to stare at Elizabeth. She was right there, not more than ten feet away. It was torture. What he would not give to go back to that first assembly and allow Bingley to introduce them, so he could ask her for a dance.

“And thereto I plight thee my troth,” Bingley recited.

This was the sad ending to his blundering campaign. Bingley was marrying Jane Bennet, and Darcy was not marrying Elizabeth.

Without even thinking about it, he peeked over at Elizabeth. She was paying rapt attention to the vicar as he droned on about something or other. Was it his imagination, or was she a little pale?

“For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health,” Jane Bennet repeated softly.

In sickness and health. And now Darcy was worried for Elizabeth. Had she been ill? Bingley had never said, and

Darcy was certain his friend would have mentioned something had Elizabeth been seriously unwell.

He glanced over at Elizabeth again. Her eyes were fixed upon the vicar as though she had never heard anything as interesting as the words that were coming from the man's mouth. It would probably behove him to listen, too.

He turned his eyes to the pastor and forced himself to attend to the rest of the service.



Elizabeth was a hardy, healthy woman, but standing in the church with Mr. Darcy so near made her feel a little faint. Now that she wanted Mr. Darcy to think well of her, she did not quite know how to act in his presence, and that made her anxious. She blinked and took a deep breath. Swooning at her sister's wedding would be ridiculous and humiliating, and so she kept her eyes focused on Mr. Kendall as he read aloud from his book in a voice that rang throughout the chapel.

Jane was soon reciting her vows, the expression upon her countenance as close to blissful as Elizabeth ever expected to witness. Then the ring was on her sister's finger and Mr. Bingley was reciting his vows to her.

“With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship ...”

Elizabeth tried not to think about a wedding night with Mr. Darcy, but it was little use. She was almost entirely ignorant of what such a night would entail, but he was so very handsome she did not think she would much mind it. When Mr. Kendall

began to speak again, Elizabeth could stand it no longer. She turned her head slowly towards Jane and then glanced up quickly at Mr. Darcy.

All she could see was his handsome profile, for unlike her, he was paying attention as he ought. How maddening. Elizabeth would not place a hand over her racing heart and attempted to ignore the way her stomach flipped. She would maintain her composure, witness her sister's signature in the registry, smile and laugh and congratulate the new Mr. and Mrs. Bingley. And then she would visit Jane in a few days, after Mr. Darcy had departed.

She stole another peek, noticing this time how neatly Mr. Darcy's hair curled over his ear. Even his hair knew its place.

Elizabeth looked away.

Stop this, she told herself firmly. You cannot be upset with Mr. Collins because he did not accept your refusal and Mr. Darcy because he did.

Before she knew it, the bride and groom were being led to the register. She watched affectionately as Jane signed her name as Bennet for the final time. After the Bingleys stepped back to allow their witnesses to sign, Elizabeth took up the pen—just as Mr. Darcy was reaching for it.

Their hands touched. Elizabeth's entire body lit on fire as though she had been struck by lightning. She yanked her hand away.

Mr. Darcy frowned. "I beg your pardon, Miss Bennet." He withdrew.

Elizabeth wanted to speak, but it was as though her mouth was filled with cottonwool. She retrieved the pen and signed her name, then waited, hands clasped before her, as he did the same. Mr. Bingley was glancing between the two of them, probably to be certain the formalities were completed. Elizabeth offered him a small smile, and he returned it.

Mr. Darcy nodded at Mr. Kendall as he straightened and set the pen down.

"Mr. Darcy, I ..." she began, but he shook his head.

"There is no need to explain, madam." His voice was clear and deep and impossibly sad. Perhaps he was not congratulating himself on his near escape from her. Perhaps he was as grieved as she that such a match could no longer even be contemplated. Her heart went out to him as he gazed about the chapel—Mr. and Mrs. Bingley had now walked ahead—and then offered her his arm.

Elizabeth realised they were alone and gathered her courage. "Mr. Darcy, I would like to thank you, sir."

He did not appear to have heard her, for his eyes were fixed on something outside. "It is raining," he told her. "Wait just a moment."

A footman was holding an enormous umbrella over the newly married couple, and Mr. Bingley was about to hand

Jane into his—their—carriage. Elizabeth stood just inside the doorway to listen.

“It is silly to take the carriage to Longbourn, Charles,” Jane said. “It is but a brief walk from here.”

“You were taken ill the last time you were out in the rain,” Mr. Bingley said firmly. “The carriage is already here. There is no reason not to take it.”

Jane shook her head and smiled at her husband. “Very well. I shall not keep Harrington standing her in the weather holding our umbrella while we debate.”

“I knew you would see reason,” Mr. Bingley replied with an answering smile.

Mr. Darcy said something in a low voice to his friend and reached inside the coach. He emerged holding another umbrella just as Mr. Bingley handed Jane up. Her family waved the Bingleys off—or rather, Mamma waved them off—and the others began to walk back to the house.

Mr. Bingley watched them through the window as the carriage rumbled away.

“Here,” Mr. Darcy said, opening a smaller umbrella than the one the footman had held. Elizabeth reached out to take it, but he shook his head. “Allow me.”

Elizabeth did not wish for him to be discomfited. “I am able to hold it myself.”

“I see.” He handed it to her, but Elizabeth had not accounted for their differences in height, and when she opened it, she

nearly poked Mr. Darcy in the eye. Elizabeth winced, but a faint smile appeared briefly upon his face.

“My apologies, sir.”

“Not at all. May I?” He held out his hand, and she sheepishly returned the umbrella to him. Mr. Darcy made certain she was covered by it, and they walked out of the church together, closer than was wise for Elizabeth’s equanimity. She breathed in his scent, a sort of musk with bergamot and orange. Why had she never noticed before how enticing he smelled?

Before it drove her entirely mad, she recalled that this tête-à-tête was likely the only opportunity she would have to achieve her aim.

“Mr. Darcy, there is something I should like to say to you,” Elizabeth said hurriedly.

They took the turn into Longbourn’s drive, and his gaze fixed upon hers with some trepidation. “I shall hear whatever it is you wish to say.”

Elizabeth eyed the nearness of the house and rushed on. “I only wish to thank you, sir, for your part in saving my sister Lydia. She mentioned you were present at her wedding, and I wrote straightaway to my aunt who informed me of your part in the business.”

His countenance darkened a little before he recovered. “I am sorry to have afforded you any uneasiness. I never meant for anyone other than the Gardiners to know of my role.”

Elizabeth understood from this that he would not have involved the Gardiners either, had he been able to help it. But he could not act on Lydia's behalf without someone in her family authorizing him to do so.

"It is very like you," Elizabeth said quietly. "I wish to offer you my deepest gratitude, sir, on behalf of all my family, for none of them know what you have done for us."

His expression hardened, as though it had been chiselled from marble. "I could do no less, Miss Bennet. Please do not mention it."

Elizabeth could hear in his tone that he meant it. He did not wish for her gratitude nor to be reminded of what he had done for her family. What mortification it must have cost him to deal with Mr. Wickham again, and on behalf of Lydia, a girl he could never respect. A cold chill began to seep from the region of her heart. She nodded. "I shall not, then."

They stepped under the portico at Longbourn. Mr. Darcy snapped the umbrella closed and tapped the end on the stones to shake off the worst of the water, perhaps a little too hard. They entered the house with a silence between them even deeper than it had been in the church. Mr. Darcy handed Mr. Hill the umbrella and removed his coat, and Elizabeth noticed that half of it was wet. He had kept her dry under the umbrella, but not himself.

Elizabeth wanted nothing more than to run upstairs to her chamber, throw herself on the bed, and weep. But she was no longer a child. She had duties to perform for her sister today,

and she would fulfil them. She offered Mr. Darcy a shallow curtsy when they stood in the front hall and then left him there.



Darcy stood in the entry hall, quite alone. A few stray drops of water fell from the half of his hat that had not been covered by the umbrella and made tiny splattering noises as they hit the floor.

Gratitude. That was what Elizabeth wanted to convey to him. Her *gratitude*. The word tasted bitter. If she had upbraided him for his officiousness in handling the sordid business of her sister and Wickham when he had no standing or made a sarcastic quip about his being Bingley's witness at the wedding he had been to such pains to prevent, at least that would have been something. Anything to show him how she really felt about him.

Well, he did know, did he not? Grateful. That pale, sickly feeling of being indebted to someone, that something was owed.

He briefly considered simply walking back to Netherfield, but the rain meant that he would arrive requiring dry clothing and his had already been packed. Besides, he could not abandon Bingley now, as none of his family had deigned to show.

That moment under the umbrella had been exquisite. Elizabeth so close, smelling of jasmine and newly fallen rain ... He swallowed and willed himself into better regulation.

The woman drove him mad.

He squared his shoulders and proceeded into the drawing room.

Stepping through the doorway was akin to entering another world. The drawing room he recalled from September last had been cleared of much of the larger furniture to make more room for neighbours and their congratulations. Mrs. Bennet was moving between the small groups of friends and family, both serving as hostess and graciously accepting everyone's well-wishes. For the first time, he realised that Mrs. Bingley had inherited her mother's looks.

Darcy had to admit that the mistress of Longbourn had done a more than creditable job. There was a warm fire crackling in the fireplace, flowers from the hothouse produced surprising colour in various places about the room, and even now, servants were lighting candles to chase away the gloom of a rainy December morning. The sideboard nearly groaned with a profusion of excellent food, including chocolate at one end and a large cake in the centre. And the air was alive with the hum of convivial conversation. He had been to many London celebrations, but none that felt so welcoming, so comfortable.

One of the neighbours Darcy did not know raised his glass in a toast, and he raised his along with everyone else. It was a rather long speech, but a heartfelt one. Mrs. Bingley was much loved here.

The moment the toast was concluded, Mrs. Bennet appeared suddenly before him.

“You are very welcome to be here among us, Mr. Darcy,” Mrs. Bennet said in welcome, though Darcy noted a bit of apprehension in her voice. “Do have some of the ham. It is especially good.”

Darcy made her a formal bow. “My congratulations, madam,” he said. “Both on the wedding of Mrs. Bingley and your elegant preparations. I have rarely seen the equal.”

He was ashamed of himself when he read the shock in her expression, though after a moment her countenance was wreathed in smiles. “Thank you kindly, sir. Jane deserves such attention, for she is the sweetest girl in the world.”

Not to Darcy. But that was neither here nor there. He stood about awkwardly once Mrs. Bennet had taken her leave, wondering where Elizabeth had gone, for he no longer saw her.

“Mr. Darcy!” exclaimed Sir William Lucas, still as bluff and cheerful as Darcy remembered him. He had to admit that it was something of a relief when the man approached him, and Darcy offered a polite bow.

“It may have taken the long way around,” Sir William said genially, “but they made it right in the end, eh?”

“Indeed,” Darcy replied, quite conscious of why it had taken so long for Bingley to return and make his offer.

“And it will be Miss Bennet’s turn next,” Sir William said.

Darcy’s heart plummeted. There was another suitor for Elizabeth’s hand? Of course there was; why would there not

be? “Oh?” he asked weakly.

Sir William nodded decidedly. “She and Mrs. Bingley are very close. I do not doubt that Miss Bennet will spend the season in town with them, and with such a variety of new people to meet, she will soon have an attachment to some fortunate young man. While Mrs. Bingley is a rare beauty, her sister is also a very handsome young woman.”

Elizabeth grew lovelier every time Darcy saw her. She would be one of those women who was quite pretty as a girl but would grow ever more beautiful with age. His breath returned to him in a rush. “I quite agree, Sir William.”

“Capital, capital,” his companion said, rocking back on his heels. “I say, this is an excellent meal. Mrs. Bennet always has a fine table, and chocolate is a favourite of mine. Will you excuse me?”

“Of course.” Darcy watched him go and then looked about the room for Elizabeth. Bingley came in through the doorway and hied off to his bride’s side. Where had he been? Darcy had thought the man could not be separated from his wife for anything this day.

Miss Mary was standing in a group of young women about her age, listening but not speaking. Her eyes frequently strayed to the window seat, where a small leather-bound book sat awaiting its owner.

On the other side of the room, Miss Kitty was smiling and speaking with a group of the younger men and women, her cheeks delightfully pink and her demeanour almost modest.

Was this what she was like without the influence of her wild youngest sister? He hardly recognised her. For the first time, Darcy thought that Miss Kitty might have some promise.

One of the Lucas boys backed into a table, tipping a china vase holding a bouquet of roses precariously to one side. Miss Kitty deftly steadied it without losing her place in the conversation.

Mrs. Bennet left a group that included Lady Lucas to join her husband where he stood speaking with Mr. Robinson and Mr. Goulding, two men Darcy had met the year before. Mr. Bennet offered his wife his arm, and she took it. They were more in charity with one another than Darcy could recall them being at the Netherfield ball.

“How do you like your breakfast, Jane?” Darcy heard a familiar voice asking from the corner to his left and just behind him. He turned his head, and there she was, smiling, but not as brightly as her wont. His thought returned to her appearance at church, and he worried anew.

“I am well pleased, as you must know, Lizzy,” Mrs. Bingley said quietly. “Thank you so much for the flowers. You must have raided every hothouse in the neighbourhood. You know how much I love them, and they are beautiful.”

“I could not allow you to go without flowers on your wedding day.”

Mrs. Bingley smiled at her sister, squeezed her hands, and moved away, taking Bingley’s arm as they spoke with the other guests.

Darcy made his way over, stopping when someone spoke to him, returning their greetings politely if not warmly, and exerting himself in general to be a different sort of man than the one Elizabeth had rightly accused him of being last April.

As he approached, he noted her touch her temple with two fingers.

“Are you well, Miss Elizabeth?” he inquired softly as he finally gained the position he had wished.

“A headache,” she replied in the same low tone. “That is all.”

She had been plagued by the headache at the parsonage, too. “Perhaps you ought to retire. My cousin the colonel suffers from megrims, and tending to them before they worsen seems to be the best medicine.”

Her eyes widened. “And miss my sister’s wedding breakfast? No, it will pass. I am not given to megrims.” She stared straight ahead. “And how do you like our little party, Mr. Darcy?”

“It is splendid, as I informed your mother.”

A little line appeared in her forehead. “You did?”

“I did.”

Her lips turned upward. “So you no longer find us tedious?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I suppose ‘confined and unvarying’ were your exact words.”

Darcy attempted to recall when he had said such a thing, and soon he had it. Netherfield, when her mother and two youngest sisters had come to call. Miss Lydia had begged Bingley for a ball, and he had turned to the window in disgust. But Miss Lydia had been so young. He really had been a prig, and he could not put it all down to worry about Georgiana. He did not know what to say.

Elizabeth was still speaking. "I would posit that boredom is ungentlemanly, for an educated man ought to have the intellectual resources to find *something* to occupy him."

Darcy felt a flare of something come to life. He had presumed she was chastising him. Was she, perhaps, teasing him?

"I have often found that books provide excellent company when one is surrounded by tedious acquaintances, Mr. Darcy. Or perhaps you should take up a different sort of pursuit? Embroidery might be a sufficient challenge. I find it quite diverting."

He choked back a laugh. "I shall consider it, Miss Bennet," he said, for she was Miss Bennet now, "Have you any patterns of a horse or a hunt that I might have to practise on?"

"I shall see what I can find, Mr. Darcy," she replied. "Perhaps my father could be of assistance."

Darcy opened his mouth to speak, but one of Longbourn's footmen approached. "Mr. Darcy, sir, your carriage is outside."

Elizabeth's face fell.

Had it been an hour already? Anders would wait. He began to tell the footman as much, but Miss Bennet touched her temple again.

“Are you leaving us so soon, Mr. Darcy?” she inquired, her voice cooler than only a moment ago.

“Yes, I am for Derbyshire, Miss Bennet, but ...”

“Well then,” she said briskly, “safe travels, sir.”

“Thank you,” he said as she dipped a curtsy and floated away.

Darcy sighed and turned to the servant. “Tell him I shall be out straight away.”

Chapter Five

“I am sorry, sir, but I cannot think continuing advisable.” Anders stood from where he had been examining one of the horses who had come up lame not five miles away from Netherfield. “The knee is sound, but the fetlock joint is tender.”

Darcy stood next to his carriage in the middle of the road, his arms crossed over his chest against the cold and the disappointment. He had been so close to a clean escape.

Anders must have mistaken his dismay for irritation. “She was well this morning. It is possible she was injured at that last turning.” The coach had hit a hidden gash in the road as it came around a bend. Not something one expected here where it was relatively wide and flat.

Darcy pinched the bridge of his nose. They were only halfway between Meryton and the Great North Road. There was nothing for it. They would have to go back.

“You do not suppose there would be room at the inn?” he asked Anders, but he already knew the answer. Even if there was a room for him in amongst the London families who had arrived to visit their country relatives for St. Nicholas Day and the coming festivities, there was unlikely to be room for Anders or the footmen who accompanied him. And even if there *were* room for them all, there would be talk about why he had not stayed with his friend despite Bingley having been married just today. No, he would have to return to Netherfield—on the Bingleys’ wedding night. Bingley placing him in a room as far away from the master’s chambers as possible seemed positively prescient given the current situation.

“Very well,” he told Anders gruffly. He swung back up into the carriage. Anders made the necessary adjustments, tied the injured horse to the back, and slowly drove them back the way they had come.



Elizabeth dragged herself up the stairs. The breakfast had continued merrily on for another two hours after Mr. Darcy’s early departure, but now the last guests were gone, as was the newly married couple.

He had removed so abruptly! They had at last been on the precipice of a normal conversation. She had even teased him a bit, and he had not appeared to dislike it. But he had left—had *planned* to leave—directly from Longbourn, and after only a short appearance. She wondered if there was something at

home that required his immediate presence or if he just had not wanted to remain here.

She feared she knew the answer.

Slowly, Elizabeth opened the door to her chamber and stepped inside, wanting nothing more than to bury herself beneath her warm quilt and sleep for a time.

“Lizzy,” Kitty said brightly, from where she and Mary were perched on the bed. “It is strange, is it not? Jane not being here, that is. She had been gone before on visits, but her room is empty now. And Lydia’s too.”

“I am not ashamed to say that I like Longbourn better without Lydia,” Mary said primly. “She was so very loud and always seemed to take up all the space in a room.”

“I cannot say you are wrong,” Kitty interjected, “but I miss her all the same.”

“It is the way of things,” Elizabeth said gently. “One day, both of you will leave Longbourn for your own homes as well.”

Mary shook her head, but Kitty smiled.

“What of you, Lizzy?” Mary asked. “Do not you wish for a home of your own?”

“I do,” Elizabeth replied. “But it must be with the right man.” *And the right man for me has already come and gone.* She closed her eyes against the throbbing in her head.

“I brought you some of Hill’s headache powders,” Mary told her. “You should take them.”

Elizabeth ought to have known that Mary would notice, for her sister could be quite observant when she wished. Mary held out a glass of water, and Elizabeth stirred the medicine in and drank it. “Thank you, Mary.”

“I am sorry you were so afflicted today of all days, but I suppose the idea of separating from Jane could not have been a happy one. At least she is only at Netherfield House.” Mary took the glass and set it on the table.

“True,” Elizabeth replied. “True.”

“What are you saying?” Kitty was aghast. “It is five miles away. Meryton is only one, but you still have to turn around and come back again!”

“It is only three, the way I walk,” Elizabeth said, wagging her eyebrows. Her sisters laughed.

“Still, it is not the same.” Kitty’s expression was drawn, mournful. “Longbourn feels so empty. And it will be worse when you go to Netherfield, Lizzy, for I know that once you are there, Jane will not want to send you home again.” She glanced at her other sister. “I mean no insult to you, Mary. It is only—there were five of us, and soon there will be only two.” She shook her head. “I used to think I should like to have grand adventures, but I find I am not half so brave without Lydia.”

“Changes like this are hard for everyone,” Mary assured Kitty. Elizabeth almost smiled, but she did not wish to offend Mary. Change was not difficult for Mary. She longed for peace as much as Papa, and if losing a few sisters to matrimony gained her more time for quiet reflection, no doubt it would be deemed a reasonable sacrifice.

“Think on this, Kitty,” Elizabeth said. “When you are a little older, Jane will likely take you to town during the season. You will have your sisters about you, those who *wish* to travel to London, at any rate.” She gave Mary a wink and was delighted when her pious sister actually rolled her eyes. “You will have both diversion and familiarity. You could not have expected as much had Jane not married Mr. Bingley.”

“That is true,” Kitty said. “Not this season, I suppose. That must be for Jane. But next year, perhaps?”

“I will tell Jane that you would like it, and that I am sure your manners will be everything pleasing,” Elizabeth assured her. Then she issued a warning. “You must demonstrate the truth of that so as not to call my judgment into question.”

“I will,” Kitty said, perking up. “I promise.”

“I should be pleased to go to town for music and books,” Mary said. “Perhaps Aunt and Uncle Gardiner might be willing to have me for a visit when Kitty goes.”

“I suspect you might have a visit earlier than that,” Elizabeth informed her.

“But I must save more money first. I plan to purchase as many books and as much sheet music as I can afford.”

“Very well,” Elizabeth said, making a note to save a little extra for Mary.

“Lizzy,” Kitty said shyly.

“Yes?”

“Do you think we could all sleep here tonight?”

Elizabeth glanced at Mary. Her middle sister would never ask such a thing for herself; the fact that Mary did not immediately cry off was enough to know her mind.

“Of course,” Elizabeth replied. “Though we will likely be very snug.” They would have a light dinner tonight, primarily the food left over from the breakfast, but that was still hours away. Her sisters left her to rest, and closing her eyes at last brought her some relief.



The knock came at his door several hours later, and Darcy sighed before opening it.

“Darcy!” Bingley cried. “I was told something about a lame horse?”

Darcy nodded. “I am so sorry, Bingley,” he said, embarrassed. “I may need to remain here a few days, until we can see whether she improves on her own,” he explained. “I will check on her in the morning and hope she is soon mended.

But even if I must remain a little longer, I will take my meals here and make myself scarce. I do not wish to impose.”

Bingley slapped him on the back with a bit more force than Darcy expected. “It is never a problem to put you up, Darcy.” He leaned in. “But I will accept your offer as to the meals and am grateful you intend to host yourself.”

Darcy could not help but chuckle at that. “I will remain as unobtrusive as possible, Bingley. If the horse is not greatly improved in a few days, I will leave her here and head north without her. I can always pick her up on the way back from London at the end of the season.”

“Do you intend to participate this year, then?” Bingley appeared more surprised by this than he had been to find Darcy still in residence.

“Why would I not?”

“No reason. You just seemed in such a hurry to leave for Pemberley.”

“Yes, I was hoping to avoid the very predicament I now find myself in,” Darcy said drily, and Bingley laughed.

“Fair enough. You shall have to join us for the theatre and for dinner when we are in town. I know Jane is anxious to become better acquainted with you and all my friends. Her sister will be with us for part of the season, I believe, so you will have your verbal sparring partner to make it interesting.”

No need to inquire which sister that would be. He began to wonder whether he would be able to regroup and approach

Elizabeth in London. "It would be a pleasure, Bingley."

"Good fellow. And Hurst and I mean to get Caroline married off this season as well, so we will need your help."

Darcy's expression must have been comical, for Bingley bent over with laughter.

"You do not think I mean you, Darcy?" He wiped his eyes. "I cannot think of anything more likely to lose me your friendship. Can you imagine? Perhaps I ought to have her compromise you in the library since that is where we most often find you." He caught his breath. "Well, not here at Netherfield, I grant you. The library is on the small side for you."

"It would not matter what you did," Darcy grumbled good-naturedly. "I will never marry your sister."

Bingley tipped his head to one side, a little like Darcy's favourite hunting dog when he caught a scent. "Hmm" was all he said. "I thank you for the laugh, Darcy, but I really must be returning to my lovely wife. Enjoy your solitude. I have given orders that you are to have things just as you like them."

"You are a good friend, Bingley."

"Thank you." Bingley smiled slyly at him. "And good day, Darcy."

Darcy waved him off and smiled as Bingley hurried back to his wife. He picked up his book and then set it down again, looking out into the growing darkness.



Three days later, Darcy was in the stables, speaking to Anders and feeling more than a little impatient.

“I would prefer to give her one more day to recuperate,” the coachman said smoothly, though he shifted from one foot to the other.

“Anders, I have been floating around this house attempting to remain unseen for three days. I am ready to depart.”

“Yes, sir,” Anders said briskly, but he could not keep his disapproval entirely out of the words.

Darcy was tired. He did not, could not, sleep well here. He rode out each day on one of his other horses for the exercise but made sure to ride in the opposite direction of Longbourn. He sequestered himself in his rooms where he read, wrote letters, and ate. He desperately wished to leave for Pemberley, where he could ...

Where he would read, write letters, and eat.

At least he would not have to keep himself hidden. In point of fact, he might not need to keep himself hidden here anymore, but no one had come to tell him so, and therefore he would continue.

Darcy rubbed his hands together in the cold. It was nearly noon, and he suspected that the Bingleys had taken their breakfast and had retired again to their chambers. Shutting

oneself away in the daytime was not done in London. Another point for the country, in his opinion.

There was always something to do or someone to see in London. But there was also always someone to comment on what you were doing or with who you were visiting. Sneering, more like. In the country, you met with your neighbours, and there was gossip, to be sure, but you did not live atop one another.

And what gossip would there be about Bingley and his new wife? That they had made a love match? That was enough to earn the scorn of many in London. More fools, them.

Despite his eagerness to be gone, how many miles could he actually travel today? It was already noon, and at this time of the year it would be dark in four hours. And tomorrow was Sunday. He would not travel on Sunday when there was no emergency.

He released a large breath. “Fine. Be ready to depart at first light Monday morning, Anders.”

Anders’s expression cleared. “Yes, Mr. Darcy.”



Elizabeth rose and stretched. It was Monday. Today would be five days since Jane’s marriage, and there had not been a single word in all that time. She began to think that Jane had found herself equal to all her tasks and in no need of her assistance. Or perhaps Mr. Bingley was not yet ready to part with her, even if there *was* work to be done.

She dressed herself for a walk. Sarah could do her hair later. With only three girls to tend instead of five, the maid was now more amenable to special requests. Elizabeth quickly donned her walking dress and boots and slipped downstairs and out into the gardens.

She wandered to the back of the park. It had not yet been cold enough to ice over the pond or turn the rain into sleet, but it was cold enough to give her a headache if her ears were not covered. She wound her scarf around her ears and nose, sure she made a ridiculous picture with her bonnet set atop the whole. When she was far enough away from the house that she would not be seen, she removed her bonnet and rearranged herself so that the scarf also covered her head.

Elizabeth was tired. Ever since the night before the wedding, she had not slept well. At least she had her bed back to herself. Her sisters had realised after one night that what had been a pleasant experience in childhood was a great deal less enjoyable now that they were grown. Mary kicked like a mule, and Kitty snored. Elizabeth had not slept at all until her sisters had crawled back to their own beds with the dawn.

When she returned to the house, cheeks ruddy with the cold and her spirits much lifted, her father handed her a note.

“Jane asks that I come today,” she told him as she read it.

“I suppose you shall be needing the carriage?” Papa asked with a twitch of his lips. He set down his paper and picked up his coffee cup.

“I could walk,” Elizabeth replied lightly, “but I would likely lose my boots in the mud and create a scandal appearing at Netherfield in my stocking feet.”

He laughed softly. “That would not do. You are the sister of the wealthy Mrs. Bingley now.”

“Given the state of the paths, Papa, I *would* prefer the carriage.” She did not want to shame Jane before her own servants.

Her father reached over to pat her hand. “I will call for it, my dear. Why do you not have something to eat while you wait?” He stood to ring the bell and give instructions.

Elizabeth nodded, filling a plate and returning to sit at the table just as her father did.

“With any luck, they will return just in time to take your mother visiting.” He stood and dropped a kiss on the top of Elizabeth’s head. “Has Sarah packed your trunk? I suspect that once you are with her, Jane will be loath to send you back again.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” Elizabeth inquired with a shake of her head.

“Because it is true.” Papa smiled. “I will miss you, but I suspect you will be happier in the larger society that the Bingleys will frequent, and so, if it comes to that, you are to accept the invitation, Lizzy.”

It was as close to prescriptive as her father had been with her since before she came out. “Do you mean to send me away?”

Elizabeth teased him.

He shifted in his chair and sighed. “Yes. For your own good.”

Elizabeth frowned. “Papa ...”

He shook his head. “Elizabeth, you were never meant to remain at Longbourn. You could not be happy here forever.”

Mr. Darcy had said something similar when they were both in Kent. “I love Longbourn, Papa.”

“I know you do. It is why I am going to push you out of the nest.” He frowned at his food and held her note out.

Elizabeth took it. “Jane has not offered me an invitation for anything beyond a visit. Mr. Bingley may wish to have his wife in town by himself this first year.”

“The affable Mr. Charles Bingley will do whatever his wife asks of him and will be delighted to do it,” Papa said, almost grumbling. “Jane *will* ask, and her husband *will* assure you that it was always his intention to have you with them. Besides, someone needs to save your sister from his.”

There was no question as to which Bingley sister her father referred. Elizabeth stood and placed a kiss on her father’s head. “If this is your wish, Papa, then I will say yes.”

“I would that I could keep you home with me forever, Lizzy,” he admitted, “but it would not be fair to you. Go, enjoy the company of younger, more fashionable people.”

“Fashion is not my forte,” Elizabeth told him between bites of her breakfast. “But I will go, to please you and protect Jane.”

Chapter Six

Darcy tugged on a glove and glanced outside. The days were so short now that he felt he was always in the dark.

He had overslept. He never overslept, but he had been thinking of Elizabeth and unable to find rest until the early hours of the morning. Darcy had instructed Anders to wait for his call before preparing the carriage, but he had fully intended to rise before dawn, something his coachman knew. However, as no one had come to wake him, Anders had clearly taken him at his word. Darcy tapped his foot, wondering what could possibly be taking so long.

At last he heard the crunching of the gravel that foretold the approach of his conveyance. He peered out of the sidelight, expecting to see his gleaming black coach with the Darcy crest upon it.

Instead, it was a glossy white-and-gold chaise with no crest, but a great deal of decorative painting along the sides.

Darcy knew that coach.

He pulled harder on his glove, turned on his heel, and walked directly to the back of the house.

“Anders!” he called as he approached the stables. “Good God, man, are you not ready yet?”

The coachman popped his head up from a stall and winced.

“What?” Darcy demanded.

“Horatio has lost a shoe.”

Darcy cursed under his breath. Disaster upon disaster. “How is that possible?”

“The boys have been riding the horses to exercise them, sir. Unfortunately, one of them must have put Horatio up yesterday without realising.”

This was shocking negligence on the part of Bingley’s grooms. Darcy would have to speak to his friend about it. He glanced back at the house. Perhaps he could still leave today and write Bingley a letter.

“Miss Bingley has arrived, Anders. Please, tell me that we have enough healthy horseflesh to make our departure.”

Anders straightened to his full height, which was still nearly a half-foot shorter than Darcy. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again. “The mare is still favouring her leg a bit, sir.”

“She was fine yesterday,” he said, frustrated.

“You can check on her if you like, Mr. Darcy,” Anders said.

Darcy almost took Anders at his word, but fortunately soon thought better of it. Satisfying his pique was not worth insulting the best coachman he had ever employed. “Are you *certain?*”

Anders nodded. “She was not in a good way this morning, and now with Horatio needing a shoe ... you could ride, I suppose, but it’d be a rather cold journey.”

It was a sign of how little Darcy wanted to see Caroline Bingley that he gave serious consideration to that notion. There were six good hours of light for riding each day. It would take him three days. Maybe a bit more. He had good gloves, a heavy coat, and stout boots.

Ultimately, his good sense won out. He could not ride all the way to Derbyshire in December. This was a nightmare. How could Miss Bingley have possibly known that he would still be here? And how had she arrived from the north so quickly?

He hung his head and reminded himself not to be conceited. Miss Bingley was not here for him. There was no way she could have known his departure had been delayed. No, she had refused to attend the wedding and was now here to make demands of her brother and attempt to cow her new sister. No doubt she had worn out her welcome with the Hursts.

“This is not happening,” he murmured, rubbing the back of his head hard enough that his scalp protested. He let his hand fall.

Anders was looking everywhere but at him. Darcy had never known his coachman to behave in such a way, but then Anders

always took such excellent care of the horses that Darcy could not recall the last time there had been one such event, let alone two. Darcy did not blame him—it was simply bad luck. But Anders would feel it was his responsibility.

Darcy had only wished to leave Elizabeth Bennet's company before she was forced to inform her sister or Bingley that she was uncomfortable in his presence. She had been pleasant enough at the wedding breakfast, but she could not want him here. The honourable thing to do would be to leave her in peace.

The white coach belonged to Mrs. Hurst but was only large enough for two. Darcy wondered if Mrs. Hurst was here as well or if Miss Bingley had come with a companion instead. He hoped the latter. Mrs. Hurst was innocuous on her own, but when she was with her younger sister, she took on all of Miss Bingley's least attractive qualities. And the way she played with her bracelets, making them clink one against the other ... Most would be able to ignore it, but once Darcy had noticed, the sound drowned out everything else. It was all he could do not to wrest them from her wrist and fling them out the window.

Darcy squeezed his eyes shut. His irritation was not under good regulation. "See that Horatio has a shoe today," he told Anders brusquely. "We are leaving tomorrow morning, even if I have to pull the carriage myself."

Anders's lips twitched, and Darcy would not stay to listen to his driver laugh at him. He turned, the skirt of his greatcoat

swirling out behind him, and returned to the house.



Elizabeth arrived at Netherfield just as a small white carriage was being driven around to the stables. How curious. She had not expected that anyone else would be visiting for at least the first week after the wedding.

“Hello, Carstairs,” she said as she entered the hall. “Shall we have snow soon, do you think?”

“Good day, Miss Bennet,” said the butler. “Might just be cold enough for that.”

“Has someone else arrived?” she asked pleasantly. “I thought I saw a coach as I drove up.”

Carstairs frowned. “Miss Bingley has come.”

Elizabeth stood still for a moment. “But she did not attend the wedding.”

“As you say, Miss.”

“Is she here to cause trouble?” Elizabeth’s question was spoken as much to herself as it was to Carstairs, but the butler answered anyway.

“I could not say.”

“You *will* not say. You *could* say a great deal.”

Carstairs struggled not to smile, and Elizabeth congratulated herself. Mr. Hill was not half so stoic as Mr. Carstairs. “Your

room has been prepared, and Mrs. Bingley has asked that you await her there.”

“Poor Jane,” Elizabeth said. “Battle lines drawn already. Have you heard anything from the Langstons?” she asked. Mr. Carstairs had been a fixture at Netherfield since she and Jane had been little girls, visiting the Langstons to play with Julia and Sophia.

“Miss Langston is lately married, just like Miss Bennet. Miss Sophia continues to enjoy the season.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I shall have to write to her. She has become a terrible correspondent this past year, no doubt caught up in the joys of town.”

They heard a high-pitched exclamation from the family wing.

Carstairs glanced upstairs at the sound. “If you do not mind my saying, Miss Bennet, it is good that you are here.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Jane is firm when she knows herself to be in the right. You have no cause for distress on that point. But if it comes to it, I shall thwart Miss Bingley so that Jane will not have to.”

“As I said, Miss Bennet,” the butler replied, “your presence is fortuitous.”

Elizabeth nodded at him and then at Rebecca Kerr, who led the way to her chambers.

They heard Miss Bingley before they saw her, her demands echoing down the hall. Kerr stood to the side, her eyes darting

about in search of a safe place to land.

“What do you mean I cannot enter? This has always been my room.”

“For the entire two months of your stay a year ago?” Elizabeth inquired cheerfully.

Miss Bingley’s head swung in Elizabeth’s direction. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Settling into my rooms, it seems,” Elizabeth replied, gliding past.

“These were my chambers first,” Miss Bingley insisted, attempting to enter. The footman who was carrying Elizabeth’s trunk brushed past Mr. Bingley’s sister, pausing in the doorway as he waited for instructions.

“Move, you big oaf!” Miss Bingley sputtered. “How dare you! Get out of my way or I will have you sent off! What is your name?”

Roberts straightened and turned in one motion, requiring Miss Bingley to duck so as not to be struck by the trunk he carried on his shoulder.

“My name is Roberts, madam,” the man said with a little nod of the head in place of a bow. “I was footman here last year, when you were mistress.”

Miss Bingley’s cheeks reddened at the reminder that she was the mistress no longer. “I insist that you put that trunk down this instant!” Miss Bingley exclaimed. “These are *my* rooms!”

“Sorry, Miss Bingley. *Mrs.* Bingley says that Miss Bennet’s trunk is to be taken here, to Miss Bennet’s rooms.”

The red in Miss Bingley’s cheeks spread to the rest of her face.

“Do you mind?” Elizabeth inquired as sweetly as possible after Roberts placed her trunk on the floor and Kerr scurried past Miss Bingley and into the room to open it. “I would prefer some privacy.”

“Do not bother unpacking, Miss Eliza, for my brother will insist that I be given my due.”

“I do not doubt that in the slightest, Miss Bingley,” Elizabeth said lightly, “and it is Miss Bennet now. I shall see you at dinner, if our brother and sister can be persuaded to come downstairs for it.”

The sight of Miss Bingley’s horrified expression as Roberts closed the door behind him had Elizabeth laughing as she had not done in months. Kerr finally had to laugh with her.

“That was marvellous,” Elizabeth declared, feeling refreshed. She wandered to one of the windows, which overlooked the woods. Just beyond, she knew, was a glade and the large pond that many of the neighbourhood children had played in as children. No wonder Miss Bingley liked these rooms. The views were lovely. Had she looked out these windows and dreamed of becoming mistress to her own estate one day?

“This is a very pretty one,” Kerr said, and Elizabeth moved away from the windows to attend the maid.

Kerr was holding out a gown Elizabeth had yet to wear. It was made of a fine silk Aunt and Uncle Gardiner had gifted her, and it had been the one evening dress she had taken with her on their trip north. She had planned to wear it to their dinner at Pemberley, but the engagement had been abandoned when they had been required to rush home.

It was a simple but elegant gown, the silk a blue that shimmered almost green in the light and made her think of the sea. The waist was a little lower than the current fashion, but Elizabeth thought it suited her very well.

Every time she looked at it now, it reminded her of lost love.

Kerr held it up to Elizabeth and nodded. “I think Miss Bingley would swallow her turban, feathers and all, if she saw you in this.”

“Is it not too fine for a family dinner?” Elizabeth asked. “Perhaps we ought to save our best ammunition for a more formal occasion.”

“Very well,” Kerr said doubtfully. “But my mother always says that if you wait too long, that occasion may never come.”

Elizabeth nodded, acting as though the words had not struck her to the heart. “Your mother is very wise. I shall not wait long. But not tonight.”

Reluctantly, Kerr put the gown away. “How about this one, then?” she asked, holding up a rose-coloured gown. This one

was also silk, though it was not as fine a weave. Elizabeth had inherited it from Jane a year ago, for it complemented her complexion better than it had Jane's. She did not believe Miss Bingley had ever seen her in it. It would do for tonight.

“Yes, thank you, Kerr.”

“Would you mind if I made a few alterations, Miss Bennet?”

“What sort of alterations?”

“The sleeves are from last season, but it would not require much to change the shoulders here.” Kerr pointed to the seam. “And Mrs. Bingley told me she has some lace she was saving for you. A bit of that along here”—she trailed a finger down the neckline without touching it—“would be the very thing. Not too much, just enough to set it off.”

“Kerr, I think you and I are going to get along very well,” Elizabeth said approvingly. “Will you have time to make these adjustments?”

“Of course, Miss Bennet.” Kerr was the tiniest bit affronted. “I would not suggest it were I unable to complete the task.”

Elizabeth smiled brightly in order to placate the miffed maid. “Yes, I would like those changes very much.”

Mollified, Kerr made quick work of unpacking and hanging the rest of Elizabeth's gowns and went in search of the lace.



Darcy sat before the fire with a brandy in one hand and a book in the other. He ought to be content, but his almost

uncontrollable desire to be away from the pain that the memories of this place engendered kept him distracted. After a time, he placed the book down on a small table nearby and gave the brandy his complete attention.

He remembered Elizabeth in this house. He could almost hear her voice drifting past the door and catch the faintest traces of the jasmine perfume she preferred. There was something complex in the scent, not unlike the woman herself, for the sweetness of the jasmine was balanced with the sharpness of lemon and just a touch of something he recalled from his travels abroad. Lingonberry, perhaps? He remembered her perfume very clearly from their brief walk to Longbourn from the church; indeed, he did not believe he would ever forget it.

“Darcy!” Bingley exclaimed cheerfully as shut the door of the study behind him. “Still here! What is it now? Has your coach lost a wheel?”

“Nothing so dire. A horse has lost a shoe.”

Bingley lifted his eyebrows. “The same horse? That is unlucky.”

Darcy felt foolish. “No, it was a different one. Horatio.”

“And that was enough to put you off another day?” Bingley poured a glass of brandy for himself.

“I begin to think I shall never leave this place.”

His friend poured another glass and held it out to Darcy. “I begin to think you do not *wish* to leave.”

“Bingley, your sister is here. Of course I wish to leave.” Darcy snapped. He grunted, annoyed with himself for giving into his vexation. “That was rude. Forgive me.”

Bingley sipped his brandy, looking troubled. “I had no idea you felt so strongly.”

Darcy did not know what to say. How could Bingley not be aware? Finally, he sighed. “I cannot look upon my behaviour here in Hertfordshire last year without abhorrence, Bingley. Your sister was a part of that.”

“Your behaviour is not her fault, no more than my behaviour in deciding to remain in London last autumn is yours.”

Bingley was correct. “No, you are quite right. It is the reminder of my ungentlemanlike conduct that I cannot tolerate.”

“Tolerate,” Bingley said, and nodded as though he had unravelled some great mystery. “Hmm. Jane and I will be downstairs for dinner. Will you join us?”

He was surprised that Bingley had latched onto the word “tolerate,” rather than asking about his ungentlemanly behaviour, but then, Bingley had witnessed it all, so there was no need. “No thank you. I am not in the proper frame of mind to be polite, and I will soon be gone. Best to avoid her. Does she even know I am in the house?”

Bingley appraised him before saying, “I do not believe so, and if you do not wish her to know, I shall not be the one to tell her.”

Darcy stood, set his glass down, and clapped Bingley on the arm. “Thank you, Bingley. You are a good friend to me.” A better friend than he deserved.

Bingley laughed quietly and shook his head. “No thanks necessary, for you are providing me a great deal of entertainment. The great Fitzwilliam Darcy, hiding from a woman.”

Darcy turned away and tossed himself back in the chair by the fire. “You are entirely too smug now that you are wed.”

“I have every right to be smug,” Bingley said cheerfully. “I am married to the most wonderful woman I have ever met, and she loves me. There is no felicity in the world equal to it.”

That hurt. “You should write for the stage.”

Bingley was unperturbed. “Perhaps I shall.” He finished his drink and set the glass down on the tray. His expression crinkled in merriment. “We will be dining at five. That might be a good time for you to sneak back to your chambers.”

Darcy nodded, and Bingley left him to his own company.



“We were unaware that Caroline would be visiting, Lizzy,” Jane said quietly. “I must apologise, but I do not see how we can turn her away. She has only a companion with her, and Mr. Hurst’s home in London will not be open until the end of January.”

“Is there no way to decline delivery?” Elizabeth jested.

Jane shook her head fondly. "I do hope Caroline's presence will not chase you back to Longbourn."

Elizabeth scoffed, as Jane must have known she would. "Miss Bingley, frighten *me* away? I think not. Though I will wish to visit Aunt and Uncle Gardiner at Longbourn when they come."

"I shall visit too, but I will confess that I do wish to have you here with me."

"Then I shall be," Elizabeth replied. "And not only because Miss Bingley wants these rooms."

Jane offered her an affectionate but exasperated look.

Kerr bustled into the room with Elizabeth's gown draped over her arm but skidded to a stop when she saw Jane. Her cheeks reddened. "Mrs. Bingley, I did not know you were here. I will just step back outside."

"That is all right, Kerr," Jane said. She turned to Elizabeth. "I will see you downstairs. I must dress for dinner, for the mistress cannot be outdone by her sisters."

"It would not matter in the least," Elizabeth responded. "Your husband has eyes for no one but you, dearest."

"Then I shall offer him something pleasant to look upon," Jane said in farewell.

Elizabeth smiled into the glass. It was good, very good, to see Jane so confident and assured. Miss Bingley had no hope of unsettling the mistress of *this* house.

“Let us get you dressed,” Kerr said, hanging the dress up and examining Elizabeth’s hair. “So many lovely curls.”

In relatively short order, Kerr had completed Elizabeth’s toilette and was helping her into the rose gown.

“It is like a new gown,” Elizabeth said happily, as she touched the narrow line of intricate lace that had been sewn along the neckline of the dress. “Thank you, Kerr. I shall offer you a report of how Miss Bingley responds to my fashionable attire.”

Kerr smiled prettily as she moved about the room collecting items and putting them away. “I would like that, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth made her way down the stairs and past the library. Her slippers whispered against the marble floors, the sound reminding her of last autumn when she had been here to tend Jane and traversing these halls alone. As she passed Mr. Bingley’s study a tendril of scent—bergamot, oranges, and brandy—wrapped itself around her comfortingly. She wondered whether her new brother wore a similar cologne as his friend. Probably. Another reminder of the man who had long confounded her.

The Bingleys were already waiting.

Her new brother bowed crisply. “My goodness, that is a very pretty gown. Good evening, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth returned the courtesy and smiled warmly. “I have always wanted a brother, but in my imagination, he has always called me Elizabeth or Lizzy, as Jane does.”

His smile was bright. “Then you must call me Charles, as my other sisters do.” He smiled at her and then at Jane, whose smile was smaller but no less pleased.

“*Charles!*”

With her back to the entry, Elizabeth flinched, unprepared for the shrillness in Miss Bingley’s cry.

Charles’s smile disappeared. “Caroline, we are standing but a few feet before you. Need you speak so loudly?”

“I fear I must, for you rarely listen. Perhaps your wife will be kinder to me.”

“What may I do for you, Caroline?” Jane inquired calmly.

“I am certain it was accidental, Jane dear, but you have given your sister my rooms. Would you kindly instruct the staff to remedy that oversight whilst we dine?”

Charles began to speak, but Jane placed one hand over his and spoke instead. “Caroline, you sent no word of your coming, and therefore the rooms were assigned to Elizabeth.”

“I forgive you,” Caroline said loftily, and Elizabeth squelched an urge to pinch the woman.

Jane’s expression was sympathetic, but her words were direct. “Caroline, you quite mistake me. I did not apologise.”

This brought Miss Bingley up short, and Elizabeth cheered silently for her sister. Miss Bingley had only ever seen the demure, quiet, eager to please Jane, the one who had been a guest in this house. She had never seen the Jane who had acted

as a mother to four younger sisters and who would be a stalwart mistress of her household.

“I beg your pardon?” Miss Bingley said, shocked.

“Caroline, those rooms were yours very briefly and are now not yours at all. They belong to your brother and to me.” Jane angled her head to look at Elizabeth. “Lizzy, are you pleased with your rooms?”

“I am.”

“Excellent. We will leave things as they stand, then.”

“Dinner is served,” Carstairs announced, rather smugly, Elizabeth thought.

“Shall we go in?” Jane asked, taking her husband’s arm when he offered it.

Charles was not smiling, but the admiration in his eyes could not be mistaken. The Bingleys strolled away, entirely absorbed in one another. Elizabeth watched them go with an abiding affection, but Miss Bingley made a sound Elizabeth was more used to hearing from the pigs.

“Nauseating,” Miss Bingley said with disgust. “They ought to at least pretend to propriety when in public.”

“They are in their own home, and we are their family, Miss Bingley,” Elizabeth reminded the shrewish woman. “Must we bow to such pretensions even here?”

Miss Bingley looked her up and down, and when she finished, her nose was in the air. “I would expect such an

unfashionable sentiment from you, Miss Eliza.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Thank you,” she said.

Chapter Seven

Bingley spoke to his wife rather loudly as they passed the door of the study, no doubt to alert Darcy to their whereabouts, and he was sure that the sharp, shrewish complaints that came later—for the tone suggested they could be nothing else—belonged to Miss Bingley. He determined to wait another quarter of an hour until he could be certain they were all seated at dinner before making his way upstairs. He took the last drink of his brandy and set his empty glass down next to Bingley's before extracting his watch.

Elizabeth's sister was in this house. Perhaps that was why he detected the faintest trace of Elizabeth's lilting voice, though he had never thought the sisters sounded alike. Darcy sighed. His mind was playing some rather cruel tricks on him of late.

When enough time had passed, Darcy stuck his head out of the study to check whether the halls were clear. All he could see were several servants headed to the dining room with platters. He slipped out of the study and moved towards the stairs to the guest wing. If he was closer to running than

walking, who could blame him? Just before he dashed up the steps to his chambers, he glanced over his shoulder. Carstairs was staring back at him, shaggy grey eyebrows lifted in amusement.

Darcy was tired of being a joke. He could not wait to get away.

Dinner arrived only a few moments after he did. He ate quickly and in peace, then looked over his scant belongings. He swung open the door of his wardrobe only to find a single nightshirt hanging there.

Well. That was disconcerting.

Scripps entered the room as Darcy stood staring at the space where his clothing ought to be. “Your things should be back soon, Mr. Darcy. Mrs. Bingley suggested I have everything laundered this morning before packing it. As you did not expect to be here long and packed only that you believed you would require, I thought it a sound notion.”

Darcy was amused by this. Had it been Bingley, he would have been irritated, but he thought it might be close to impossible to be aggravated with the man’s wife. He understood almost instinctively that because Bingley had not been much in need of Scripps for the past four days, the valet was at loose ends, and Mrs. Bingley would have seen this as a way to please her guest and placate her husband’s man at the same time. Mentally, he calculated a generous vail for the valet, but outwardly, he simply nodded. “Very well.”

“Do you mind, sir?” Scripps asked, motioning over to the items he would use for Darcy’s morning ablutions.

“Not at all, Scripps. Carry on.”

The valet cleaned Darcy’s brushes and sharpened his razor on a leather strap.

“Scripps,” Darcy asked at last, “do you know how long Bingley’s sister intends to stay?”

The valet stopped what he was doing. “I believe the master and mistress intend to have her live with them permanently, sir,” he said a little stiffly.

Gads. That meant that if he invited Bingley and his wife to Pemberley, he would have to endure Miss Bingley as well. If only they could invite Elizabeth instead. Perhaps he could seek Bingley out at the club in London and have a conversation with him there.

“I see.”

It might have been his imagination, but Scripps seemed a bit cooler after that exchange. Still, when his clothes arrived, he took them into another room to iron them, and returned them to the wardrobe with an exactness that Darcy could not help but admire. Darcy’s own valet would be hard pressed to find anything wrong with Scripps’s work, though he would try.

“Scripps,” Darcy said as the valet was preparing to leave for the night, “how long have you worked for Bingley?”

“Since September, sir, when he returned to the country. His old valet did not wish to leave London again.”

“And how did he find you?”

Scripps straightened his back and looked Darcy directly in the eye. “My uncle is Mr. Gardiner’s valet. Miss Elizabeth ... Miss Bennet, that is, knew through her relations that I was looking for a position outside of London and recommended me.”

Darcy smiled fondly. “Of course she did.” Elizabeth would have known not only that Scripps was in need of employment, but that Bingley would be in need of a very organized sort of valet. Learning that Mr. Gardiner kept a valet did not surprise him; both he and his wife were always very well attired.

Scripps was bemused. “As you say, sir. I will be back at seven, then?”

“Yes, thank you, Scripps.”

The valet nodded and was gone.



Elizabeth placed her napkin on the table with a little sigh. Dinner had taken twice as long as it ought because Miss Bingley had criticised each dish as it came out. The soup had too little salt, the meat too much, the wine was too weak, and the bread too dry.

The meal had, in fact, been wonderful.

No one responded to Miss Bingley’s complaints other than the harried servants, but it did not keep her from continuing.

“Really, Jane,” Miss Bingley said as they rose from the table, “you shall have to speak to your cook. You cannot allow her to serve this sort of food to the family, let alone your guests. I will help you with it tomorrow.”

“I thank you for the offer, Caroline, but that will not be necessary. You are our guest.”

Miss Bingley waved a dismissive hand in the air, intentionally ignoring Jane’s meaning. “It is no trouble.”

“Caroline,” Jane repeated without raising her voice or appearing unsettled in any way, “Thank you for offering your assistance—”

Miss Bingley smirked and began to speak.

“But it is not required.” Jane met Miss Bingley’s gaze and said, seriously, “If and when there is a need to direct the staff, I shall do so.”

“My heavens,” Miss Bingley replied, her cheeks flushing with either anger or embarrassment, “there is no need to be rude. I only wish to help, and I have been mistress here, you know. It is not uncommon for servants to take advantage whenever they can.”

“That may have been your experience,” Elizabeth said with her offense barely restrained. “But Jane has known most of the Netherfield staff her entire life, and they respect *her*.”

“How dare you,” Miss Bingley hissed.

“I only speak the truth,” Elizabeth replied.

“Elizabeth,” Jane said warningly.

“Caroline,” Charles said sharply at the same time. He tossed his napkin on the table and took Miss Bingley aside, but as Elizabeth and Jane stood to leave, they could hear him speaking to his sister.

Mr. Bingley was less diplomatic than his wife. “You arrived without notice, Caroline, and you may feel at liberty to depart the same way. If you remain, you will be civil.”

Elizabeth was nearly floating, so happy was she to witness Jane taking her rightful role and Charles defending her right to do so. As for Miss Bingley, she detested the woman even more for the insult of appearing only *after* the wedding to complain about everything. Still, she ought not to have baited the woman.

“I am sorry, Jane,” Elizabeth said softly. “That woman vexes me, but I can see you will need none of my help dealing with her. I will do better, I promise.”

Jane patted Elizabeth’s hand. “Charles suspects she made herself unwanted with the Hursts and left to avoid being asked to leave. If that is so, her coming here makes sense. She means to establish herself as mistress in deed if not in name. I understand it is difficult for her to give way, but she must.”

“She did not even attend your wedding,” Elizabeth nearly hissed. “She has no right even to be in your house, let alone attempting to usurp your position as mistress.”

“Charles believes she did not want it to appear that she approved of the match.” Jane was far too serene. Elizabeth would have tossed the ingrate from the house, but that was not Jane’s way.

“You spoke of this?”

Jane nodded. “We were not expecting to meet Caroline or the Hursts again until the season in London, but I had already planned how to act, for I am familiar with overly bold sisters. Miss Bingley did not find me unprepared.”

“Brava, Jane.” Elizabeth smiled and held her sister’s arm a bit tighter before releasing it and offered her sister an artificially winsome smile. “I hope you do not mean me.”

“You may be bold, Lizzy, but you never cross the boundary of propriety.” Jane glanced around before leaning close to say, “Though you do dance a jig on it from time to time.”

Elizabeth laughed softly. It was true, she could not deny it.

Before they reached the drawing room, Miss Bingley swept past them and up the stairs without so much as a “good evening.” A few moments later, Charles appeared, a bit red in the face.

“My apologies, ladies,” he said. “Caroline is often a trial, but tonight she was absolutely unbearable. I hope she did not ruin dinner for you, Lizzy.”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth was quick to assure him. “Each dish was delightful. I enjoyed it immensely.” She had particularly enjoyed how each successive complaint of Miss Bingley’s had

been ignored, the dishes merely removed. It seemed the woman was not used to her utterances going unremarked upon and did not know how to respond when they did.

“Lizzy,” Jane said softly, putting a hand on Elizabeth’s arm though her eyes were on her unhappy husband, “would you mind terribly if Charles and I were to retire early?”

Elizabeth smiled. “Not at all, Jane. Perhaps I will find something to read in the library.”

“I did bring back a few new books from London,” Charles informed her. “They are on the lower shelf.”

“Why, Mr. Bingley,” Elizabeth teased, “are you attempting to win me over?”

Charles smiled. “You have caught me out. Good night, Lizzy.”

“I will be down for breakfast in the morning, Lizzy, and we shall spend the day together.” Jane took her husband’s arm. “Charles has several items of business to complete.”

Although Jane did not say it, Elizabeth knew that they would have to include Miss Bingley in their plans. Even an uninvited guest was still a guest. “I shall look forward to it,” she said.

She watched the Bingleys ascend the stairs to their chambers, speaking quietly to one another, and felt an unexpected twinge of her heart. She was not jealous of Jane and Charles for who could be? No, it was their situation she envied.



The next morning brought more bad tidings. Darcy was already dressed when Bingley knocked and entered, only to stand there staring as Darcy tugged the cuffs of his shirt to make the sleeves lay correctly.

“You look as though your favourite hunter has died,” Darcy said. “It portends some bad news.”

“Darcy,” Bingley said, dismayed, “I have some information you will not like.”

Darcy glared at his friend. “You did not tell your sister ...”

“No, no. It is only that one of the servants is ill, and Jones is concerned enough about it that he has forbidden anyone from leaving. He did say the grounds it was fine to be out on the grounds, so long as you have no contact with anyone not already in the house.”

“Mr. Jones was here?” Darcy was perplexed. It was so early. How could he have missed a visit by the apothecary? Were his chambers so remote from the rest of the house?

Actually, he supposed they were. He had been grateful enough for it. A thin reed of pain began to twist itself around his head like a vise. “How serious is it?”

“An undergardener visited his family on his day off and brought something back from there. Jones is not certain what it is, but he believes it wise to quarantine.”

This *was* serious. “Can I help in any way?”

“No, but it is very like you to ask,” Bingley replied. “We have separated the staff who have been in contact with the man, and now we just have to wait and see if anyone else is taken ill.”

“How long?”

Bingley shrugged. “Until the illness is gone. I cannot judge the length of that. Will you come down to dinner tonight?”

“I am sorry to be causing additional work for the staff, but I cannot bear to come down for dinner with your sister just yet.”

“You shall have to, eventually. This is not a lame horse that is soon mended.”

“I am aware. Just ... not yet.”

“Very well.”

Bingley rubbed the back of his neck and left Darcy to his agitation.

Darcy began to pace. If only he could get out of Netherfield! He would be able to think more clearly once at Pemberley; he always did. Perhaps he could devise a plan to speak to Miss Elizabeth when she was in London with the Bingleys. Darcy sat heavily on his bed. Or perhaps he would realise that Miss Elizabeth did not want him to pay her any attention and could determine how he was to spend the rest of his life without her. For despite his behaviour this past year he was a gentleman, and a gentleman accepted that a lady knew her own heart when she refused his offer.

Elizabeth had been missing some very important information when she had declined his proposal in Kent, though. Even if she could not love him as he did her, she had no longer seemed to hate him when they met in Derbyshire last August, and that still appeared to be the case. It could only mean that even when she thought the worst of him, she had been fair enough to read the letter of explanation he had handed her, and to judge matters in his favour.

That letter ... Darcy held his head in his hands. That letter had been dreadful. All pomposity and offense when all he had wished to do was beg her to reconsider. What would he write her now, had he the chance? He had always expressed himself best in letters and notes. He lifted his head.

Writing always helped him sort out his thoughts. Perhaps, since he could not go to Pemberley, he could try to make sense of his feelings here. Darcy took his candle to the little writing table in the corner of the room. When he opened it, he saw the document with the seal that he had tucked in there last September when he had returned to London. He really ought to discard it, but he could not bring himself to do so. He reached out to touch it, then took out ink, pen, and paper, and sat down to compose a new letter to Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Be not alarmed, madam, that this letter shall be in any way similar to the last. My intention then was to defend myself against your accusations, but I fear the message itself was designed less to soothe and more to provoke, written as it was in a

dreadful bitterness of spirit. What a fool I was. In the months that have passed since that dreadful event, I have come to accept each of your grievances as no more than the truth and have attended to them all.

At the least, I have tried.

For some time I believed that I would never see you again and could only berate myself for having lost the one woman I have ever loved. But then you came to my home and were standing not twenty feet before me. For a moment I thought you a dream, but when I gathered my wits, I determined I must speak to you, to learn whether I might improve your opinion of me. Thus I steeled my courage and came to meet you.

You know everything that has followed. My wishes and desires have never wavered, but I cannot be certain of yours. And as I attempt to make sense of our acquaintance, it now occurs to me that despite my desire to please you—a woman worthy of being pleased—I have never offered you any sort of apology for my ungentlemanly behaviour. Let me do so now.

I wish to assure you that I have long held you in the highest regard, despite my initial and misguided attempts to conceal it. Your beauty is unrivalled in my eyes, and my admiration for your character and principles is profound. My nature is a rather decided one, as you are aware, and therefore I must tell you that my feelings for you will never change.

It is my greatest hope that you can forgive my transgressions and allow me a chance to redeem myself. If you are so good as to permit me, I pledge that I will continue to amend my behaviour and to show you, by word and deed, the respect and esteem you so rightly deserve.

Should you one day accept my apologies, as insufficient as they are, if you might one day consider me your truest friend and most ardent admirer, I can attest that we would share our lives with mutual respect and the deepest of affection. And if you can one day accept my apologies, I will continue to hope that you might also accept my offer of marriage, for I love you and I always shall.

If this letter arrives too late, or my feelings are never reciprocated, do not fear that I shall be spiteful or petty. For even then, I shall always wish you well and remain, with the deepest of humility and love, yours.

F.D.

Chapter Eight

After dinner, Elizabeth found herself standing alone in the hall. Miss Bingley had flounced her way up to the music room, where she was currently striking the keys of the pianoforte with such force that Elizabeth could hear her all the way down the stairs.

It was a mystery to her how Miss Bingley, with all the advantages of youth, beauty, wealth, and education could behave in a way that reminded her so clearly of Lydia. Miss Bingley's flirting was reserved for Mr. Darcy, but it was only slightly less brazen, and her insistence that all things be arranged just as she pleased, without regard to anyone else's needs or wishes, was truly astonishing. It was no secret to Elizabeth why Miss Bingley had not had any suitors in the years she had been out. No man wanted a wife that cared only for her own comforts and not at all for his.

No man wanted a wife who flung unjust accusations at his head, either.

“New books,” Elizabeth said aloud, forcibly changing the direction of her thoughts. She entered the library to a fire burning in the hearth and several lit candles. There was indeed nearly a full shelf of tomes that had not been there before.

The Bingleys were excellent hosts. Elizabeth selected a novel quite at random and sat down to read.

After a few chapters, she flipped back to the start to read the title. It was *Self-Control*. How appropriate. The story had been very popular when it was published last year, but it had not arrived in Meryton’s circulating library yet. Kitty asked for it every time they visited.

Elizabeth typically enjoyed novels, but this story was not for her. There was nothing wrong with it, exactly, other than she could already sense that the villain would exert himself to rather violent extremes to possess the heroine, and she always wondered what sort of a man would wish to marry a woman he had been required to physically force into marriage? Had he no sense of self-preservation? Would he not be checking his wine or soup for poison the rest of his days? No, there was misery enough in life, and Elizabeth did not wish to experience more of it in her reading. It was probably why she did not appreciate Shakespeare’s tragedies as she ought. She far preferred the comedies, for they always came right in the end.

Elizabeth was badly in need of peace now, not more turmoil. So she closed the book and set it on the table. She would ask Charles whether Kitty might borrow it.

Later, as she prepared for bed, she reached into a little locked box of treasures she had brought along with her—Lydia was no longer at Longbourn to steal her sisters' belongings, but Mamma could be just as intrusive, and Elizabeth had no wish for anyone else to know that she had received a second proposal of marriage that had come to nothing.

She removed her letter from Mr. Darcy and gazed upon it, touching, as she always did, the tender adieu. He had not wanted her gratitude when she offered it, he had not even wished to remain long in her company, but he had loved her once.

She pressed her lips together. This was silly. Jane would undoubtedly invite her to town for the season, and they would meet with Mr. Darcy again. Perhaps she could convince him that she was not the same stupid girl he had proposed to before. She was more careful to suspend her judgment and unwilling to be taken in again by a handsome face and a sad story. Often, she recalled how Mr. Wickham had first asked whether she was acquainted with Mr. Darcy, gauging her response before launching into his lies. She would not be taken in so easily ever again.

Elizabeth folded up the letter and held it for a moment. Mr. Darcy had written to her, but she had never written to him. He was owed an explanation and also an apology, was he not?

Not that she could ever send such a letter. Still, she had no one but herself to whom she could unfold the entire affair. Aunt Gardiner would be a ready listener, but she was not here,

and Elizabeth was not entirely sure she wished to share her sad history with Mr. Darcy, not even with her aunt. It seemed something that ought to remain between the two of them most directly involved. She tapped her lip with the corner of the page.

Writing had helped Mr. Darcy explain many things he had been unequal to telling her the night she had so bitterly rejected his offer of marriage. Perhaps composing a letter might help her order her own thoughts, as well as ease the pain and uncertainty that still made her so uneasy in his presence. Elizabeth replaced Mr. Darcy's letter in the box to keep it safe and then took up the candle, setting it down on the lovely writing desk in the corner.

Be not alarmed, sir, that this letter will repeat any of my words of gratitude which were, recently, so abhorrent to you.

Elizabeth knew every word of Mr. Darcy's letter, but she would not tease him by repeating all of his phrases so neatly. He would never see her letter, of course, but she felt as though she was speaking to him, telling him what she felt in her heart.

When you appeared at our assembly more than a year ago, I will admit that I thought you a very handsome man. When you announced your opinion of my looks, therefore, I was disappointed. I buried my hurt in the pretence of

indifference, not because I believed your insult, for while I have long been told by my mother that I am nothing to Jane, I do have a glass. My sister's beauty is exceptional, but I am aware I have my own share of the Gardiner looks and that I am more than tolerable. No, the problem, I was very sure, must be with you.

The problem was not with you, of course, though it took me many months to accept that truth. During those months, my own vanity led me to easily accept Mr. Wickham's lies, though he was nearly a stranger to me. It was such a spur to my wit and self-righteousness to know that you behaved badly even to those you had known your entire life.

When I read your letter, I understood you better, but I still could not like you. By the time my aunt and uncle pressed me to visit Pemberley—and I will here state again, unequivocally, that we were informed the family was not at home—I had learned that you were a man to be admired, not censured. When I toured the grounds at Pemberley and understood how much rested on your shoulders, how many people relied upon you for their livelihoods, how the very towns of Lambton and Kympton lean on the business both

from and created by Pemberley, I believe I began to sympathise with you. When I saw the carefully managed abundance of your estate, I began, at last, to understand you. And when you stood before me, charmingly dishevelled after a long ride, attempting to make pleasant conversation, my heart was touched. You appeared so worn, so unhappy, and I wanted nothing more than to care for you. Yet I had thrown away my chance to be of any importance in your life.

To my great relief and pleasure, you did not order me off the grounds at once. Instead you met me with more than politeness, you met me with genuine respect and consideration, and I have never thanked you for that. Let me do so now with the tools that are within my reach.

Thank you. Not for what you did for my youngest sister, about whom we have already spoken, but for loving me once, even if you love me no longer. I did not understand how having the regard of such a man could change one for the better. And I am changed.

More than thanks, of course, you deserve an apology for what I said to you that night in Kent. I do not think you are the last man I would ever

wish to marry. I never did. My sister's pain was my own, and I grieved for her, but your explanation made me see how a man might view his friend's behaviour differently than a hopeful sister. You did no more for Mr. Bingley than I would have done for Jane. Have done, in fact. One day, when we meet again, I shall have to tell you the story of how I ran off Mr. Robinson's distasteful nephew when he was making Jane uncomfortable. Let me advise you that it includes a partridge filched from my father's successful hunt and a very hungry pack of dogs.

I believed that in haranguing you I was defending my sister and my friend, but I know better now. You have made amends with your friend, and my eldest sister is happy. You opened my eyes to the person who is now my youngest sister's husband, and though my cautions fell on deaf ears with my father, you did what you could, even violating your own need for privacy to do so.

I am running out of room on this page, but know that if I could, I should fill twenty such with my regrets. I wish I truly had laughed off your insult at the assembly. How different everything might be if I had! But we cannot go backward, only forward, and I do wish that, Mr. Darcy. If you

cannot give your heart again to one who did not value it rightly the first time it was offered, I will think you wise. However, if you are willing to be foolish instead, I can promise you that it would be received with the love and care that it so richly deserves.

I will only say, God Bless You.

E. B.

Elizabeth read it over. “Oh,” she whispered. “I would marry him if he asked. I *would*.” But he would not ask. She had to remind herself of that.

She sanded the letter. When it was dry, she folded it, placed it in her box with the others, and turned the key. “Good night, Mr. Darcy,” she said, placing one hand atop the wooden lid. “Pleasant dreams.”

Chapter Nine

Darcy sat up and swung his legs over the side of his bed. There was no hope for it—he could not sleep. He was to be marooned at Netherfield forever, in close quarters with Miss Bingley while Bingley made a cake of himself over his wife.

Well, to be fair, if he had married Elizabeth, he too would be in danger of such distraction. He laughed at himself a little. He was distracted anyway. Bewitching woman. Why could he not accept that she did not want him?

Because of Pemberley, that was why. Those three days had offered him the thinnest thread of hope, and for whatever reason, it had yet to be sundered. It could not be, not when she was a short ride away through the fields.

He grabbed his trousers, pulled the braces up over his shoulders, and stuffed his shirt into them. His stockings were next, and he slipped on a pair of shoes while reaching for his coat. There.

What was he doing? He could not ride to Longbourn now; they would all be soundly asleep.

His stomach grumbled at him, and Darcy sighed. He was sufficiently dressed to wander the halls of Netherfield while everyone else was asleep, and so, instead of walking to Elizabeth, he would skulk down to the kitchen and see if there was anything in the larder. Bingley was already laughing at him for playing hide-and-go-seek with his presence in the house. Even the butler had noted his uncharacteristic behaviour. Why not go all in and frighten any kitchen maids who might happen to be awake, too?

Darcy glared at himself in the glass. “What would Elizabeth say if she could see you now?”



Elizabeth kneaded her shoulder with one hand, stretching her neck and attempting to work out the knot. She could not sleep after writing her letter, and she did not wish to remain in her rooms. With all the staff abed, it would not matter if she wandered the halls a bit.

“Like a ghost,” she told herself wryly. “Which you are in danger of becoming.” She put on her favourite set of stays, the ones that fastened in the front, and drew a morning dress over herself. It was, after all, morning, though too early for anyone else to be up. She twisted her hair up into a simple chignon and slipped her feet into her shoes.

As she walked the hallway, she glanced up at the portraits of some long-forgotten ancestors of the Langstons. It made her think of the gallery at Pemberley, and how she had been captivated by Mr. Darcy's likeness. He had been a bit younger in his portrait—she thought it might be from his time at university. His visage had been softer and there had been mischief in his eyes, something entirely lacking in the man she had met in Hertfordshire.

She could not help but ponder what had caused the change. Mrs. Reynolds had sung Mr. Darcy's praises, but it could not have been easy to become the master of such an enterprise without the mentorship of his father. As disappointed as she was in her own father, she could not imagine losing him and then having to run Longbourn as she grieved. Had Mr. Darcy ever been allowed time to mourn, or had he been thrust into taking care of everyone around him when he was in need of succour himself? How she wished she might be the one to offer him that comfort.

Christmas was on Friday, less than a week away. How she wished to invite him to Longbourn for it. Noisy, bustling Longbourn would do him a world of good, she was certain of it. Now that Lydia was gone to the north with her husband, only the actual children would put up any sort of fuss, and Mamma would make sure that the feast was spectacular.

Elizabeth found herself actually anticipating the day with her family. Perhaps it was possible to love her family more completely from a distance.

Her stomach grumbled. How could that be? She had eaten very well at dinner. Although perhaps she had been diverted by Miss Bingley's continual objections to one thing or another, for she now recalled not quite finishing the soup. Or the duck. Or the fruit that came from the hothouse and was such a delicacy during the winter months.

Well, she had been known to raid the kitchen at Longbourn before, sometimes with her furry friends. Jane would not mind, and Charles would probably only laugh at her. She would just be certain not to take anything that Cook might require for their meals tomorrow.

She padded quietly down the servants' stairs towards the kitchen holding her candle out before her, as the treads were rather narrow here. When she reached the door for the kitchen, however, she heard someone inside, and froze, her free hand hovering near the knob.

She heard a solid thump and pressed her ear against the wooden door. She glanced up the stairs, but if she hurried away, they would hear her.

Footsteps, light, like the wearer was in slippers rather than boots, but with a heavy tread—most likely a man—were moving away. Elizabeth released a breath and laughed shakily at herself. It might even have been Charles. But she waited for a time before cracking the door and holding out the candle.

A glass sat on the counter, water droplets clinging to the inside, a small plate with a few crumbs next to it. Elizabeth

examined them with her meagre light and then opened the larder to search out something for herself.



Despite Darcy's clandestine journey to the kitchens early in the morning, he woke at his normal time. The house was still quiet, though he could detect the familiar hum of industry. The servants were at their work even if the family was still asleep.

Scripps had him prepared for the day with great efficiency, and soon Darcy found himself hiding away in the library, staring curiously at a novel that had been left on the table near the settee. It was *Self-Control* by Mary Brunton. He had read about its success last year, but it was rather gothic in nature, not something he believed Mrs. Bingley would find entertaining, though he supposed it might be Miss Bingley's. He picked it up and returned it to the shelf, then straightened the spines so that they were perfectly aligned.

He heard a woman's voice out in the hall that sent his heart racing, but by the time he opened the door to look, there was no one there. He shook his head.

"I must get out of this house," he murmured. He gathered his greatcoat and gloves himself, much to Mr. Carstairs's consternation. "Never mind," Darcy said almost gruffly, and nearly walked into the door before the older man had a chance to open it. No doubt his strange behaviour would be the talk of the servants' quarters this evening—or perhaps not. Carstairs

did not seem the type to encourage gossip about the family he worked for or their eccentric guests.

He could hope.

Once outside, Darcy looked about him almost frantically, choosing a path that led over a small rise and down to and around a large pond. The turning of the path towards the water was marked by a small gardener's shed where they kept some of their tools.

Darcy had seen Elizabeth on that path once. He had watched her from a distance as she had stopped in the shower of leaves that were falling, her arms raised over her head, the perfect portrait of happiness. She had dropped her arms when she saw him and hurried away. Then, he had thought her coy, but now he knew she had fled because she did not like him.

Darcy took a deep breath and forced himself to slow down. There was something calming about standing out of doors in the country. One's feet might as well be the trunk of a tree with roots reaching into the earth. Though many of the birds had gone for the winter, there was still the chirrup of the sparrow and the whistle of the blackbird. The bare branches of the oaks rubbed one against the other, creaking in a wind that was becoming a little stronger than a breeze. He pulled his greatcoat about him more tightly, doing up the final buttons. As he walked, his boots made a crunching sound as they ground pebbles into the earth and snapped small twigs. It smelled like snow, but it had not been cold enough for that,

surely? The pond had not iced over, and there had not even been slush or hail, only rain.

It was too bad he had sent his valet on ahead. If it snowed, it would not matter if the sickness turned out to be nothing, for the roads would not be passable. At this rate, he would be stuck in Hertfordshire until the season began. He patted his coat pocket, where the letter he had written Elizabeth resided, folded small and close to his heart. Perhaps he could leave it with Mrs. Bingley to give to her sister, and when they met again in London, he could have his answer.

A ride would be more to his liking, but after having been delayed nearly a week already, he dared not risk additional injury to any of his mounts just now. A few rounds about the pond and he would feel better. He smiled a little, recalling how Miss Bingley had taken Elizabeth for a turn about the room, hoping that he would compare them. He suspected Miss Bingley had believed that she would come out the winner in such a comparison, but even then, he had only had eyes for Elizabeth.

He was nearly to the turnoff where the path at the shore was reached through the trees. As he rounded the corner, he turned to the right and lifted his head.

A woman was standing at the end of a long, narrow pier, gazing out across the water. She was a spritely little thing in a golden-brown pelisse, dark brown curls escaping her bonnet.

Darcy could barely breathe. He had been sure he was hearing Elizabeth's voice back at the house. He had smelt her perfume.

The book in the library—had he imagined her there, reading it? And now he was seeing her image.

He walked closer, but the image did not disappear. Elizabeth was at Longbourn, surely. Was he truly in danger of losing his wits, or was that ... “Elizabeth?” His question was spoken somewhat louder than he had intended, the sound of his voice breaking the silence into jagged pieces.

The woman jolted and turned quickly, sending herself a little off balance. When she stepped back to right herself, there was nothing for her back foot to rest upon, and she toppled backwards with waving arms and a little screech.

“Elizabeth!” Darcy cried and ran after her.



The water was *frigid*. Frigid, but fortunately not so very deep. Elizabeth sat up spluttering, the water coming to her chin, but her head above the surface. Her bonnet was soaked and limp, her hair half caught up in her pins and half trailing down her back.

And the wind had picked up, making every damp inch of her face feel caked over in ice.

“Elizabeth!”

The panic she felt rising in her chest had nothing to do with the fact that she was currently sitting in a pond, soaked to the skin and very likely to catch her death of cold. It had to do with the familiarity of that voice—the dearness of it—and that

the man who belonged to it was currently charging towards her.

He could not come to the dinner when she had been perfectly attired, no, he must witness her gracelessness, he must see her looking like a vagabond who had been caught in a downpour. Of course. This was a sad commentary on her life of late, and the absurdity of it could not help but make her laugh a bit.

The laugh died in her throat when Mr. Darcy tore off his greatcoat, dashed down the pier, and waded into the water, boots and all, until he was at her side.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, bemused. “It is not deep here.”

“Not for *me*,” he said wryly, and indeed, the water did not reach the top of his boots. He held out both hands to help her to her feet, then put one strong arm around her waist and led her the few steps back to the pier. “On the count of three,” he said, “jump, and I will lift you up.”

Her face must have turned a bright red, for he murmured, “We must get you out of the water as quickly as possible, madam.”

She had preferred it when he had called her Elizabeth. But she did not protest, simply nodded. Mr. Darcy’s large, strong hands nearly encircled her waist, and Elizabeth closed her eyes at the exquisiteness of his touch.

“One,” he said. “Two.”

Elizabeth bent her knees.

“Three.”

She pushed up with her legs as hard as she could and found herself being easily lifted onto the wooden platform again. Mr. Darcy placed both hands on the side of the pier and pushed himself up, gaining his feet in no time.

Then he stood before her, strong, tall, handsome, caring. She studied his face and noticed a small white scar near the corner of one eye. “I thought you were gone to Pemberley,” she said, irritated at how her shivering made her words stutter like a staccato note on the pianoforte.

“I intended to. Horse trouble,” he said roughly, and her disappointment was acute.

Stupid girl. Did you think he had stayed for you? How many times must the man rescue you from your family's folly and your own?

He placed his arm around her waist again, leading her to the shore. Elizabeth leaned into his side, willing to be brazen for she might never have another chance to be so very close to him. When they reached the place where he had discarded his greatcoat, he let her go to retrieve it.

A blast of icy air blew through her wet clothes and froze every part of her. Elizabeth wrapped her arms around herself and tried to stop shaking. She bent over, trying to make herself smaller, to conserve what heat she had.

Suddenly, she was swathed in warmth and was being lifted off her feet. “What are you doing?” she asked shakily, more

surprised than offended.

Mr. Darcy had wrapped her in his greatcoat.

“You are shivering so hard you cannot stand,” Mr. Darcy replied sternly. “We must get you to the house and changed into dry clothing.”

He meant nothing by it, of course, his talk of changing her clothes, but Elizabeth imagined what it would be like were they wed, and he could take her to their chambers. Would he see to her care himself or leave it to the maid? Would they sit together before a fire after and laugh at her clumsiness? Would he read to her until she fell asleep on his shoulder, then kiss her forehead and carry her to bed—carry her as tenderly as he carried her now?

“Put your arm around my neck,” he instructed her.

Elizabeth did so, then buried herself deeper into his coat and closer to his chest, mortified not by the thoughts themselves, but that she was having them at all. The man clearly did not want her. He had been in the house, no doubt aware that she was in residence, but had not even bothered to come down for dinner last night. More than that, he had been at Netherfield since the wedding!

Her thoughts slowed. She was very cold. Instead of trying to figure out what the confusing man holding her had been about, she simply laid her head against his chest and listened to the beating of his heart.



Darcy was nearly frantic with worry. Elizabeth's shivering had abated somewhat, but she had fallen silent. She was soaked from head to toe. Between the nearly freezing temperature of the water itself, the wind was biting, making her body respond as though it was even colder. If the undergardener's illness *was* spreading through the house, she would be more susceptible to it. He lengthened his stride, ignoring how the gusty winds were increasing in strength. When he reached the top of the rise, his hat flew from the top of his head, and he involuntarily paused to see where it had gone. But the next moment, he tightened his grip on Elizabeth—she felt so small in his arms—and plunged ahead towards the house.

“My goodness, Mr. Darcy,” she said, her voice muffled in his coat, “your legs are very long. Perhaps the next time I need to walk to Meryton I should ask you to carry me there. I should save nearly half my time.”

Darcy's heart eased a fraction to hear her teasing, but he could not think of her, bent over, shaking, her lips painted with a faint bluish hue, and be entirely sanguine. “I am at your service, Miss Bennet,” he told her without breaking his stride.

She sighed, and Darcy imagined carrying Elizabeth like this on their wedding night. God forgive him, if this was the only way he would ever have her in his arms, he would cherish it. “My sister Georgiana used to insist on riding me like a horse throughout the nursery and out in the hall. She once wanted to ride me down the stairs, but even as a reckless youth I would not risk that.”

“You are full of surprises, sir.”

“Is it surprising, Miss Bennet, that I was once a boy like any other?”

She was silent for a moment before saying, “I suppose not. Were you much in the way of surprising young ladies and making them fall in the pond?”

“Are you blaming *me* for this?” he cried in mock affront.

“Of course. It could not possibly be *my* fault.”

He barked out a laugh at that. “No, of course not.” Netherfield was close now; they would be at the stairs in a few moments. He summoned his courage. “Miss Bennet, when you are restored to yourself, I should like to speak with you.”

There. The stairs were just before him, and not a moment too soon. Elizabeth was not a large woman by any measure, but she no longer felt as light as she had back at the pond. He took the first step up, adjusted her in his arms, and then hurried up the rest.

“As long as you are not gone off to Pemberley,” she said faintly, as they reached the top, “I will listen to whatever you have to say.”

“Thank you,” he said, breathing a little heavier.

The door opened so quickly that it nearly hit Darcy. He turned a bit so that his shoulder would take the blow and not Elizabeth. She had enough to contend with.

“I startled Miss Elizabeth, and she fell in the pond,” Darcy said brusquely, walking inside past the butler.

“You may set me on my feet now,” Elizabeth told him, and Darcy complied, unwilling to let her go, but knowing that her peril was less extreme now that they were indoors.

“Fetch Mrs. Bingley,” Carstairs told a footman. “Quick, now.” He beckoned to a maid. “Tell Mrs. Nichols we have need of her.” Then he bellowed, “Kerr!” and Darcy raised his brows.

The maid appeared as though from the thin air. “Oh, Miss Bennet,” she said reprovingly. “Come with me and we will set you to rights.”

One of the staff was already approaching with a blanket, and Darcy gently lifted his greatcoat off her shoulders and allowed Kerr to wrap the dry wool around Elizabeth.

“The fire is still warm in your chambers,” Kerr told Elizabeth. The maid could not be more than a year or two older than his Elizabeth, but she behaved more like a mother, wrapping an arm around her mistress as she clucked at her. “What were you doing out by the pond on such a blustery day?”

Darcy watched until they disappeared into the family wing. Only then did he realise that Carstairs was standing next to him, his hands clasped behind his back, watching as well.

“You should change your boots, sir,” Carstairs said without actually looking at the boots or at Darcy. “It would not do to

leave your feet wet.”

The butler had already picked his damp greatcoat up from the floor and stepped into the little room off the entrance where wet outerwear was hung to dry. His feet were not wet, but they were cold, so with a grunt that passed as a response, he walked up the other staircase—the one that led to the guest wing. When he reached the top, Darcy could not help but look back. Elizabeth was here. She was here, and she had agreed he might speak to her. He would make certain that this time, nothing would go wrong.

Chapter Ten

Jane draped another heavy blanket over Elizabeth's legs while Kerr filled several bed warmers and stuck them under the sheets on the other side of the room.

“Are you warm enough, dearest?”

Elizabeth sat with her stocking-clad feet stretched out in the direction of the fire and wiggled her toes. She was finally warming, but the whole ordeal had left her fatigued. Not that she ought to be the one who was tired, for Mr. Darcy had carried her back to the house. She wondered how he was feeling.

“I am well, though you may suffocate me with all of these blankets,” she teased.

“I cannot understand why you were out walking by yourself when it is so cold, Lizzy,” Jane fussed, mimicking a shudder. “You cannot move me from the fire on a day like today.”

“I did not expect to be out long.” She had felt compelled to visit the path where she had seen Mr. Darcy once before. How

prophetic that had been! “The wind was not blowing when I set out. That is why it feels so cold.”

“It does not only feel cold, it *is* cold. I would not be surprised if it snows tonight.”

“Do you think so?”

“I hope not, for Mr. Darcy’s sake. Charles did not tell me his friend was still here, but he will be here longer still if there is any snow to speak of.”

“Why *is* Mr. Darcy still here? He mentioned horse trouble, but I thought he was to leave directly from the wedding breakfast.”

“He was. A series of mischances, it seems. His horse fell lame not five miles down the road, and another lost a shoe, and then there was an illness in the house ...”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. Jane was not looking at her as she spoke, only fluffing pillows and replacing them on the settee.

“Jane ...”

“I will check on your soup. Is the tea still hot?”

“Nearly scalding, yes.” Elizabeth looked at the kettle hanging over the fire and then back at Jane. She wanted to ask her sister what was happening, why Mr. Darcy had suffered so many delays, but suddenly she did not want to know. She only wished for Mr. Darcy to be delayed again so that he could ask her what he wished to know.

It will not be that, she warned her fickle heart. He would apologise for something or thank her for something, and in either case, he ought not. It would have nothing to do with calling on her or courting her, or better still, marrying her. It would not.

“I am sorry that you will be required to spend more time in close quarters with Mr. Darcy,” Jane was saying, peeking at Elizabeth as though she was afraid of her sister’s response.

“Jane, I have said time and again that his presence does not bother me.”

“Then you were not embarrassed that he carried you back to the house? For I must say, Lizzy, I am greatly indebted to him for his care of you.”

“You realise, of course, that Mr. Darcy caused the entire accident by coming upon me and crying out my name as he did?” Elizabeth was vastly amused by the whole thing now that her nose and the tips of her ears were thawing.

“Oh, Lizzy, no. He was merely surprised to come upon you. Imagine, you were both in the same house at the same time and never saw one another.” Jane busied herself about the room.

“He was hiding, that is why! Why did he not come to dinner last night?”

“I cannot tell you. Perhaps because Miss Bingley is here.”

“Mr. Darcy has never eschewed Miss Bingley’s company before.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because he ... because I ...” Elizabeth hesitated. “Well, I suppose I do not know, do I?”

“You were only in their company a very short time, sister.”

More time than Jane had been in her husband’s before she agreed to wed, given the weeks Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy had been in Kent together and the additional days at Pemberley. Enough to know ... she sighed and patted the space next to her.

Jane sat and put her arm around Elizabeth’s shoulder. “You frightened me today, Elizabeth. Thank heavens it was only a shallow part of the pond.”

“I was never in any danger, Jane. I would only have been a little colder had I needed to find my own way back. And as I said, had Mr. Darcy not been there, I would not have fallen in at all.”

“You cannot blame him when he was so gallant as to rescue you.”

“He did *not* rescue me. I could stand up on my own and was in no need of a knight.” Elizabeth laughed. Why did Jane insist on painting her as a poor weak heroine waiting for a man to save her? Nothing could be farther from the truth. Not that she did not appreciate Mr. Darcy’s assistance. The safety and comfort of his strong arms—no, she would never forget that. Moreover, she *had* been very cold, and his coat had been quite warm. “Why do they not make greatcoats for women, Jane?”

she asked suddenly. “They are wonderful. I should traipse the entire estate in the dead of winter if I had a coat like Mr. Darcy’s.”

Jane’s lips twisted slightly in amusement. “If you had a coat like Mr. Darcy’s, you would forever be tripping on the train.”

Elizabeth laughed again, and this time Jane joined her. “He *is* very tall.”

“And you are very ... not.”

“Thank you for reminding me.”

“It does not seem to bother Mr. Darcy,” Jane said playfully.

“No, of course not. It makes me easier to carry,” Elizabeth retorted with an exaggerated eye roll.

“But Lizzy,” Jane said gently, placing her hand on Elizabeth’s arm, “I am sure that you could not have been so flippant with Mr. Darcy when he came to your aid.”

“Indeed, I was not. But Jane,” Elizabeth said, patting her sister’s hand, “while Mr. Darcy and I are no longer at odds, you must see that he could never pursue the sister of a man who has done such harm to his own. Even if he did mean to renew his addresses last summer, Lydia’s behaviour has certainly put an end to any wishes he may have had on that score.”

A little line appeared above the bridge of Jane’s nose. “Did you wish for him to renew his addresses, Lizzy? When you spoke of him upon returning to Longbourn in August, you said that you did not.”

“Jane, I have done something rather stupid.”

“This sounds serious.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and clasped her hands in her lap. “I am afraid that I have fallen in love with Mr. Darcy.”

Jane gasped. “What?”

“And I believe it is possible that he is still in love with me. But he could never ask for my hand. Not with Mr. Wickham as our brother.”

Jane thought this over. “Charles would be his brother, too. Certainly that would even the scales.”

Could the good outweigh so much bad? Elizabeth shook her head. It was too much to hope for.

“Well,” Jane said, standing up and shaking out her skirts, “if he is not brave enough to ask when your silly sister is wed and far away, then he does not deserve you.”

“He does not,” Elizabeth declared loftily in an attempt to banish the gloom that was gathering. “For who could?” She and Jane smiled at one another, but Elizabeth was soon yawning.

Jane stood to ring the bell.

“Kerr, is the bed warm?” Jane inquired, raising her voice.

The maid removed the bedwarmer. “Yes, ma’am.”

Elizabeth stood to make her way over to the bed, climbing in after Jane peeled the sheet and blanket back. Elizabeth pulled

the quilt up to her nose and felt as warm as she had in Mr. Darcy's greatcoat.

Jane tucked her in and kissed her on the forehead. Elizabeth closed her eyes, thanking God for giving her such a wonderful sister and asking forgiveness for her ingratitude. For she would have preferred a different nurse.



“So, your little game has been discovered,” Bingley said with a half-smile, dropping onto the settee in Darcy's chambers and giving Darcy an elbow in the side. “Jane and Lizzy now both know you are here.”

Darcy groaned. He lifted his feet to the ottoman and held out his feet to the fire. Scripps had quickly located a pair of thick wool socks and slippers large enough to put over them before he bore Darcy's hessians away. Darcy was feeling a good deal warmer and now felt at leisure to contemplate his position.

“It is your own fault, you know,” Bingley scolded him in jest. “You would have had an easier time of it had you not hidden away last night. Now they know you were in seclusion and will wish to know why.”

“Because of Miss Bingley, of course. By the by, why did you not tell me that Elizabeth Bennet was residing here?”

Bingley appeared confused. “I thought you knew. We spoke of my sister ...”

“We spoke of the sister we have always spoken of. Miss Bingley.”

“No, we specifically spoke of the sister you wanted to avoid. You have never avoided Caroline.”

“What? That is not true.”

Bingley lifted both eyebrows. “When have you ever sought to eschew Caroline’s company, other than last night? Even after you snapped at her at Pemberley, you did not avoid her before you left. Lizzy, on the other hand—you did not come in time to attend the family dinner, and you removed yourself from the wedding breakfast rather quickly. Besides, you are forever arguing with her.”

Darcy cast his thoughts back. As much as he dreaded Miss Bingley’s company, he had never really avoided her. It was the cost of a friendship with Bingley, and he believed the friendship was worth it.

Bingley’s countenance creased as he thought. “You spoke of your behaviour last autumn. I reminded you that your behaviour was not *her* fault any more than my decision to remain in London was yours. I was speaking of the way you insulted Elizabeth at the assembly and again in your conversations with Louisa and Caroline when you said something about the Bennet daughters not marrying well.” He snickered. “You were wrong there, but I think I may be forgiven for assuming you meant my *new* sister.”

Darcy dropped his head in his hands. “And Miss Bennet will also wonder why I hid myself away.”

Bingley shrugged, evidently enjoying himself. “Yes, most likely. Although she is an intelligent woman. She may already have worked it out.”

Worse and worse. “This is a disaster.” But no, there was hope. Miss Bennet had agreed to speak with him once she was feeling better. She had been entirely lucid when she said it. And they had shared a friendly, teasing sort of conversation, despite the unusual circumstances.

“One thing I have learned,” Bingley said, crossing his arms over his chest and staring into the fire, “is that the two eldest Bennet sisters are quite forgiving.”

“Beg pardon, Bingley,” Darcy said, returning the earlier jest, “but I believe you are married to the forgiving Bennet sister.” Not that he deserved to be forgiven.

“No,” Bingley said carefully. “Lizzy was quite angry with me when I returned, though she did not allow her sister to see it. Can you imagine if a man had treated your sister with special notice, speaking with her almost exclusively when in company with others, dancing with her twice at his own ball, and then decamping for London nearly immediately after? Leaving her to the tattling tongues of the town gossips and a disappointed mother?”

Darcy winced. “No, I cannot.” He knew, of course, that Jane Bennet had been hurt by Bingley’s departure. It was one of the things he had felt must be remedied, but he had feared making things worse, and had thus waited until he could accompany Bingley back to Netherfield himself.

“Well, she did. She held the grudge only until I was accepted again by my wife. Once Jane was happy, so was Elizabeth.” He stared into the fire.

Darcy had been cautious when relating his plan to Bingley. Miss Jane Bennet might not have the same feelings for his friend as she once had, but Bingley was determined to find out once and for all. When Darcy understood that Jane Bennet still loved Bingley and would forgive him, he had left Netherfield to allow his friend to court in peace.

He had not put the knocker up on the door in London, as he had wished for privacy to work through his feelings. It was difficult to accept that his admiration and affection were not returned. If only she had been able to remain at Pemberley for a few more days! Everything then might have been different. He might even have had some standing to force Lydia Bennet home.

During those days in London, his aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh had called, but had left in a huff when the servants informed her that Darcy was not at home. The letter she had left for him had begun with vitriol, and he had not read the rest, but tossed it immediately into the fire.

It was unlike him. He had always been very patient with his aunt, for his mother had loved her. But he was worn out, all his reserves depleted. Loving Elizabeth without having gained, without having *earned* her love in return had been—was—a terrible burden to bear.

“You are quiet, Darcy, even for you.” Bingley nudged him with an elbow. “Are you asleep?”

Darcy scoffed. “Would I ever fall asleep in front of a fire rather than in my bed, Bingley?”

His friend laughed. “Most of us have, at one time or another, you know. When you are in your own chambers, you may do as you like.”

“Servants talk, Bingley. I am never alone, not even in my own chambers.”

Bingley leaned forward, his forearms on his thighs, his hands clasped before him. “That sounds exhausting.”

Darcy cast his eyes upward. “It is.”

“Perhaps you ought to learn to shave yourself and tie your own cravat.”

It surprised a laugh out of him. Bingley was a good friend. He always knew when to be serious and when Darcy needed to be goaded out of his dark humours. “Perhaps I shall.”

“Because you are my good friend, Darcy, I shall offer you one more evening of reprieve. I will announce that your heroics today have left you quite done in and that you will dine up here. But tomorrow, I expect you to join us, like a gentleman should.”

Darcy sighed and nodded. “Thank you for your forbearance, Bingley. I shall do as you say.”

Bingley appeared a little shocked by Darcy's easy acquiescence. But Darcy knew that Elizabeth was unlikely to come to dinner tonight—her sister would not allow it after the events of this morning, no matter whether Elizabeth felt recovered or not. And Elizabeth would not worry her sister by insisting. But that would only last so long. Provided there were no lingering ill effects from her misadventure this morning, Miss Elizabeth Bennet would be at dinner tomorrow night.

“Well, Darcy,” Bingley said, standing and tugging the hem of his waistcoat, “I will leave you to it.”

“To what?”

Bingley chuckled. “To whatever it is that you do when you are on your own.”

He nodded, but when his friend reached for the knob, Darcy abruptly recalled why he was still here, “How is your servant? The one who was taken ill?”

Bingley met Darcy's gaze steadily. “He appears to be doing well enough, but it is too soon to say.”

Chapter Eleven

By the morning after her unexpected dunking, Elizabeth was wild to be out of her room. She was embarrassed that Mr. Darcy had seen her in such dishabille, but it was as much his fault as hers—more, really. First, he ought to have attended the dinner at Netherfield where she had appeared at her best, and second, he ought not have cried out her name and frightened her when she thought she was alone. But what was done was done, and she was determined not to dwell on it. She had done enough of that these past few months. Mr. Darcy was still here, and she did not much care why.

Somehow, she would gain a private moment with him and confess what she had hoped for last summer. If he did not wish to renew his offers, it would hurt—it would hurt badly—but at least she would know. And then, one way or another, she could go on with her life. Elizabeth sighed. She hoped she could go on with her life.

“Lizzy, what are you doing up?” Jane asked.

Elizabeth had not even heard her sister walk in. “I am well, Jane. A warm fire, a good meal, and a full night’s sleep have done their work.”

“I would prefer you remain in bed today, just to be safe. If you are still feeling well this evening, you can come down to dinner.”

“Will Mr. Darcy be there?”

Jane worried her bottom lip, but Elizabeth could see that she was trying not to smile.

“What is it?” Elizabeth inquired, ready to be entertained.

“You need not worry about the meal being awkward for you, Lizzy. Caroline does not know that Mr. Darcy is here, and upon his request, she will not learn of his presence until just before dinner. I suspect she will demand his attentions tonight.” Jane shook her head. “The poor man had hoped to slip out of the house without her knowing, but between the trouble with his horses, a servant taking ill with an influenza ...”

Elizabeth did not wish for Miss Bingley to command Mr. Darcy’s attentions. Not tonight and not any other night, either. “You did not tell me anyone was ill.”

“Another reason why you should remain upstairs today. We are trying to contain it.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. She had not detected any of the usual signs of a house with illness inside. Even if the sickness was downstairs, there would have been a few maids missing as

they would be needed to nurse the invalid. “Jane, has anyone else been taken ill?”

“No, not yet, but Charles says ...”

Elizabeth arched one eyebrow. Charles said? “And how long has it been?”

“Only a few days.”

“Janie ...”

“Lizzy.” Jane returned Elizabeth’s disbelieving stare with an expression of pure innocence. Elizabeth did not wish to insinuate that her new brother was prevaricating. And really, what purpose would there be to telling such a story?

“I would prefer you remain to rest, but if you insist, you may come downstairs. I must sit with Caroline.” Jane said, moving smoothly past Elizabeth’s pointed gaze.

“Where are the men?”

“Riding. Charles is taking Mr. Darcy out to look at a particular field that floods in the winter.”

Any desire to show herself downstairs vanished. “Hmph. Very well, if you will bring me something to read or sew or do, I will remain here. But I will absolutely be at dinner. I must witness Miss Bingley’s first look at Mr. Darcy.”

“Do not be too hard on him, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I notice you have not asked any clemency for Miss Bingley.”

“Miss Bingley’s heart is not my concern. I fear that if you are unkind to Mr. Darcy, you will only hurt yourself.”

“I promise to be kind, Jane.” She was learning that she did not wish to be anything else—not to him.



Darcy was grateful to be away from the house this morning. Though it had been cold when they left the manor house and the temperature did not seem to be rising, it gave him time away from Miss Bingley and distance to consider what he would say to Elizabeth. In the meantime, Bingley was quizzing him about what could be done for the low-lying field that appeared to flood each winter if he decided to purchase Netherfield.

Here he was on familiar ground. “You could always plant river birch trees. It would take time, but the wood could eventually bring a nice profit.”

“You would not advise draining the field?”

Darcy scanned the landscape. “You could. But it is not so large a plot that you need worry about lost crops. If you build drainage, it is one more thing to maintain and repair. And the trees would not take much tending once they were well started.” His horse pawed at the ground, tired of standing still. “It is always easier to work with nature than against it,” he said, and then led his mount into a trot in the other direction.

Bingley rubbed the back of his hand against his mouth, clearly trying not to smile.

“Bingley, what is the matter with you?”

“Nothing. Why do you ask?”

“You cannot hold a conversation without smirking at me.”

“I am doing no such thing. Smirking, indeed.”

Darcy frowned. “You are up to something. Please tell me it does not have to do with your sister. Miss Bingley, that is, not the sister you have more recently acquired.”

Bingley laughed aloud at that. “I am only amused that you, of all men, are suggesting I allow nature to take its course.”

His friend found it humorous, but Darcy was deeply chagrined. “Bingley, I ...”

“You have already apologised, Darcy, and I have accepted. But do not make the mistake of believing I have forfeited the enjoyment of teasing you about it from time to time.”

“When I need it, I presume,” Darcy grumbled.

“Indeed. Now, if you wish to know, I was also considering the look on Caroline’s face when you suddenly appear before her.”

Darcy blanched.

The laughter that erupted from Bingley was not soon dampened, but at last he shook his head. “Do not concern yourself, my friend. I will inform my sister that you are here. Caroline, that is, not Lizzy, who is already aware.”

“Too many sisters, Bingley.”

“Just wait until we have to add the other two still at Longbourn, or when Louisa comes to call. Even your sharp mind will have trouble keeping up.”

Darcy grunted and led his horse away from the soft, wet ground. “None of them will likely give me as much trouble as you.”

“Me?” Bingley exclaimed, “I am the easiest fellow you shall ever meet.”



When they arrived back at Netherfield, Darcy went directly upstairs for a bath and to write some letters. His steward had been expecting him back days ago, but he doubted now that he would return to Pemberley at all before the season began. He would cut his stay in London short and return to Pemberley before planting. He explained the change in his plans and answered a number of outstanding questions.

Dinner was served early in the country, and as soon as his letters were done, Darcy prepared himself for it. He would see Miss Bingley, but he might also see Elizabeth.

“How is Miss Bennet faring?” Darcy asked Scripps as the valet arranged his hair.

“I could not say, sir, but there has been no rushing about for more than some hot soup and tea from the kitchen.” He pressed his lips together. “Kerr had a gown to press, so I suppose that means Miss Bennet will be down for dinner.”

Darcy smiled to himself. Just as he had predicted. “Good, good.”

“Miss Bennet is well thought of by everyone at Netherfield, Mr. Darcy.”

“Not everyone,” Darcy remarked drolly, and felt a painful tug on his hair. “Ow,” he said, complaining. “Do you mind? The hair is attached to my head at present, and I should prefer to keep it there.”

“My apologies, Mr. Darcy,” Scripps replied curtly.

“Scripps,” Darcy said slowly, recalling his misunderstanding with Bingley, “do you think I am the one who does not think well of Miss Bennet? If so, you quite mistake the matter.”

“Indeed, sir?”

“I was speaking of Miss Bingley. She has never thought well of Miss Bennet.”

“Ah,” Scripps said politely. His ministrations eased.

“I think quite highly of Mrs. Bingley’s sister,” Darcy assured Scripps.

“Very good, sir.”

Darcy almost repeated himself in the hopes that Scripps would believe him, but he stopped himself in time. It did not matter whether Scripps believed him or not. It only mattered that Elizabeth did—and what her response to his admission would be.

“Thank you, Scripps,” he said when the man was done, and Scripps hurried away to assist his master.



Miss Bingley was waiting for Mr. Darcy—lying in wait like the carnivorous plant from America that the botanist Mr. Ellis had written of so exactly. Only Mr. Darcy was not an insect, and he was unlikely to be caught no matter how long Miss Bingley waited.

Elizabeth had believed she would enjoy seeing Miss Bingley’s face when she first encountered Mr. Darcy and learned he had been hiding himself away in the guest wing of the house, but this game had grown tiresome. Charles had already informed Miss Bingley of Mr. Darcy’s presence in any case, and Elizabeth had refused to eavesdrop near the study door to hear what the woman’s reaction might be. She did not wish to act like a child, no matter how sorely she was tempted.

She did not wish to tease Mr. Darcy either, not really. She wished to speak to him like the rational creature she knew herself to be.

She could tease him afterward.

His expression, when he did arrive, was stoic and perfectly composed. “Miss Bingley,” he said flatly, and then turned to Elizabeth. “Miss Bennet. I trust you have not suffered any lasting harm from your accident yesterday?”

“As you see, sir,” she replied with a little smile.

He returned it, though his smile was fleeting.

“Accident?” Miss Bingley asked slyly, as though she now had intelligence that might be of use to her. “You really must take care, Eliza. I had not thought you so clumsy, but I suppose traipsing through the woods as you do, a certain number of mishaps are inevitable.”

“This particular mishap was not my fault,” Elizabeth informed Miss Bingley pertly. It was the truth. She glanced at Mr. Darcy. It was also a tease.

Mr. Darcy said nothing, but he met Elizabeth’s eye, his gaze promising retribution. Elizabeth felt a little thrill in the pit of her stomach.

“They never are, are they, dear?” Miss Bingley asked, the sweetness of the words undercut with the rancour of the message.

Elizabeth did not reply, as Charles and Jane were arriving. Charles offered her his other arm and she took it without comment, though she would have rather Mr. Darcy offered his. Instead, Mr. Darcy was left to lead Miss Bingley into dinner. No doubt the deluded woman thought it a great honour to her.

She gathered her wits and determined not to be petty. It was beneath her.

Elizabeth was seated next to Charles and Mr. Darcy sat next to Jane, with Miss Bingley on Elizabeth’s other side. So close, yet too far away to speak to one another. It did not really matter, she consoled herself, dipping her spoon into her soup

with rather more energy than required. It was not as though they could converse frankly in the presence of the other three people now seated at the dining table.

She placed her spoon down and waited for the footman to remove her bowl.

Charles leaned over just a bit. "Was there something wrong with your food?"

"Not at all," she responded quietly. It was not the food, it was being so close to Mr. Darcy without being at liberty to speak with him. She was too anxious to eat.

He waited another moment, but when she did not elaborate, he gave her a sympathetic glance and resumed his meal.

Elizabeth's eye wandered to the windows. It was dark, but there seemed to be something drifting in the wind. Was that ...?

"It is snowing!" she exclaimed happily and stood to go look.

Miss Bingley huffed at the impropriety, lifting another spoonful of the soup to her lips.

"Oh," Elizabeth said, half-turning to address the entire party. "I beg your pardon."

"Not at all," Charles said from just behind her. Elizabeth suspected that her new brother had stood and joined her to make her own breach of etiquette less noticeable, and she loved him for it.

"Does it not normally snow here?" he asked amiably.

“It varies,” Jane said from her seat at the table.

“There are many years where we have only rain and frost in December,” Elizabeth explained. “But last year was very cold, as you know, and the spring very wet.”

“It was the same in Derbyshire,” Mr. Darcy said. Elizabeth turned to face him, as he remained at the table. “Planting was delayed, and because there was so much rain in the summer, the harvest was smaller than normal.”

“But you have managed Pemberley so brilliantly that you will hardly see the difference.” Miss Bingley nearly purred her words.

Mr. Darcy’s incredulity was quickly masked, and Elizabeth turned back to the window to peer out into the dark. The flakes were coming thick and fast.

Miss Bingley must have been waiting all day to offer Mr. Darcy such praise. Elizabeth wondered, laughingly, whether she had been composing delicate little compliments to use should the opportunity present itself. But Miss Bingley could not have chosen worse, for a conscientious landowner such as Mr. Darcy, no matter how well he had planned for such a contingency, would be accepting lowered rents and anticipating greater expenditures during the winter so that his tenants neither froze nor starved. Even Papa had told Mamma they should have to economise this year—after Jane’s wedding, of course.

Mr. Darcy did not deign to reply, and Miss Bingley fell silent. No doubt the woman had returned to her soup, since no

further discussion was to be had. But having committed to her breach in propriety, Elizabeth stood at the window for a few moments longer, watching the peaceful sweep of the snowflakes as they drifted to earth. She took a deep breath and released it slowly.

Charles was still beside her when she turned, and Elizabeth blushed to think that she had been keeping him from his meal. “Forgive me, Charles,” she told him quietly. “I still adore the first snowfall.”

“I, for one, detest the stuff,” Miss Bingley said. “It fouls the roads and makes visits difficult, if not impossible. And what if one requires deliveries of coal or food?”

“That is why landowners spend much of the autumn preparing for winter, Miss Bingley,” Mr. Darcy said pleasantly. “Pemberley itself is essentially cut off from both Lambton and Kympton after a heavy storm. We are required to care for ourselves.”

Elizabeth was impressed. That was a proper set-down without any sign of it being so. Charles held out her chair for her, and she slipped back into it with whispered thanks. Her new brother smiled at her and returned to his own seat.

“Although we do not often have storms that cut us off from town for more than a day or so,” Elizabeth said, “we also prepare as though it could. For if the shopkeepers cannot reach their shops to open them, or there is illness in the house and we cannot go out, we must be prepared.”

“And do you manage the larder, Miss Eliza?” Miss Bingley asked, her lips raised in a mocking smile.

Elizabeth was suddenly afraid that her early morning visit to the kitchen had been discovered, but although her cheeks warmed a bit, she quickly rallied. “We all of us grew up on an estate, Miss Bingley. It would have been strange had we not been trained to run one.”

It was Miss Bingley’s turn to blush. “And your *mother* taught you? How extraordinary.”

“Caroline,” Charles said without any hint of malice, “tread very carefully.”

Elizabeth thought the calmness in his voice more powerful a warning than if he had raised it. Miss Bingley, however, would not be deterred.

“Eliza does not mind, Charles. After all,” Miss Bingley said, “your mother is not from the landed gentry, is she? What could she possibly teach you?”

“She learned how to be mistress of Longbourn from our grandmother Bennet,” Jane said before Elizabeth could respond.

Jane always knew when to step in. Elizabeth reminded herself that Mamma needed no protection from her, any more than Jane did. Mamma, despite her nerves, was a good mistress, and the Bennets were the oldest family in the area. A great house had stood on the same site at Longbourn for close to three hundred years. Caroline Bingley had money and

nothing else. Not even the respect of a brother who was likely to rise far above his father's expectations.

"Your grandmother?" Miss Bingley asked, for once caught off guard.

"Yes," Elizabeth replied, now more in control of her ire. "My grandmother was mistress of Longbourn for thirty years when our grandfather passed, and she lived with us until her own death five years ago. My mother was very happy to learn from her."

Her grandmother had taken such pains with them all. She would have been saddened by Lydia's marriage, but then, had she been here, she might have prevented Lydia from becoming such a flirt in the first place.

"I am sorry for your loss," Mr. Darcy said, looking directly at her. "It sounds as though she was very much loved."

"She was." Elizabeth smiled. "Jane, do you recall her teaching us to sled when we studied the Cimbric War?"

Jane laughed. "She was irrepressible."

"It sounds as though she was a little like our Lizzy," Charles said as the soup bowls were removed, and the next course brought in. There were several dishes, and they all smelled heavenly.

"You know, Lizzy," Jane said after everyone had been served, "now that I think on it, you two were very much alike. She loved the cats in the barn and would take you out there to play with the kittens. Mamma was always unhappy when their

little claws snagged your clothes, so Grandmother bought you a special dress to wear out to the barn, do you remember?”

Elizabeth nodded. “It was made of a rougher material, and it itched, but I did not mind, for the kittens could climb all over me and Mamma did not care. And when the puppies were born ...”

Jane nodded. “And she taught you how to climb trees.”

“You climbed trees?” Miss Bingley’s eyebrows rose almost to her hairline. “How ... charming.”

“Oh, it was the best way to pick apples, you see. Or throw them at marauders.” Elizabeth glanced over at Mr. Darcy. His expression told her nothing, but the light in his eyes meant that he found the notion of her climbing trees more amusing than shocking.

Jane laughed a little louder this time, which for Jane meant that it could be heard. “You mean the Lucas boys?”

Elizabeth met her sister’s eye. “There are so many of them.”

“And what was their offense, Miss Bennet?” Mr. Darcy asked in a sonorous voice that sent a glorious shiver down her back. Elizabeth broke away from her sister’s gaze to meet his. Her breath caught in her throat at the dark intensity of his stare.

“They were stealing apples, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth managed to say.

“Perhaps they were hungry,” he replied.

“Did *you* ever stage a raid on a neighbour’s apple trees, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth heard Miss Bingley’s affected gasp, but ignored it, for Mr. Darcy did not look away.

“I must say I did. I believe that is where my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam learned the skills he now uses against Napoleon.”

“Were *you* hungry, Mr. Darcy?”

“Of course, and the neighbour’s apples always tasted better in any case.” One corner of his mouth curled up slightly. “But surely the Lucas boys knew you would defend your family’s interests with vigour. It is in your nature to protect those you love.”

Her heart raced. Was this an acknowledgement that he did not hold her terrible words at the parsonage against her? They were seated at a family dinner—they were not alone. But it might be a very long time before she had another opportunity such as this.

“Little did they know,” Elizabeth said directly, “that had they simply asked, I would have said yes. For I knew that they would also have been generous with me.”

This was skirting too close to intimacy, but neither of them looked away.

“What *are* you talking about, Miss Eliza?” Miss Bingley said, and Elizabeth could hear the taint of desperation in the woman’s tone.

Mr. Darcy flinched and cast his eyes down at his plate, at last breaking the connection. For a connection it had been.

Elizabeth willed her heart to slow to a more normal beat as she focused on the food, picked up her fork, and began to eat.

Chapter Twelve

Bingley was watching the snow fall outside, an unlit cigar in his hand. “I think that regardless of what happens with the undergardener, Darcy, you will be delayed here until the roads are cleared. You may as well settle into your rooms.”

”I *cannot* leave,“ he informed Bingley, who turned to him with a mildly interested expression. “Your staff took my clothing to launder it and only half of it has made its way back. Would you mind making some inquiries?”

Bingley’s lips twitched. God help him if he laughed at Darcy’s plight. Darcy had had quite enough of that.

It was not as though he intended to leave. After their conversation at dinner this evening, he was not leaving this house until he could speak with Elizabeth alone. He might have mistaken her answer tonight or taken it to mean more than it did—misunderstanding Elizabeth was something he had a good deal of experience with—but he did not think that was the case. And when he did, it would be best if his stockings matched.

“I will speak with the staff.”

“Thank you. This is no slight on Scripps, of course. He must be weary of tending to us both.”

“He will manage,” Bingley replied. “I expect he is anticipating a bit extra on Boxing Day, and he shall have it.”

Darcy nodded and joined his friend at the window. The snow was still coming down in great blustery swathes, though it had slowed somewhat from earlier in the evening. It was too dark to see much beyond where they stood, but he doubted it was enough to foul the roads.

Bingley offered him the cigar, but Darcy shook his head. “Usually I smoke to keep Hurst company, but Jane does not like the smell. I shall not purchase more.”

“I am sure Hurst will be glad to have what remains.”

“No doubt.”

“It has been growing progressively colder,” Darcy mused. “I ought to have expected the turn in the weather.”

Bingley huffed, amused. “You are a farmer through and through.”

“I suppose that is true.” Darcy did not mention that he had been terribly distracted. “It comes with being born on an estate.”

“It does not,” Bingley disagreed. “For if it did, there would not be so many old families in decline. Observing you last autumn taught me that success takes a great deal of work. One

must keep up with new ways to increase yield or new crops that might do better than the old. It requires managing risk and not relying on previous partnerships if they no longer offer favourable terms, not to mention a knowledge of contracts to sell the goods, and the many letters to interested parties. You must know who to hire and how to oversee their work. And in addition, one must cultivate good relationships with everyone whenever possible, from one's tenants to the neighbouring landowners." He paused. "Some of it comes naturally to me, but much of it does not."

"I had the advantage of being brought up to the work. Pemberley is as much a part of the Darcy family as I am. More, to tell the truth, for if I am a success, it will live on after me."

Bingley stared straight ahead. "What does a landowner do when the weather turns cold like this?"

His friend was in an unusually pensive mood, but Darcy simply answered the question. "Nothing of consequence if the harvest has been good and the work is done. In a year like this one, however, more care is required. Normally I would be at Pemberley to oversee the preparations, but as you know, business called me back to London soon after my arrival last summer. I have been corresponding with my steward and my housekeeper to make certain the staff and the tenants have what they need to make it through the colder months."

"What if the next harvest is also poor?"

Darcy shook his head. “I do not like to think of it. I have money in investments and the funds as well, of course, so Pemberley is secure though ten such years. But so many people depend upon the health of the estate for their own livelihoods that two years of poor harvests would be very damaging.”

“Is there any other sort of work that you could put them to that would see them through the leaner times?” Bingley inquired.

“I have considered it, of course, but when the harvest is poor, very few people have funds to purchase anything else we might produce.”

“What if you created some sort of barter system?”

“That is what happens among the tenants and villagers quite naturally. They need none of my help there. The staff alerts me where assistance might be needed. The difficulty at times is getting people to take the help, for many are averse to what they view as charity.”

Bingley glanced at him, and then back out at flashes of white swirling against the dark. “There is a healthy sort of pride, I think, that can lead a man to greater achievements. But there are occasions where pride becomes nothing more than an impediment.”

Darcy clasped his hands behind his back. That hit very close to the mark. His pride had been a significant impediment to his own happiness. But he was well past any sense of superiority now. He would be insufferably proud again, though, if only he

could convince Miss Bennet that he was worthy of her. For a man worthy of her regard could truly be proud to have won it and her.

“Not a prize to be won,” he murmured.

“Did you say something, Darcy?” Bingley asked, finally drawn away from the scene outside.

“Nothing of import.” Elizabeth was a treasure, that much was true. But her respect, dare he hope—her love—was something he would work every day to preserve, to deepen.

Bingley tossed the cigar back in its box and poured two small glasses of brandy. Darcy took one and sipped it slowly.

As tirelessly as Darcy worked to maintain the family seat, to make it prosper for his family and those who depended upon it, Pemberley would never love him. He might have scoffed at such sentiment once, but no more.

He loved Elizabeth. He wanted, more than anything, to be a man she could love in return. He wanted to share Pemberley with her in all its trials and triumphs, but it was another sort of legacy he wanted more, the legacy of a love that would live on in their children and grandchildren.

It was a great deal to hope for. To make it happen, he must first speak to Elizabeth.

“Are you ready to rejoin the ladies, Bingley?” he asked.

Charles nodded. “I am.”



Elizabeth followed Jane out of the dining room and into the hallway. Mr. Carstairs was shaking out Mr. Darcy's greatcoat but draped it over his arm when he saw them. "Mrs. Bingley, Miss Bennet," he said, and then paused. "Miss Bingley."

Miss Bingley frowned. "Is that Mr. Darcy's coat?"

"It is." Carstairs addressed Jane. "I was about to have it sent up to his rooms, now that it is dry and has been brushed."

"Thank you, Carstairs," Jane said approvingly.

When they entered the parlour, Miss Bingley was not with them. They waited for a few moments before Jane returned to the hall to locate her. Miss Bingley was not far from the door, and she was wearing a self-satisfied smile that Elizabeth could not like.

"What shall we do to pass the time?" Miss Bingley asked. "Perhaps some music? Mr. Darcy has always appreciated my playing."

"That would be lovely, Caroline," Jane said, seemingly relieved that the woman was not continuing to be difficult.

Miss Bingley moved to the pianoforte and began a few country airs. Even Elizabeth had to admit she played them very well. Jane spoke quietly about her plans for Christmas dinner, and Elizabeth tried to quell the happiness that welled up inside. She would be able to spend Christmas with Mr. Darcy. Unless the snow grew very deep indeed, they would go out to gather greenery and decorate the house. Perhaps they might even hang a kissing bough where she would be sure to

be caught standing. She clasped her hands together in her lap and said a silent little prayer that she was not wrong. How he could have overcome his aversion to Mr. Wickham so far as to contemplate marrying into a family that counted him among their members, she did not know, but at this moment, she did not care.

Thus they remained for three quarters of an hour. Elizabeth caught only a few words from Jane in all that time. Pudding. Goose. Pies. They took up some work, finishing some infant clothing for the parish.

When the music shifted rather abruptly into Clementi, which she knew Mr. Darcy enjoyed, Elizabeth looked up to see the men entering. Due to Charles's desire to be with his wife, no doubt, not to any haste on Mr. Darcy's side. Still, she watched him closely, and he smiled at her, a gentle smile of promise.

"Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley called in a voice as sweet and yet sophisticated as Elizabeth had ever heard, "I must claim your assistance to turn the pages, sir. Do say you will."

Elizabeth wanted to pick up the nearest vase and throw it at Miss Bingley's head. Horrible woman. Mr. Darcy could not properly turn down such an agreeably framed request, and though his expression hardened, he dutifully turned away and stepped to the pianoforte as Charles came to sit next to Jane.

Now that Jane's attention was all for her husband, Elizabeth was free to observe the pair at the pianoforte. Miss Bingley nodded at the bench, but Mr. Darcy pulled a chair up to the instrument and sat in that instead, using the length of his arms

to turn the pages at the exact moment it was required for Miss Bingley to continue seamlessly through the music. Elizabeth thought he must have performed the office regularly for his sister.

When the Clementi ended, Miss Bingley immediately began a piece by Pleyel, giving Mr. Darcy no chance to take his leave. Elizabeth gritted her teeth. Several sonatas followed until Elizabeth could bear it no longer. She stood and announced she was retiring.

Mr. Darcy's glower was, she trusted, meant for Miss Bingley rather than her. The pleasure that suffused Miss Bingley's countenance was worse than her manipulations had been, but Elizabeth was certain that she would be able find Mr. Darcy alone somehow. If Miss Bingley was anywhere near either of them, they would never be able to have a moment's conversation.

She bid the others a good night and tried to offer Mr. Darcy a hopeful smile. He blinked but remained stoic, and Elizabeth did not know what to make of it. With a little sigh, she left them all for her chambers, where she was sure she would not sleep.



Darcy had slept heavily but awoken early. He stared up at the canopy over his bed for a time trying to return to sleep, but it was no use lying in bed when his mind was not at peace. He heaved himself up, dressed, only calling for Scripps when he

could not tie his cravat properly, and then went in search of some coffee. Fortunately, Scripps was as efficient as ever, for Darcy's request preceded him; the cook had already sent coffee to the breakfast room for him though the meal itself was not yet prepared. Darcy gulped down two piping hot cups in blissful silence.

Thus fortified, he donned his outwear and headed out into the snow to check on his horses. Although he now had no intention of leaving Netherfield until he had been able to speak with Elizabeth, Darcy wished to make certain his horses were all healthy, shod, and otherwise prepared to make the journey north—it was always wise to be prepared for all contingencies. He had certainly learned that much over the past year.

Anders was cleaning the coach when he arrived.

“Good morning, sir,” he said, doffing his hat.

“Good morning, Anders. How are the horses?”

“Well, sir. Horatio is shod, and Calliope is healed.” His brows pinched together. “Were you thinking of leaving soon?”

“We cannot,” Darcy said. “Have you not heard about the illness in the house?”

Anders scratched his head. “I've been staying out here in the room above the stables so as to be close to the horses. Not heard much about the goings-on up at the house.”

Darcy nodded. The world around Anders ceased to exist when his horses were hurt or sick. “No matter. We cannot

leave for a time. I only wish to be certain the horses are able to travel when we are.”

Anders nodded, a picture of relief. Something was definitely amiss, but Darcy knew if there was something that required his attention, Anders would tell him. He had enough of his own troubles to sort through without asking for more. So Darcy simply wished his coachman a good day and headed back towards the house, his boots making a crunching sound in the snow as he walked.

He changed course when he reached the gardener’s shed at the top of the path to the pond, for he was not yet ready to return indoors. The air was cold, but it was clear and sweet, a refreshing change from Miss Bingley’s company. The way she had run Miss Elizabeth off last night made him angry, and he needed to be in control of himself before he met her today.

He had only taken a few steps where the path entered a copse of trees when something struck his hat and dashed it from his head. Darcy narrowed his eyes when he spied the remainder of a snowball splattered against the felt. He snatched the hat up and whirled around only to receive another snowball directly in the chest.

Darcy ducked into the trees across from the direction of the latest hit and began scooping up snow and forming it with his hands. He was methodical and strategic, warily eyeing the treeline on the other side of the path until a bonneted head poked out to look for him.

He smiled widely. Darcy knew that bonnet. He reached back to grasp a snowball from the top of his hastily stacked pile and let it fly. It exploded against the tree Elizabeth was using as a shield, and she shrieked and ducked back behind it, laughing.

A silence descended for a time. After a few minutes, Darcy warily glanced around the tree. Another snowball landed nearby, missing him entirely, but offering important intelligence, as it had been launched from a different location.

Elizabeth was on the move.

Darcy grabbed up two snowballs, one in each hand, and crushed the others. No reason to leave ready-made ammunition behind with an enemy as sneaky as this one. He judged the angle of that last throw and moved stealthily through the trees until he was closer to the pond than she was—provided she had not moved again, that is.

Luck was on his side—he spied her cloak through the trees. She was turned away from the pond, expecting him to launch his assault from his previous position. It was almost too easy. He threw one snowball, then the other, hitting her twice in the back.

Elizabeth screeched again, laughing even louder as she leapt out into the open and gathered more snow. She rolled one, making it much larger than the others had been.

“Oh no,” he warned her, a smile playing on his lips. “You are justly served. Do not even think about it.”

“Very well,” she said agreeably.

Too agreeably. For she very quickly made and threw another snowball at him, this one hitting his stomach. He looked down at his coat. “You really are quite short.”

She fired again. “I am not!” she shouted, quite against the prevailing evidence, he thought, for this one only struck him in the leg.

Elizabeth must have seen it too, for she bent over at the waist and laughed merrily. “I am not so very short,” she informed him between wheezes. “It is only that you are so very tall.”

“Guilty,” he confessed, charmed by her reddened cheeks and bright eyes. He took a step towards her. “Miss Elizabeth ...”

Elizabeth stilled and her eyes found his. “Yes, Mr. Darcy?”

He took another few steps. “We should speak.”

“Yes,” she said. “I think we—“

A terrible yell shattered the air and Miss Bingley broke through the trees to dump a bucket packed full of snow over Elizabeth’s head.

“I am on your side, Mr. Darcy!” she informed him. “We win!”

Elizabeth slowly straightened, shaking herself like one of Darcy’s retrievers when they exited the water. He waited as she dusted the snow from her bonnet and fixed it back atop her head. She was not hurt, for which he was grateful, but he was stunned by Miss Bingley’s appearance. When he had stayed at Netherfield last autumn he had rarely seen her downstairs before noon, and here it was only half-past nine. And never,

ever had he known her to leave a well-marked path to hide amongst the trees.

Where had she even found a bucket, let alone thought it was a good idea to pack it with snow instead of just making a snowball like a normal person? Elizabeth was hopping about because some of it had undoubtedly slid down her back. It would chill her, and she was only just recovered from her first dunking in the pond.

That thought finally broke through his shock and propelled him into action. He strode over and took the pail from Miss Bingley. He turned to Elizabeth. “Miss Bennet,” he said, “are you well?”

She beamed at him. “Never better, Mr. Darcy.” She gestured to the pail and held out her hand. “May I have that bucket?”

“Whatever for?” he inquired.

“I find I must revenge myself.”

He chuckled. She was indomitable. On the other hand, Miss Bingley’s complexion nearly matched the snow, and she was scurrying backward. She did not stop until she was a dozen feet away. “I was entering into the game you were already playing, Miss Bennet,” she said, suddenly prim and ladylike. “But I only came to tell Mr. Darcy that breakfast is ready.”

“You did not intend to summon *me* to breakfast?” Elizabeth teased. “That seems rather unfair.” She took the bucket he held out and dragged it through a small snowdrift, then lifted the larger snowball she had been making and dumped it in as well.

Miss Bingley came as close to running as Darcy had ever seen as she beat a hasty retreat. She did not leave them alone even then, though, for she stopped near the gardener's shed at the top of the path. That must have been where she found the pail.

“Miss Bennet,” he said, “as amusing as this all was—“

“Particularly the last bit,” she prodded.

“Particularly the last bit,” he agreed, “you are now soaked again.”

“At least this time we can agree it was Miss Bingley's fault,” she said with a laugh.

He shook his head. “You will tease me about falling in the pond forever, even though it was your own fault?”

“It was not!” she replied, but her shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. “I refuse to admit it!”

“Regardless,” he said, shaking his head at her, “we must get you inside. Unless you wish me to carry you a second time.” He held out his arms, knowing she would refuse, and he was right.

“Do not you dare!” she warned him as she walked, rather quickly, in Miss Bingley's tracks.

Chapter Thirteen

Elizabeth shivered as Kerr assisted her into a new gown and handed her a thick wool shawl.

“I do not know how you manage it, Miss Bennet,” the maid said, amused. “I do not think you ought to walk out of doors again until the spring.”

“I quite agree,” Jane said as she entered the room. “I understand you were on the losing end of a snowball battle with Mr. Darcy? Really, Lizzy,” she said with a gentle laugh, “how old are you?”

“I was winning,” Elizabeth explained. “But Miss Bingley snuck up on me from behind.”

“Then you were not winning,” Jane said, shaking her head. “Defeated by Caroline. A sad conclusion to your winter antics. How did you even know Mr. Darcy would be there?”

“I did not know,” Elizabeth told her sister, “but I could not pass up the opportunity.”

Jane and Kerr shook their heads together this time, but Elizabeth could see that they were entertained by her rather than annoyed.

“Begging your pardon, Mrs. Bingley, Miss Bennet, but Miss Bingley was asking about Mr. Darcy’s whereabouts this morning—and yours too, Miss Bennet. She was out of doors in search of you both, I imagine. Maybe she planned to toss herself in the pond too, so Mr. Darcy would have to carry *her* inside.”

“You realize, of course, that you have Mr. Darcy concerned about you again?”

“He really is too serious,” Elizabeth said. “He shall go grey by the time he is thirty.” She pulled the shawl around her shoulders. It was a favourite of hers, another gift from her aunt who knew all about Elizabeth’s fondness for wintery strolls. “I suppose I shall have to make an appearance at breakfast to assuage his fears.”

“I think that would be best. Are you warm enough?”

“Yes, dear sister of mine, I am quite warm.”

The exercise in the cold air had done Elizabeth good, but she wished she had stopped to speak with Mr. Darcy *before* giving into the temptation to knock his hat from his head. But who could have predicted that Miss Bingley, of all people, would suddenly decide to take a walk in the snow?



Darcy heard Mrs. Bingley and Elizabeth chatting pleasantly as they approached the breakfast room, and he stood as they stepped inside.

“Thank you for our battle royale, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said, her fine eyes sparkling with unrepressed mirth. “It was the most fun I have had since—”

“Last winter,” Jane finished for her. “When you ambushed Lydia.”

Elizabeth’s cheer faltered for a moment, but she regained her composure. “I knew Lydia would not cry or be angry with me,” she said, glancing over at Miss Bingley, who pretended not to notice.

“No,” Mrs. Bingley said with a smile. “She just fought back.”

“I had to be careful, though,” Elizabeth said, glancing at Miss Bingley. “Because even more than winning, Lydia loves revenge.”

Miss Bingley covered her uneasiness by lifting her chin a little higher. “Revenge is beneath a true lady.”

“Ah, there are no ladies when it comes to snow battles,” Elizabeth replied smoothly. “You should know, since you must have pilfered that pail from somewhere.”

“Thank you, Charles,” Mrs. Bingley said as Bingley set her plate down before her.

Bingley just smiled at his wife and sat down.

“I found that bucket, I will have you know,” Miss Bingley said to Elizabeth, just as disdainful as ever. “It was left next to the shed on the path.”

“Oh, the raspberry jam, Jane, thank you!” Elizabeth exclaimed, completely ignoring Miss Bingley.

Clearly, Elizabeth was no worse for wear despite having an entire bucket of snow dumped over her head. Of course not. She was no dainty flower of the ton. And her mention of revenge had not been lost on Miss Bingley, either.

Darcy tucked into his meal with vigour.

“Mr. Darcy,” Miss Bingley said when she had finished her tea and toast, “I intend to play again today. Would you mind performing the office of turning my pages? You read music whereas alas, my brother does not.”

Before he could think of a way to decline, Elizabeth piped up. “I read music,” she said innocently. “I would be happy to turn your pages for you, Miss Bingley.”

“I would not wish to inconvenience you,” Miss Bingley replied, a little too sharply. “I am certain Mr. Darcy does not mind. We are old friends, you see.”

Both women looked at him, Miss Bingley with expectation and Elizabeth with humour.

“I have letters to write, Miss Bingley,” he said at last. “They will likely take until dinner to complete. You will forgive me.”

“Of course,” Miss Bingley said tightly. “Perhaps after dinner, then.”

“Perhaps,” he said, touching his napkin to his mouth and placing it on the table as he stood. He met Elizabeth’s eye with regret. “Good morning.”

As he mounted the steps, he cursed himself for coming up with an excuse that would remove him from everyone’s company, including Elizabeth’s, until dinner. If he showed himself before then, Miss Bingley would force him to remain by her side—he had no doubt she would loiter near the staircase in order to have early intelligence of all movements in the guest wing.

It was time to change for dinner when he finally thought of a way around the clinging Miss Bingley. He walked to the wardrobe and tossed open the doors. All his clothing had finally been returned—it was a lucky thing that the last missing pieces of his clothing had reappeared in the wardrobe the night before—but he was looking for one piece in particular. His greatcoat.

If Miss Bingley would not allow him to speak to Elizabeth, he would allow his letter to speak for him. He reached into the inner pocket, but it was empty.

Drat. He must have dropped it in the snow. And there was no time to rewrite it now. He took comfort in the fact that he had not put Elizabeth’s name anywhere in the letter this time. Even if it was located and the ink had not run, only his initials were written on the missive, and very few people knew his Christian name.

Small consolation when he faced another evening with Miss Bingley. Darcy determined to search for the letter in the morning, and if he could not find it, he would simply write another. He always expressed himself better in writing.



Elizabeth found herself wishing that Mr. Darcy had just agreed to turn Miss Bingley's pages after breakfast. For now she found herself in a nightmarish repeat of last night's performance. While Jane and Charles sat together on the settee near the fire, Miss Bingley had trapped Mr. Darcy into attending her at the pianoforte.

Once he had committed himself to writing letters, he could not very well venture into Elizabeth's company until dinner, and during the meal Miss Bingley had absolutely refused to allow him to speak more than a few sentences to anyone but her. There was a growing shrillness in her behaviour that spoke of desperation, but Elizabeth could not feel any compassion for the woman.

"Jane," Elizabeth said sweetly. Perhaps too sweetly.

"Yes, Lizzy?" Jane inquired, suspicion writ across her features.

"Do you recall how Lydia took revenge upon me last winter?"

"She waited until you were sleeping and then stuck your hand in a bowl of icy water."

“She did. And do you recall how I revenged myself upon her?”

Jane narrowed her eyes. “You balanced a pail of snow water atop her chamber door.”

Elizabeth smiled. “It took days of careful planning,” she said, “but I had justice at last.”

Miss Bingley met her gaze at that last, and though she appeared bored, Elizabeth detected a flash of fear in the woman’s eyes.

There. Let her ruminate on that. She was rudely demanding all Mr. Darcy’s time and attention when all Elizabeth wanted to do was speak to the man privately for five minutes. Miss Bingley deserved every bit of disquiet Elizabeth could serve up.

Mr. Darcy laughed at Elizabeth’s vague threat. Miss Bingley glanced, horrified, between the two of them. Elizabeth was certain that Miss Bingley understood at last. Mr. Darcy would never be hers.

But Miss Bingley merely inclined her head to speak a quiet word to Mr. Darcy, who, Elizabeth noted with pleasure, leaned back from her.

Something was wrong.

His eyes narrowed, and he stood up so quickly that he knocked his chair to the floor. “That is my private property, madam,” he said sternly. “You will return it to me at once.”

“It is my property now, Mr. Darcy,” Miss Bingley said artlessly. “For you gave it to me. I am only sorry I have not yet composed a reply.”

“What are you talking about, Caroline?” Charles inquired.

“Nothing, Charles. It is a private matter between Mr. Darcy and me.”

Mr. Darcy’s complexion had flushed a deep, disturbing red. “There is no private business between us, Miss Bingley.”

“What can you mean?” she asked, her eyes wide and dramatically frightened. “Have you not written to me? Do not break my heart by denying it.”

“Do not be ridiculous, Caroline,” Charles said with a sigh. “Darcy would never do such a thing.”

“Of course he would not,” Miss Bingley confirmed. “Unless we were engaged.”

Jane frowned and glanced uneasily at Elizabeth, who was watching everything play out before her. What was Miss Bingley even saying? Her mind could not comprehend it. A letter?

Charles stood and held out his hand. “If such a letter exists, Caroline, you will allow me to see it. Now.”

“But it is private,” Miss Bingley said, removing a folded piece of paper from her sleeve. “Can you not simply see that his signature is on it?”

“Darcy?” Charles asked, but before Mr. Darcy could say anything, Miss Bingley interrupted.

“I should never have accepted it, Charles, had I not believed Mr. Darcy and I would soon be wed.” She held the folded page out to her brother.

“Bingley,” Mr. Darcy said stonily, “that letter was not given to your sister. It was not delivered to anyone at all.”

Bingley glanced at the letter. “My first thought was that Caroline had forged something, but this is definitely your hand. I must ask, Darcy—how did it come into Caroline’s possession?”

“That is something I wish to learn as well,” Mr. Darcy nearly growled. “How did you manage to steal my private property, madam?”

“I did not,” Miss Bingley cried, placing one hand over her heart. “How dare you suggest such a thing?”

“Darcy,” Charles said as his eyes traced the writing on the page, “perhaps you and I should speak privately.”

Mr. Darcy pursed his lips. “Perhaps we should. For the words I must say in regard to Miss Bingley should not be uttered in mixed company.”

Miss Bingley wept silently as the men left the room and Elizabeth’s temper flared. These were crocodile tears, and Miss Bingley was a reptile. Mr. Darcy had broken propriety before—he had written to Elizabeth. But he would never write to Miss Bingley. Of that Elizabeth was entirely certain.

She clenched her hands into fists. “Do not worry, Miss Bingley. When this gambit fails, you will always have a career on the stage.”

“Poor Eliza,” Miss Bingley crooned. “Has he made promises to you, too? Never mind, I shall insist he apologise for raising your expectations.”

Elizabeth scoffed. “Do refrain from speaking my Christian name, Miss Bingley, for you have never been invited to use it. Unsurprising, I suppose, for you are a liar and a thief, and what do such women know of basic etiquette? You do not even have enough sense to entrap a man who might one day tolerate you.”

“Elizabeth,” Jane warned.

“He is having second thoughts, as men do,” Miss Bingley said with a dismissive wave of the handkerchief. “But he will remember how well he loves me, and we will be happy together.”

“Caroline,” Jane said softly, “Mr. Darcy is very angry with you. Would you put yourself into the care of a man whom you have forced to wed? Is it a victory to be tied for life to a man who may leave you in the country on your own and lead his own life in the ton?”

Miss Bingley withdrew a lace handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. “He would care too much for the family’s reputation and my brother’s for that.”

Elizabeth's blood froze to ice, and the room suddenly felt colder than the storm outside. Mr. Darcy was a man of duty. He *might* give up his own wishes to protect his family name. He might not feel he had a choice.

She could not allow that to happen. Elizabeth cast her thoughts back to the letter Mr. Darcy had delivered to her at Rosings, the one in her room upstairs.

Her letter. That was it. She, too, had a letter—one that *had* actually been written to her—and could produce it. But it was hidden. She thought to send a servant, but it would take longer to explain where it was than it would to retrieve it herself.

Jane knew of the letter's existence, but she had not read it herself, and might believe that Elizabeth had destroyed it. Mr. Darcy had asked that she burn it, but she had not been able to do so, not when his gracious signature might be all she had left of him.

Jane took a step towards her, her expression concerned and sympathetic, and Elizabeth could not stand it. She whirled on her toes and fled while Jane called her name.

"Let her go," she heard Miss Bingley say, miraculously recovered. "I daresay she should have her cry. She will feel better after."

The words Elizabeth threw about in her head in response to Miss Bingley's gloating would have had Mamma in a dead faint had she ever spoken them aloud. She raced up the steps to her rooms, careful to avoid any of the servants, though she knew that word must be spreading even now that Miss Bingley

had a letter written by Mr. Darcy. From what she could see of Charles's expression while he read it, she surmised it was a love letter.

A love letter. She hit her door with the flat of her hand and shoved it open. It swung back so hard it hit the wall with a bang.

Kerr jumped. "Miss Bennet," she said. "I thought you would be downstairs for hours yet."

"I am not here for long," Elizabeth said, striding quickly to the wardrobe, opening one of the bottom drawers, and reaching all the way to the back of it to extract the wooden box where she kept her letters.

It had to be a love letter, but if it was, Mr. Darcy would not have written it for Miss Bingley. Had he written it for her? They had been unable to speak, and he preferred to write when his feelings were running high. This much she knew. Elizabeth's heart soared with hope.

She cradled the box in her hands and hurried away, fearful that she would arrive only after Mr. Darcy had capitulated and made the hateful Miss Bingley an offer.

They would be miserable together.

Miss Bingley could be miserable the rest of her sorry life, and Elizabeth would not care. She had brought it on herself. But Mr. Darcy—it would kill him to have such a wife, and Elizabeth would not allow it. If Charles could not protect him, then Elizabeth would.

From halfway down the staircase, she saw the men returning to the parlour and closing the door behind them.

Elizabeth stumbled slightly and caught herself on the rail. She paused only a moment before continuing on and bursting into the parlour, making such an inelegant racket as she did that all four occupants turned to stare at her.

She must have been quite a sight, gasping for air, her hair mussed and her complexion bright from exertion and anger. But there was no time to be missish. She leaned back against the door until it clicked shut.

“Mr. Darcy wrote me a letter first.”

Mr. Darcy’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What?” Charles barked, facing his friend with a scowl. “Darcy!”

“And I wrote one back.” She had not delivered hers, but she did not say as much.

“Elizabeth!” Jane exclaimed.

“So you see,” Elizabeth rushed to finish, “if Mr. Darcy is to be forced to wed, he must wed me.”

Miss Bingley shook her head. “No, it is not possible. And even if he did write Eliza a letter, surely he has regretted it since. Why else would he write to me yesterday?”

Elizabeth was panting now. It was not the running up and down stairs that had done it. She was used to walking great distances. It was her fear making her weak. She set the little

box down on the nearest table with a thud and used her key to open the lid, furious that her hands were shaking.

Mr. Darcy was watching her, an impossible tenderness in his expression. “Elizabeth,” he said softly, and she caught her breath at the sound of her name on his tongue.

She withdrew the letter, almost falling apart now. “Charles, it is a very private letter, but I shall allow you to see the date, its address to me, and the signature. I have had it since April.”

“It is the truth, Bingley,” Mr. Darcy said. “I did write a letter to Miss Bennet, and the letter in her hand is the one I referenced in this one.” He held it up. “I have never written one to Miss Bingley.”

Elizabeth watched Charles carefully, but he did not reach for the letter she held, merely shook his head. “I am shocked. I knew that Darcy had a tendre for you, Lizzy, though I admit his studied avoidance temporarily confused me until I realized it was Caroline from whom he was hiding and not you.”

Miss Bingley protested, but no one paid her any mind.

“Still, I had no idea you two were so far advanced in your courtship. Why did neither of you inform me?”

Elizabeth blinked.

Mr. Darcy’s brows pinched together.

“You knew?” they asked at the same time.

“Then why ...”

“How ...”

Charles sighed. He motioned at the letter that was now held by Mr. Darcy. “Caroline, this letter makes mention of the one in Lizzy’s possession. Unless you can produce another letter in Darcy’s hand, you must desist.”

“I would like to know how Miss Bingley came into possession of my property,” Mr. Darcy said in a low, menacing voice.

“Darcy recalled that his letter was in the pocket of his greatcoat,” Charles said. “I know not how it came into your hands, Caroline, but it refers to things Lizzy has that you do not and conversations you have had no opportunity to be a part of.” He lifted his eyebrows. “From what Darcy has only now told me of his meeting with Elizabeth in Kent, this letter only makes sense if it was written for her.”

“Charles,” Miss Bingley said, scandalized, “how could you possibly think that I would lie?”

“Sadly, sister, I find it is not at all difficult.”

Miss Bingley wept more noisily, as if an increase in sound could change her brother’s mind.

Jane placed both hands on her hips and glared, actually glared, at Miss Bingley. Elizabeth had only seen that look once before, when she had taken two-year-old Kitty to the mews to see the horses though she had been warned it was dangerous. Elizabeth had been extraordinarily careful to never be on the receiving end of that expression again. She bit her bottom lip and took a silent step back.

“That letter was in the pocket of Mr. Darcy’s greatcoat? The greatcoat that Mr. Carstairs was folding over his arm as we passed him in the hall yesterday?” Jane drew closer to Miss Bingley. “Is that why you lagged behind us, Caroline? Did you see the letter fall from Mr. Darcy’s pocket and pick it up? And once having retrieved it, rather than returning it to Mr. Carstairs so he could see it safely back to Mr. Darcy’s room, you kept it overnight and *read* it?”

“She used it, too,” Charles added helpfully.

Jane’s gaze did not waver from Miss Bingley. “I have made every attempt to accommodate you, Caroline,” she said evenly. “I have not protested your presence here despite your disdain for your brother’s marriage and my sister’s presence, to say nothing of your general unpleasantness. As I am a lady, I shall not have you tossed out, no matter how sorely I am tempted. But you will steer clear of me while you remain in this house, and the instant the coaching inns are open again, you will be on your way.”

“Charles ...” Miss Bingley said, as shocked as the rest of them that Jane was sending her away, “you cannot allow your wife to speak to me this way.”

“It is her house, Caroline. She may speak as she finds.” He smiled proudly. “In fact, I am rather enjoying this.”

“But where do you expect me to go?”

Mr. Darcy’s expression spoke his answer to that, and it was not to heaven. Elizabeth cleared her throat very quietly to

interrupt any impolite sound of mirth. In truth, her relief was so profound that she might not be able to stop.

“To Scarborough,” Charles replied. “Louisa and Hurst are still there, and if they will not admit you to their family circle again, you may stay with Aunt Penelope. Poor Mrs. Matthias has already inquired whether she might return to her own family, so she will again serve as your companion, and I will pay her handsomely for the journey. But Caroline, do not think I shall be covering any of your personal expenses henceforth. You have enough money to purchase everything you need and most of what you want. I have other responsibilities now.”

“Charles!” Miss Bingley’s countenance was ashen. “How will I purchase new clothing for the season?”

“Do not importune my husband, Miss Bingley,” Jane said steadily. “We cannot shelter a woman who would willingly injure two good people for nothing but her own selfish gain. Please do not bother to join us for meals. You may take them in your rooms.” She turned to Mr. Darcy. “You, however, should dine with us. No more hiding in your chamber.”

Mr. Darcy inclined his head slowly in assent. Perhaps he was afraid to move too quickly for fear that Jane might lambaste him. Elizabeth did not utter a sound. She did not want to draw Jane’s ire down on her head, either.

Charles rang the bell for Carstairs, who appeared so quickly that he must have been standing nearly at the door. Whether he had been preventing eavesdropping by the other servants, or doing so himself, she did not know.

“Carstairs, have a maid escort Miss Bingley to her rooms,” Jane said politely. “And please follow her to make certain she does not walk anywhere else first.”

“Very good, madam,” Carstairs replied and waited.

Miss Bingley looked pleadingly at her brother, but Charles merely lifted an eyebrow. Then she glanced at Mr. Darcy, but whatever she saw on his countenance did not encourage her to speak. So Miss Bingley straightened her shoulders and tossed her head back before stepping regally out of the room. Carstairs followed, closing the door behind them.



A great deal of tension left the room with Miss Bingley’s departure, and Darcy’s mind began to sort through all that had been revealed. Bingley knew all about his failed proposal now, knew that what Darcy felt was not some mild infatuation.

The paper of his letter was rough against his fingertips.

Elizabeth glanced at her sister, whose eyes were closed. “Are you well, Jane?”

“I will be well,” Mrs. Bingley replied, opening her eyes and releasing a deep breath. “I do not care for confrontation, as you know, but it could not be helped.”

“Absolutely not,” Bingley agreed, taking her hand to kiss. “I find myself even more in awe of you than when I asked you to be my wife, Jane Bingley.”

Mrs. Bingley smiled beatifically at her husband. "It is easier to be strong when I have you to support me," she told him, and he beamed back at her.

"Bingley," Darcy asked suddenly, "was anyone ever ill?"

"Only you, Darcy," Charles replied without looking at his friend. "Lovesick. Terrible case. There will be no leaving Netherfield until you are out of danger."

"*Charles*," Mrs. Bingley said reprovingly, but then laughed a little.

Darcy tossed his head back and stared at the ceiling as he attempted to compose himself, caught between irritation and appreciation. He ought to have known instantly what Bingley was about, but he had been so unhappy it had quite slipped past him. Lovesick indeed.

Mrs. Bingley turned back to the room. "Now, Lizzy," she said firmly, "You will have ten minutes alone with Mr. Darcy and then we will return. I beg you, be honest with him. A great deal of trouble might have been spared if you had simply spoken your hearts to one another after the wedding." She was still holding Bingley's hand as she began to walk again, and he hurried to catch up.

"Does Lizzy care for Darcy?" Bingley asked his wife as they walked away. Darcy's eyes shot to Elizabeth, who winced; surely Bingley was unaware he was speaking so loudly. "I could see that Darcy cared for *her*. I kept delaying him in the hopes he would speak with her."

This drew his attention back to Bingley. “*You* delayed me?” Darcy asked. “More than telling me the house was under quarantine?” He was shocked, though he ought not be. Bingley’s behaviour was all of a piece.

Charles looked over his shoulder to say, quite calmly, “Anders helped.”

“*Anders* knew?” Darcy felt quite stupid. Of course Anders knew. Darcy would not take Bingley’s word on the state of his horses, but he would trust Anders without question.

“Of course. I spoke with him when he came to Longbourn after the wedding. He knew you were not yourself, and I told him I thought I could help. Good man, Anders.”

“Unbelievable.”

“What is unbelievable is that you believed it all,” Bingley called as his wife pulled him into the hall.

Darcy could not but agree. He had been miserable and blind.

“You have ten minutes,” Mrs. Bingley said warningly. “Do not waste the time.”

The door clicked shut behind her. Darcy stared at it and then at Elizabeth. “You and your sister are more alike than I had guessed.”

Elizabeth’s lips twitched, and a strangled sort of mirth burst out of her mouth before she gave in and began to laugh. It was like music, her laughter, and he could not help but chuckle, too.

“May I see my letter?” she inquired boldly when she had done. She stretched out her hand and then withdrew it. “It *is* for me, is it not?”

“It is.” Darcy held out the note, but just before she took it, he lifted it above her head, quite out of reach. He smiled roguishly. “I would like to see *my* letter as well, Miss Bennet.”

Her cheeks flushed, but she moved resolutely to her little wooden box and lifted the lid. With exaggerated care, she placed the tattered letter she had been holding inside and removed a newer one.

Shyly, she held it out to him, and he offered his in return.

There was absolute silence for a few of their precious minutes as they read. When he reached the closing of Elizabeth’s letter to him, Darcy’s heart beat a little harder.

If you cannot give your heart again to one who did not value it rightly the first time it was

offered, I will think you wise. However, if you were willing to be foolish instead, I can promise you

that it would be received with the love and care that it deserves.

“If I am willing to be foolish ... Elizabeth Bennet!” he cried, delighted. “Are you proposing to me?”

She gazed up at him, her eyes a little glossy. Had she been crying over his words? “Do not be ridiculous,” she told him impertinently. “It is not my place to propose to any man.”

He laughed with delight and held up the letter in his hand. “You are, and I have the proof!”

Her adorable face collapsed into a pout. “Give it back, Mr. Darcy.”

“You will never have this letter back. I accept, by the way.”

“I have not asked.”

“You have.” He waved the letter at her, then folded it and put it in his breast pocket.

“Is that the safest place for such a letter?” she inquired pointedly, folding hers and locking it in the wooden box. She glanced at him askance and folded her arms across her chest. One slender eyebrow rose as she stared impishly at him.

He reached for her hands, gently tugging at them until she uncrossed her arms. She did not remove her hands from his. Rather, she trained her eyes on where those hands were joined.

“I have been teasing you, and now I wish to be serious,” he told her. She glanced up at him. “You will think me vain and presumptuous.”

She lifted her chin haughtily. “As if I do not think you those things already.” Her eyes sparkled when she spoke. It gave him courage.

“Very well,” he replied directly. “When I think of you, I do not call you Miss Bennet or even Miss Elizabeth. You are Elizabeth to me, and you have been since Pemberley. In my heart, you are mine.”

An almost unbearable silence descended. He could even hear the clock in the hall. Had he gone too far? Tick. Tick. Tick ... He could hear his life draining away as he waited for Elizabeth to speak.

“It *is* presumptuous, sir,” she said at last.

Darcy closed his eyes in defeat.

“But no more than I, for I consider you mine as well.”

His eyes shot open. “You do?”

She smiled and laughed quietly. “If you will be mine, I will be yours. That is, if you will have me.”

“If *I* will have *you*? What do you think I have been ... I cannot believe that ...” Words failed him. This was neither unusual nor unexpected, for powerful emotions often rendered him mute. But Darcy’s feelings could not be contained merely by not speaking of them, and the very staid, very respectable Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire released his joy by embracing the woman he loved, picking her up and swinging her around once, twice, three times.

“Stop!” Elizabeth exclaimed with a squeal. “You are making me dizzy!”

He set her down at once. She swayed a bit but laughed cheerfully at his alarm. When she was steady, he took her again by the hands. “Do you mean it?”

“Why would I say such a thing if I did not?” she asked pertly.

“And you will marry me?” He felt stupid, asking her so many times to confirm it, but this moment had taken a very long time to arrive.

She gazed up into his face, all trace of levity gone. “Yes, Fitzwilliam. I will marry you. I love you.”

Her name escaped him in a whisper. “Elizabeth.” He touched the sides of her face with gentle hands and bent his head. She tipped her face up to meet him, and he brushed his lips lightly against hers.

It was a touch charged with the sort of electricity that he had only felt once before, when a lightning bolt had split an old Spanish oak at Pemberley not five hundred feet away from him, making his hair stand on end. He kissed her again, a little more passionately this time, but not enough to frighten her. Now that she had said yes, they had time for that. They would have time for everything.

“I do hope that means you have something important to ask of me,” Bingley said laconically from some distance away. Darcy did not move to ascertain how far. “She is my sister now, you know.”

Darcy placed a gentle kiss upon Elizabeth’s brow and pulled slowly away. “So you have informed me,” he responded to Bingley. “And to be perfectly clear, *this* is the sister I prefer.”

“Yes, this is the sister everyone prefers, Darcy,” Bingley replied teasingly.

“Are you certain?” Elizabeth asked Darcy softly. “If you are having second thoughts, I am sure Miss Bingley would be only too willing to meet you at the church.”

“Do not say that even in jest,” he warned her, but the side of his mouth tugged up, and she smiled warmly at him in return.

“Lizzy,” Mrs. Bingley called. “Come upstairs with me, dear.”

“I suppose I should,” Elizabeth told him. “Jane can be a rather fearful creature when pressed.”

Darcy shuddered dramatically. “As we have seen. Go on, then.” He chuckled, kissed the back of her hand, and watched as she joined her sister. Mrs. Bingley embraced Elizabeth, and they removed from the room.

“Well, Darcy?”

He dragged his gaze away from the door and back to his friend. “Bingley, I shall speak with Mr. Bennet on this topic. But know that Elizabeth has accepted my hand, and I intend to marry her as soon as may be.”

Bingley smiled. “Congratulations! Now, in addition to another sister, I shall have you as a brother. Fortunately, there is no way I shall ever confuse you with Hurst.” He clapped Darcy on the back.

“How long had you planned this?” Darcy inquired.

“Plan?” Bingley asked, confused. “There was no plan, not really. I noticed at Pemberley that you were enamoured of Lizzy, but at the wedding I realized that you could not stop

looking at her. You are a serious man, Darcy. To still be interested in Lizzy after all this time . . . I just thought if I delayed you here long enough that you would both be in the same house at the same time and that eventually you would come up with the correct words to tell Lizzy how you felt.”

“When did you involve Anders?”

“At the wedding breakfast. I just stepped outside for a moment to have a word, but it was very quick as your coachman is rather astute. He was aware that you had not been yourself and he wanted to help.”

“And the clothes?”

Bingley chuckled. “I have just been informed that Jane was responsible for that. She had already requested your clothing be laundered in preparation for your journey, but then Lizzy had confessed that she had feelings for you. So Jane simply asked the staff to delay finishing the task in lieu of other more pressing matters.” Bingley glanced at the door. “My wife is more subtle than I am. I ought to have consulted her right away, and from now on, I shall.”

Before he could finish this conversation, Darcy felt compelled to speak. “Bingley, what you did to keep me here was not only dishonest—it was truly underhanded. Involving Anders in the lie, which made him extremely uncomfortable—it was beyond wrong.”

His friend merely cocked his head to one side. “You are welcome.”

Darcy shook his head. "Thank you. But do not ever do that again."

"I will not. You are unlikely to ever again require that sort of extravagant action. Besides, it will be Lizzy's place, not mine, and judging by her sister, I daresay she would make a better job of it."

Darcy laughed, thinking of his Elizabeth setting him straight. "I daresay you are right, Bingley." God help him, he was greatly anticipating it.



"Go to your father," Mr. Darcy whispered in her ear. "He wishes to speak with you."

Elizabeth stood and studied Mr. Darcy's expression. "Was he very hard on you?"

He smiled. "Not at all. But I of all men know how difficult it must be to allow you to wed and move away."

Mary and Kitty were staring at her with their mouths slightly agape. Elizabeth smiled at them and nodded at the chair she was now vacating. "Sit down and become acquainted with my sisters," she murmured, amused. "For they shall soon be yours as well."

"Where is your mother?" was his hushed inquiry.

She almost laughed. "In her chambers. The cold bothers her."

“She thinks this is cold?” he asked, lifting his brows. “She would not like the peaks near Pemberley, then.”

“Not in winter at any rate,” Elizabeth replied. “I must go to my father now. Sit down, Mr. Darcy, and be pleasant.”

He shook his head at her. “If I must. Miss Mary, Miss Catherine,” he said as he turned to address them, “I am pleased to see you. We did not have much time to speak at the wedding.”

With her sisters and her betrothed settled together in the parlour, Elizabeth took a deep breath and walked to Papa’s book room.

“Elizabeth,” Papa said as she entered, confusion writ upon his countenance. “Have you not always hated this man?”

She closed the door behind her. “As late as April of this year, I did believe I hated him,” Elizabeth said quietly. “But what I held to his account was either a misunderstanding on my part or something he has remedied since. You know we met each other at Rosings, and then again when my aunt and uncle wished to see Pemberley.”

Her father eyed her shrewdly. “And you began your acquaintance over again at Rosings?”

She shook her head. “We quarrelled at Rosings, but it was there I learned how wrong I had been. I did not expect to see him again, and I was determined not to regret him.”

“But then you met again at Pemberley.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Elizabeth, tell me truly. Did you meet him there by chance or intention?”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “Entirely by chance. He was not supposed to arrive until the day after our visit, but he rode ahead of his party, and I met him as he walked up to the house from the stables.”

Her father stroked his chin. “And how did he receive you, after you quarrelled in the spring?”

“He was everything good, sir. He finished our tour himself and invited my uncle to fish in his streams. Miss Darcy came to call on us in his company the very morning of her arrival, and my aunt and I returned the call the day after.” She paused. “We were invited to dinner on the day following, but ...”

“You were forced home by your youngest sister’s folly?”

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Yes.” She held out Aunt Gardiner’s letter to him, and he took some time reading and rereading it.

“Well now,” he said, drawing the words out and leaning back in his chair, tapping one corner of the folded page against his lips before handing it back to her. “So I have Mr. Darcy to thank for Lydia’s rescue. I shall think on that. But it is clear his feelings for you are not of short duration.”

“Nor mine for him, though it took me longer to understand.”

“And this is why you have been so unhappy. I must say, it was terrible to watch, Lizzy.”

“I thought I had lost him forever, Papa.”

Her father's expression softened as he gazed at her. "I wish you could have told me of it, but I suppose affairs of the heart are not a thing a young lady takes to her father. And I admit I would likely not have known how to advise you. Did you two speak at all when he came in September?"

She shook her head. "I was sure, then, that Lydia's behaviour had made it impossible for him to speak, even had he wished it."

"I see." He opened a drawer and withdrew what appeared to be a legal document, "it seems he left for town in September in order to retrieve this, my dear, but as he thought you did not wish for his presence, he did not return." He moved around the desk and took the chair next to hers.

"What is that?"

"It is a common license."

"A license?" She gasped as the meaning struck her. "A *marriage* license?" Mr. Darcy had not said a thing about *when* they would marry. She had guessed he would leave it to her. But had he inquired, she would have wished to marry as soon as possible.

And now they could.

"The issue, as Mr. Darcy has explained to me, is the license itself. It is only valid for three months, you see," Papa told her, a little glint of mischief shining from his eyes. "And that means you must be married on or before the twenty-fourth of December."

Elizabeth's mouth hung open for a moment. "But that is less than a week away."

"It is indeed."

"I will be married by Thursday?"

Her father smiled. "It could not be timed better, in my view, for the Christmas feast your mother already has planned can double as your marriage celebration. Waiting two and half months for your sister's wedding is not something I feel prepared to repeat just yet, not if I can avoid it." The smile faltered when she did not reply. He hesitated for a moment before he moved to the chair across from Elizabeth, where he took her hand and asked, earnestly, "Would marrying Mr. Darcy next week make you happy, my dear? For truly, that is all that matters."

"Papa," Elizabeth said, very seriously, "You know how important Mr. Darcy is, and I am afraid a simple country wedding will not suffice. I would rather wait. Six months should be enough."

Her father's face paled considerably, but to his credit, he did not protest. "Very well, my Lizzy. You shall have everything you wish for."

She smiled brightly. "You absolutely deserved that, you know."

He blinked. "What?"

"I shall marry Fitzwilliam Darcy as soon as may be. I feel as though I cannot wait even the entire week."

Her father laughed uncertainly, placing a hand over his heart.
“Good Lord, Elizabeth Bennet. You frightened me.”

“Papa,” she said, clasping her hands together and resting them upon her lap, “now I must be serious.”

He waited for her to continue.

“You did not listen to me about Lydia.”

She could see him stiffen.

“I do not mean to chastise you, Papa. I only wish you to listen to me now. Please, make a concerted effort to know Mary and Kitty better.”

He gazed at her steadily, and she took it as permission to continue.

“Mary tries too hard to be accomplished because she does not like being compared to her sisters and found lacking. You could give her books to read and discuss the notion of charity with her so that her opinions and judgments are softened. Kitty’s French is improving, and she has a fondness for poetry. She is a lovely girl but has been left too often without guidance beyond that of Lydia.”

Papa’s guilty expression hastened her conclusion.

“They are neither of them loud or unseemly, Papa, and they would blossom under your care. Will you promise me to provide it?”

He nodded, then leaned forward to kiss her forehead. “I shall. I give you my word.”

Elizabeth took his hands. "Thank you."

"Now," he said, a bit of humour making its way back into his voice, "what say you to inviting Miss Bingley to your wedding? It seems only right, as she missed her brother's nuptials, that she should attend yours. You are, after all, her sister, and she will wish to fulfil her duty to you, will she not?"

"*Papa,*" Elizabeth scolded him laughingly.

Chapter Fourteen

Mamma was thrown into a whirlwind of nerves and bliss. She accepted Papa's suggestion of allowing Christmas dinner to double as a wedding celebration and spent many blissful hours adding courses she was sure a man of Mr. Darcy's status would expect.

Mr. Darcy had advocated for marrying the very day after he had received Papa's permission, but Papa had insisted that they spend the week remaining on the license talking to one another about their marriage rather than the wedding. "It will last longer," he had commented wryly.

Therefore, on each of the five remaining days before their wedding, Mr. Darcy came to Longbourn to share in their breakfast and remain until after dinner. Papa had given orders that they could walk out alone so long as they remained within sight of the house, and that they could sit alone in the back parlour with the door open.

Elizabeth found herself grateful for her father's insistence.

It was only five days, but how much they had to say to one another!

On the first day, Elizabeth offered Mr. Darcy a confession. “I was so afraid that your aunt had convinced you to stay away.”

His bemused expression was almost comical. “I beg your pardon?”

“She came to see me. Did she not tell you?”

He shook his head slowly, his dark eyes turning stormy.

“Lady Catherine informed me very directly that she did not approve of you proposing to me, and as you had done no such thing, I did not know what to say.”

“So you said nothing? Forgive me, Elizabeth, but that does not sound like you.”

She glanced away. “I said many things. She pressed me not to accept you even should you ask, and that request I refused.”

Mr. Darcy rubbed the back of his neck. “I would not see my aunt when she came to London. Perhaps if I had, I might have spared us a few miserable months.”

“It does not matter now,” she assured him. “For despite everything, we shall soon be wed.”

He pressed her hand in his.

On the second day, Mr. Darcy explained that he had requested the marriage license before he brought Bingley back to Hertfordshire. When she saw the brief flash of melancholy cross his face, she regaled him with stories of her youth at

Longbourn. Her escapades while visiting with the Gardiners in London, her taste in books—biographies over histories, comedies over tragedies—and how she had always wanted to learn to play the harp, but the instrument was too expensive to purchase when they already had a pianoforte—anything to make him smile. Mr. Darcy asked her a hundred questions and listened carefully to every answer.

Over the remaining days, while she continued to amuse him with tales of her irreverent ways, Mr. Darcy told her stories about his own childhood, how he and Colonel Fitzwilliam had spent much of their summers together at Pemberley, how he had run from his home to Lambton and ridden to the far edges of his father's property, what he recalled from the time when both his parents lived, how his father had changed and become a much more solemn man after his wife died. How the weight of his responsibilities had almost crushed him when, at twenty-two, he had found himself helping to bear his father's casket to the church yard.

"It was too soon," he said softly. "I was not ready."

"I cannot imagine you ever would be, but you were so young."

"My father never allowed either Georgiana or me to doubt that he loved us," Mr. Darcy told her quietly, "but he treated Wickham in the same way, and knowing that Wickham in no way deserved it, but feeling unable to disappoint my father by revealing that man's transgressions ... that was difficult."

Elizabeth squeezed his hand. "I cannot tell you how I regret what I said to you in regard to him."

"It is no matter, Elizabeth," he told her. "I am not that man any longer. Your reproofs soon taught me that I wanted to be a better one, and I hope that I have succeeded in that." He stroked her cheek with the back of one hand. "Not that my work there is done."

"You are not the only one who felt the need to change," Elizabeth replied, leaning into his touch. "I am a different woman than the one who rejected you out of hand. Wiser, I hope. Less gullible, certainly, and I hope also less prejudiced."

"Elizabeth," he asked haltingly, "why did you keep the letter I gave you in Kent? It was certainly not kind."

"I did not want to believe it, at first," she admitted. "It was so dismissive of Jane and hinted that I held some sort of infatuation for Mr. Wickham."

He shut his eyes and shook his head.

"Please look at me," Elizabeth said.

Mr. Darcy did as she asked.

"It was not very long, though, before I saw how foolish I had been. I needed to keep that letter to remind myself how easily I had been led and how I had allowed my prejudice against you to blind me to certain truths. It was a lesson I sorely needed. And your adieu was kindness itself."

"Will you burn it now?"

“Must I?”

“Those words haunt me nearly as much as the proposal in Kent. Knowing that they still exist is painful to me.”

“I suppose I do not need it anymore, for I have a more recent one. One I like a great deal better.”

Darcy brushed her forehead with his lips. It was not the first time he had done so, and the intimacy of it no longer surprised her but made her happy.

His voice was low and impossibly tender. “I promise I shall write you many more like the second if only you will burn the first.”

Elizabeth leaned her head on his shoulder. “Very well. If it bothers you that much, I shall burn the first letter.”

He released a deep, bone-rattling sigh, and Elizabeth’s heart ached for him. “I shall fetch it now, and we will burn it together.”

“Thank you, love” was all he said.



Elizabeth examined herself in the glass. The blue silk dress she had meant to wear to dinner at Pemberley suited her very well indeed as a wedding gown. All it had required was a bit of the silk Mr. Darcy had gifted Jane on the occasion of her marriage so that Kerr could add long sleeves. Kerr had come to Longbourn last night in order to prepare Elizabeth for the

wedding, and the young woman bobbed up and down on her toes, she was so pleased with her work.

“Oh, Miss Bennet,” Kerr said with a pleased sigh. “You do look a picture.”

“It is the dress,” Elizabeth said modestly, admiring it. “I am so happy to finally have an occasion grand enough to wear it.”

“Elizabeth?” Kitty’s voice floated through the door. “May we come in?”

“Yes, do,” Elizabeth called.

Kitty walked in and stopped abruptly. Mary ran into her from the back.

“Why are you stopping?” Mary asked peevishly. She stepped around Kitty. “Oh.”

Both her sisters stared at her. Elizabeth knew it was the dress, but there was something else about her this morning that had made her gawk at her own reflection. She was not just pretty today. She was glorious, and it had to do as much with the way she felt inside as the extraordinary care that had been taken with her toilette.

“We brought you this,” Kitty said, and thrust a small bouquet of dried flowers at Elizabeth. It was tied together, quite cleverly, with ivy.

“Ivy is for wedded love and fidelity,” Mary said earnestly.

“And there are dried primroses, for everlasting love and devotion,” Kitty added. “Plus all the herbs. Mrs. Hill helped

us.”

“I am sorry there will not be flowers at the dinner, like you had for Jane,” Mary added. “I am afraid that when we asked, no one had any left.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I shall not require them, Mary. It was so sweet of you two to make me a bouquet.”

“You love flowers.” Kitty shook the ones in her hand a little, and Elizabeth took them. “It would not be right for you not to even have a few to hold.”

Elizabeth’s eyes stung with unshed tears. “Do not make me cry. Fitzwilliam might turn and run away if he were to see it.” He would not, for he had seen her weep before when he came to visit her in Lambton.

Her sisters were plainly unconvinced. “He adores you, Lizzy,” Kitty said. “It was all Mamma could do to get him out of the house last night.”

Even Mary giggled at that.

“I did not want him to go,” Elizabeth admitted. “And I cannot wait to meet him this morning. Is everyone ready?”

“Mamma is downstairs ordering the servants about, even though the dinner is not until tomorrow,” Mary informed her. “They will be only too happy to have her leave for church.”

Elizabeth smiled widely. “Then to church we shall go.”



Blue. Her dress was blue. But not only one shade of the hue, for it shimmered lighter, darker, and sometimes almost green in the light of a grey, snowy Christmas Eve morning. It reminded Darcy of the sea and its unfathomable depths. Elizabeth was like a water nymph rising from the waves, and he was the fortunate man to whom she was travelling. He could not take his eyes from her.

Never had he been so grateful that he had not discarded the common license tucked into his writing case. For after so many months of suspense, a prompt wedding to Elizabeth was the only reasonable conclusion. He smiled at his bride as she walked on the arm of her father, drawing ever closer.

“Good morning, Mr. Darcy,” she said quietly, once her father had given her over to his care.

“Good morning, love,” he replied, for he would never call her Miss Bennet again.

Her countenance lit up at the endearment.

The ancient vicar cracked open his well-worn *Book of Common Prayer* and began to read. “Dearly beloved ...”

Darcy listened closely to the entire service, documenting it for posterity in his mind. He never wished to forget the moment Elizabeth promised to be his forever, or when he slid the cool gold band on Elizabeth’s finger or how she blushed when he repeated the vow. “With my body, I thee worship.” He would always recall how deeply her happiness was reflected in her dark eyes when the vicar declared “Those

whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder,” for he was sure that his own joy was as easy for her to see.

He had been startled, at that juncture in the ceremony, by a loud, half-choked cry from the back of the sanctuary. When he glanced up, he could see Miss Bingley holding a handkerchief. He was determined to ignore her sniffing. As he turned to face Elizabeth again, he could see Mrs. Bingley, standing behind his bride and glaring at Charles’s sister.

The sound was quickly muffled, and Mrs. Bingley returned her attention to the vicar, her countenance sweet and serene.

When at last the service was over and they were led to the marriage register, Elizabeth chuckled.

“What is it?” he asked. She pointed at the last entry. Mr. Charles Bingley and Miss Jane Bennet. And their own signatures, as witnesses.

Darcy signed his name. “Has it really been just over a fortnight?” he asked, befuddled. “It feels an age.”

“Only because you were in a self-imposed isolation for much of it,” Elizabeth teased him, taking the pen from him to add her name.

“I remained in my rooms because it was the Bingleys’ wedding night, and they did not re-emerge on the nights that followed,” he told her wryly. “It is not usually the best time to be hosting guests.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth replied pertly. “You are very thoughtful.”

“Mrs. Bingley,” the vicar called. “We need your signature as witness.”

Elizabeth handed the pen to her sister as Mrs. Bingley stepped over to them.

“Mrs. Darcy,” Darcy said, taking his wife’s hand. “I intend to hide away again, if you do not mind.”

She took his hand and squeezed it. “Not as long as I am allowed to hide with you.”

The building was nearly empty now. “That is the plan, Mrs. Darcy.” He moved her bonnet back a bit to drop a kiss on the top of her head. “That is the plan.”



Instead of a wedding breakfast immediately following the ceremony, the entire family and some of their friends would gather for Christmas dinner on the morrow. This meant that Elizabeth could take the carriage back to Netherfield with her new husband.

“Lizzy, Mr. Darcy,” Jane called.

“Yes, Jane?” Elizabeth asked.

“Would you mind if Charles and I took Miss Bingley to visit Longbourn for the day? Mamma has a number of things she wishes done for the dinner tomorrow, and I thought we could help.”

“We would not mind at all, so long as *you* do not mind if we return to Netherfield.”

“Of course not. Caroline,” Jane called quietly, “we shall be returning with my family to Longbourn and remaining for dinner.”

They all ignored Miss Bingley’s little cry of dismay.

“Your sister has a streak of cruelty in her that I quite approve,” Fitzwilliam murmured in her ear.

Miss Bingley would remain in Hertfordshire through Christmas and would be a guest at the dinner that would celebrate both the day and the marriage. But as soon as the sun was up on the twenty-sixth, she and Mrs. Matthias would be on their way back north to Scarborough, where Mrs. Hurst ought now to be expecting her. Mrs. Matthias had confessed that she was very happy to be returning home for Twelfth Night.

“It is not cruelty,” Elizabeth corrected her husband. “Jane has a finely honed sense of justice, is all, and she wishes for Miss Bingley to be well chastised for attempting to come between us.”

“Whatever you name it, I am grateful for two things. One, she did not apply the same sort of chastisement to me when I separated her from Bingley, and two, she is now sending us to Netherfield, quite alone.”

Jane had always been firm where she knew herself to be right, but she was truly able to be herself now that Charles was there to support her.

Elizabeth opened her mouth to say so, but then met her husband's intense, magnetic gaze, and her breath hitched. That look promised something she did not understand but was eager to discover. "Is the carriage out front?" she asked.

Fitzwilliam took her by the hand. "Anders is waiting. Shall we say our farewells to your family?"

"Jane will do that for us," Elizabeth informed him.

He lifted both of her hands, placing a kiss on the back of one, then the other. "Shall we, Mrs. Darcy?" he asked in a low, rumbling voice.

Elizabeth was lost in the sensation of the kisses and the way his deep voice made her shiver. "I never expected to have this second chance with you, but I will always be thankful for it," she said quietly as she gazed up at him. "To spend Christmas as your wife is beyond anything I could dream of even a fortnight ago. Yes, please, Fitzwilliam. Let us return to Netherfield, for you have, I think, much to show me."

His eyes bore into hers. "We have much to show one another. And it may take us all night."



Christmas dinner was a loud, merry affair. It was almost too much for Darcy, and he reached under the table for Elizabeth's hand. She linked her fingers through his and held his hand in her lap. He took a breath, feeling calmer.

Even when he was a child, dinners at Pemberley or Matlock, the earl's home, had been quiet, formal affairs. With the Gardiner, Phillips, Lucas, Goulding, and Long families gathered together to celebrate Christmas and his marriage to Elizabeth, there were many conversations being held at once, and he was overwhelmed by being at the centre of all the activity.

Elizabeth answered the questions that were tossed at them for the most part, though he managed to respond several times on his own.

“My cousin and my sister will visit us in London in January,” he said to Mrs. Bennet. “Because of the possibility of a storm, I asked them not to travel.”

Mrs. Bennet had apparently been disappointed not to host the son of an earl at her Christmas table, but she was mollified by his explanation.

“It is a shame, for the storm eased in time, but I would not have taken the chance either,” she said sadly, nodding. “And at least the roads are clear enough for Miss Bingley's journey to Scarborough.” She smiled at Miss Bingley, who was seated between Mrs. Long and Mr. Goulding. Darcy could see by the set of her jaw that she was miserable, but no one paid her any heed.

“Indeed,” Miss Bingley replied flatly. “It shall be quite comfortable, I expect.”

“And Mr. Darcy, when do you and Elizabeth plan to travel to town?”

“Sometime after the first of the year, Mrs. Bennet,” he said, grateful for an inquiry that was simple to answer. “My aunt and uncle wish to meet Elizabeth before the season begins.”

The letter from his uncle had been surprisingly sanguine. It might have had something to do with the viscount’s newly announced engagement. Darcy was grateful.

“Your uncle and aunt, the earl and countess?” Mrs. Bennet asked, raising her voice just a touch.

Elizabeth sighed beside him, but Darcy would not deny her mother a chance to boast a little. He was sympathetic to her having lost her youngest daughter to a man that did not deserve her, and still felt some guilt attached to that entire affair.

“Yes, madam,” he replied. “They have heard much to Elizabeth’s benefit from my cousin, the Honourable Colonel Fitzwilliam, and my sister, Miss Darcy, whom Elizabeth met when she and the Gardiners were in Lambton over the summer.”

Mrs. Bennet could not have been any happier to have him elucidate the connection. She accepted the congratulations of the neighbours seated to either side of her and smiled at Elizabeth as though she had always been her mother’s favourite and not her father’s.

Elizabeth squeezed his hand. “You are becoming a bit obsequious, Mr. Darcy,” she whispered to him. “Whatever will you say to my mother next? Will you compliment her for the

glazing on the windows or the exquisite fireplace, which I can assure you did not cost eight-hundred pounds?”

“What are you on about, wife?” he muttered back.

“If you had ever heard Mr. Collins waxing rhapsodic about Rosings, you would not ask.”

“Are you comparing me to your cousin?”

“I would never.”

“I should certainly hope not.”

“Although you do share something in common.”

“I am afraid to inquire.”

“Perhaps you are wise.”

Did she truly intend to keep it from him? He narrowed his eyes at her, and she lifted a hand to pat his cheek.

“You both proposed to me,” she informed him.

That malodorous, bad-mannered popinjay had proposed? To *his* Elizabeth? Collins had been married to Miss Lucas by April, which meant that Collins had proposed before Darcy. Further, that meant that when Elizabeth said Darcy was the last man she should ever marry ... the *last* man?

He stood, using their linked hands to lift her to her feet in a graceful twirl. Elizabeth was surprised, but did not protest, only watched him curiously as he pulled her out of the dining room and into the hall, where he positioned her under the archway that led back to the drawing room.

“Your smile is rather roguish, Mr. Darcy,” she said breathlessly.

“Did Mr. Collins ever kiss you, Elizabeth?” he asked, reaching one long arm above his head and was pleased to see her grimace.

He saw the moment she realised what he was about, for she held out her hand for the white berry he plucked from the mistletoe hanging above. Darcy placed it very gently in her palm and her fingers curled around it.

“If Mr. Collins had ever made the attempt,” she said in a low, throaty voice that made Darcy wish to call the carriage and make for Netherfield instantly, “I would have slapped him.”

“Then my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth,” he nearly growled, “he and I have nothing in common. Not anymore.” He took her lips in his own and felt her melt against him. “Do not you agree?”

Elizabeth’s eyes were glazed. “What?” she asked.

Darcy smiled. “You were telling me that I am the only man you have ever loved.”

“And the only man I ever will,” Elizabeth said, most agreeably.

“Happy Christmas, love,” he said, and leaned down to capture her lips again.

Epilogue

Elizabeth Darcy shivered as her bare feet touched the cold floor. With a sharp intake of breath, she scurried to the curtains and parted them a little. Then, just as quickly, she made her way back to bed and thrust her legs under the warm covers.

Fitzwilliam slept soundly beside her. There was a peace that settled over him here at Pemberley, especially visible as he slumbered, when all the cares of the day were banished. Elizabeth rolled away from her husband and onto her side to watch the snow drifting lazily past the window, allowing the warmth from the quilt and his body to begin to lull her back to rest. She jumped when one strong arm snaked around her waist.

“Your feet are like the inside of an icehouse,” he grumbled.

“Which is why I returned to bed, dearest.”

“You returned for the blanket and not for me?” The low, gravelly sound in her ear made her shiver, and it was not from the temperature in the room.

“You are warmer than the blanket,” she informed him, turning in his arms to place a little kiss on his nose.

He took her in his arms. “When you recompense me in such a way, I do not mind your freezing feet.”

“That may be the most romantic thing you have ever said to me,” Elizabeth teased.

Suddenly she was beneath her husband and he was smiling down at her. She proudly noted the lines near his eyes that proved her Fitzwilliam smiled and laughed a great deal more than he had when they first met. He raised himself up on his forearms. “If that is the case, I must make amends.”

Elizabeth reached up to touch his face. “As wonderful as that sounds,” she told him, “I would like to take a walk out of doors before church.”

“You would rather go out in the snow than remain indoors with me?” Fitzwilliam asked, a wicked gleam in his eye. He leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I shall have to do better by you, Mrs. Darcy. Allow me to demonstrate.”

He then trailed several light kisses down her neck, and Elizabeth sighed with pleasure. Who could have guessed that the activities in the marital bed could be so very pleasing? Particularly when they had been wed ten years and already had four children. Fitzwilliam had once explained that having waited so long for her, he was determined never to take for granted a single moment they had together.

Elizabeth acquiesced. “Very well. But afterwards, I wish to go out, whether it is before church or after.”

“It would be my pleasure to escort you out into the freezing snow for your walk, Elizabeth,” he told her. “You know how much I enjoy it. Particularly when you throw snowballs at me.”

She laughed at him. “You adore walking in the snow. Before the day is out you will roust all three of our sons and lead them in pelting one another with snowballs. Do not even attempt to deny it.” She smiled mischievously up at him.

He smiled but did not reply, and Elizabeth felt her point had been made. As Fitzwilliam lowered his face to hers, she only wished she could recall what that point had been.

When at last Fitzwilliam felt he had sufficiently defended his honour, Elizabeth kissed him on top of his head, sat up, and plucked a letter from inside a book on her bed table.

“Here,” she said a bit nervously. Why, she could not say, for they wrote letters to one another with some frequency. Their Christmas letters, though, were special. “It is for you.”

Fitzwilliam took it with a shake of his head. He leaned back and stretched one long arm behind him to open the small drawer on his own bed table, from which he removed another missive, sealed in red wax. He held it out to her.

“You seal yours every year. So formal, sir.”

“My words are only for you, Elizabeth,” he told her solemnly. “Therefore, it is sealed.”

“Are you suggesting that I ought to seal mine?”

“No, for you do not have the bad habit of tucking important items into your pockets as the boys and I do.”

Her husband rarely lost anything unless it had been moved by someone else. Bennet and Fitzwilliam still lost things on occasion, and Edward, at five, lost everything. “Only because I do not have any. I intend to have Kerr sew pockets into all my dresses and Georgiana Jane’s as well, I shall have you know. You make us quite jealous over them.”

He chuckled and tapped her nose with the end of his letter. “You have pockets in your coats.”

Elizabeth had mentioned once in passing how warm his greatcoat had been, and on St. Nicholas Day that year, he had presented her one of her own. It was slimmer than Fitzwilliam’s, clearly fashioned for her smaller frame, but made of the same sort of materials and very warm. When Georgiana Jane, named after his sister and hers, had shown signs of taking after her mother rather than her namesakes, Fitzwilliam had quietly spoken to the tailor in Kympton. The result was that perhaps the tiniest greatcoat ever made in England had been shortly thereafter gifted to little Miss Darcy. To say that their daughter had been thrilled was an understatement, though her older brothers were not quite as pleased, for now the youngest Darcy could remain out in the snow with them for a good deal longer than she had before, and though her little legs carried her a long way, the distance was accomplished very slowly.

“It is important to have pockets when you are determined to collect every interesting stone at Pemberley,” Elizabeth said fondly, shaking her head.

“Do you mean our daughter or you?”

She laughed. “I will not answer that.”

“The coats are becoming and practical. I shall not apologise for worrying about you.”

It had been some time before Elizabeth realised that her little escapade at Netherfield’s pond had affected him so badly. Elizabeth recalled that day with amusement, but her serious husband did not.

“You worry anyway,” she replied gently.

He shook his head at her. “Read your Christmas letter, Elizabeth.”

“I shall, so long as you read yours.”

He unfolded his letter and began to read, but Elizabeth did not open her own. She watched his eyes moving across the page. Then his lips pressed together. She expected him to speak, but instead, he turned to her, placed a warm, loving hand on her abdomen, and kissed her softly.

Only after a few moments had passed did he ask, “When?”

“Early June, I believe,” she told him. “Is it wrong for me to hope for another little girl?” She nudged him with her elbow. “We women are outnumbered here, and I am still not used to it.”

“Not at all,” he told her. “But I shall be happy with whatever we are given, so long as you and the child are safe.”

“Always the same answer,” she replied with a smile.

“Always the same prayer.” He kissed her forehead and nodded at the page in her hand.

Elizabeth broke open the seal and began to read the latest of Mr. Darcy’s Christmas letters.

The End

**Caroline is less than impressed with Mr. Darcy's choice of wife. Hear her impressions of the Darcys' marriage in *Mr. Darcy's Christmas Letters Bonus Epilogue!* Click here:
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OR SCAN



Want more Darcy and Elizabeth at Christmas?

Read Melanie Rachel's *An Accidental Holiday!*

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Excerpt from *An Accidental Holiday*

Netherfield was in chaos. Well-organized chaos, but even so, it was too much for Darcy to bear. Instead of answering a letter from Pemberley's steward as he had planned, Darcy decided to put it off until he arrived in London. Though it was nearly three and would be dark in an hour, he left his valet to pack up his things and went for a ride. If the weather held, it would be too cold to ride outside the carriage all the way to London tomorrow, so this might be his last opportunity for some time.

As he guided his horse out into the meadows for a bracing run, he wondered how Bingley had fared, riding out so early in

the cold. It must have been an uncomfortable trip, but by now he would be settled in his rooms at The Albany next to a roaring fire with some convivial company.

Without thinking, he guided his mount into Meryton and in the general direction of Longbourn. Though he had never visited the house, the pathways were clear. He might have considered making Bingley's farewells for him, but he could not predict his friend's reaction. Bingley might return despite everything his sisters could do, and if so, a farewell might be seen as presumptuous. No, better to allow Bingley to handle his own affairs. Once in London, Bingley would surely ask for his advice, and if so, he would offer it.

Darcy would have liked to take his leave of Miss Elizabeth. She was pretty and witty, a woman who not only could challenge him but was willing to do so ... He shook himself. It was rare enough a combination of traits to be intriguing to a man such as himself, that was all. Certainly, there were women better situated who also possessed those attributes. Miss Elizabeth had shown him what he wanted in a lady, and he would always be grateful to her for that, but her position in life was not suitable for a man of his rank. Though he might be persuaded to forgo the rank or financial difficulties were it not for the vulgar behaviour of her family.

No, wishing for something that could not be would only hurt them both. He had no reason to call, not really, and it would be better not to tempt himself too far.

This sort of indecision was entirely out of character for him, and it provoked him greatly. His horse skittered to one side, then another, tired of standing still, yet there they remained, facing the road to Longbourn without any intention of taking it.

Just as he had ordered himself for the third time to turn away and return to Netherfield, a figure appeared where the Longbourn path emptied out into Meryton. It was a woman, bundled in a red wool cloak, a scarf wound around her neck and up nearly to her ears, and a fur-trimmed hood pulled over the whole. She was driving a small pony cart that had probably been rather smart a generation ago.

He did not recognize her, exactly. It was simply that he could think of no other gentlewoman who would be out an hour from dark on such a chilly day, and on her own at that.

He touched the brim of his hat as she drew near.

What is Elizabeth going to say? Find out here: <https://mybook.to/AAH>

About The Author



Melanie Rachel first read Jane Austen's novels as a girl at summer camp and will always associate them with starry skies and reading by flashlight. She was born and raised in Southern California but has also lived in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Washington. She currently makes her home in Arizona where she resides with her husband and their incredibly bossy Jack Russell Terrier.

Want updates on special giveaways and new books? Sign up for Melanie's newsletter at <https://www.melanierachelauthor.com/newsletter> and all her bonus content at <https://www.melanierachelauthor.com/bonus->

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