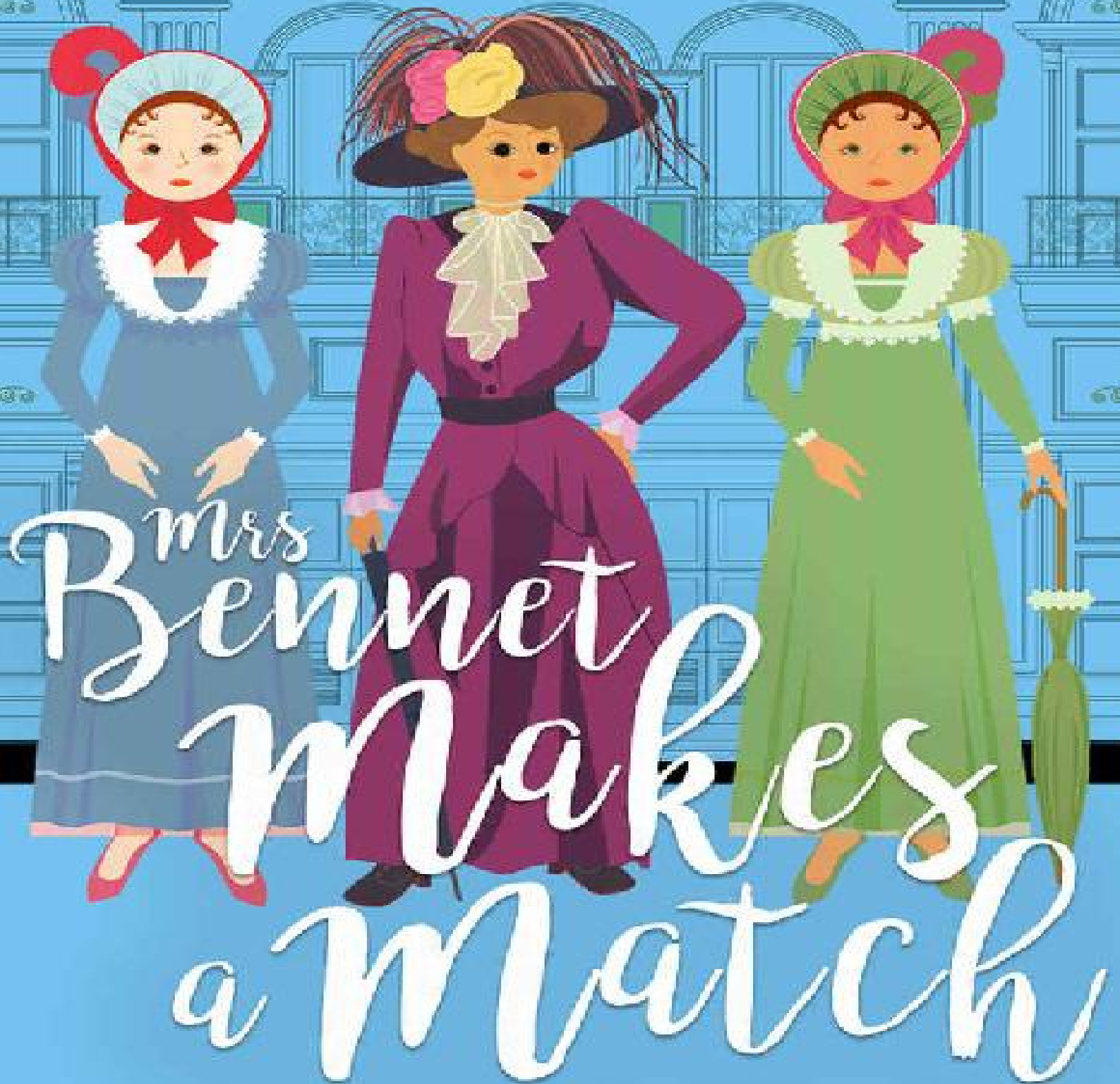


LUCY MARIN



# MRS BENNET MAKES A MATCH

---

LUCY MARIN



Quills & Quartos  
PUBLISHING

Copyright © 2023 by Lucy Marin

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Ebooks are for the personal use of the purchaser. You may not share or distribute this ebook in any way, to any other person. To do so is infringing on the copyright of the author, which is against the law.

Edited by Debra Anne Watson and Grace Baumann

Cover by Hoja Designs

ISBN 978-1-956613-77-3 (ebook) and 978-1-956613-78-0 (paperback)

*To interfering mothers everywhere*

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

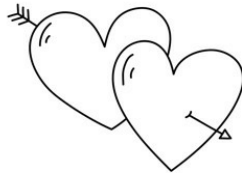
[Get a free ebook!](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Lucy Marin](#)

# ONE



September 19, 1812

Mrs Bennet looked about her drawing room, feeling more satisfaction than she had in many a month. It had little to do with the decoration—although it was as fine as it could possibly be, given her husband’s income—or the refreshing late summer breeze entering through the open windows. The smile on her face was because of the gentleman sitting beside her eldest daughter. Mr Bingley, about whom she had harboured so many hopes the previous year, had returned to the neighbourhood. He was as handsome and jovial as she recalled. More to the point, his only interest at present was looking at and speaking to Jane.

A warm but cautious contentment settled in Mrs Bennet’s belly. Her dearest dream might still come true. Her daughter might be mistress of Netherfield and have a rich husband! Any mother would be proud of such an accomplishment, and it would be a relief to know that she need not worry about the future once Mr Bennet died and the disagreeable Mr Collins inherited Longbourn. Besides, Jane had been despondent since Mr Bingley had gone away. Her dear girl did not think Mrs Bennet had realised, but she had, and what kind of mother would she be if she did not long to see Jane happy?

Mrs Bennet’s eyes took in the room’s other occupants. Kitty looked bored, and Mary frowned and quietly sewed. Neither contributed to the conversation, which was just as well. It meant Mr Bingley’s attention could remain on Jane. Mrs Bennet fought against a scowl when her gaze fell on Mr Darcy. In addition to insulting Elizabeth, he had been rude to everyone when

he was last in the neighbourhood. Why had he accompanied Mr Bingley? Apparently, it was to sit in her drawing room, being silent and sullen. Mrs Bennet regarded her second eldest daughter. Elizabeth had been different since her return from travelling with the Gardiners and the...*difficulties* of the summer. Usually lively and quick with a joke, she had been quiet and serious. When Lydia and Mr Wickham had visited, Elizabeth had seemed angry more often than not, despite her attempts to hide it. Well, it was nothing Mrs Bennet should waste her time contemplating. After all, when had she ever understood Elizabeth, and was it not more important to ensure Mr Bingley and Jane finally married?

“Mr Bingley, you are quite in our debt, if you recall. Last autumn, you promised to take a family dinner with us, but then you left. I insist on setting a date at once. Will Monday do?” Mrs Bennet said.

With a grin on his face, Mr Bingley tore his eyes away from Jane. “That is very kind of you, and I am happy to accept. Monday would suit me very well.” He turned to gaze at Jane again.

Because she knew it was expected, Mrs Bennet turned to her other guest, only to discover he was staring at someone instead of at his hands, as he had been. She thought it might be Elizabeth and suspected the odious man was reminding himself that he did not find her handsome. Her Elizabeth was lovely, and if he could not see it, he was very stupid indeed!

“You are welcome too, Mr Darcy,” she said, managing to sound polite but wishing she could tell him to leave her home.

“Thank you, madam.”

She struggled not to roll her eyes, knowing his politeness was feigned. To keep vexation at bay, she watched Jane and Mr Bingley. They were a handsome couple. What a great match it would be!

*I shall do what I must to see them at the altar before Christmas. It begins with dinner. What shall we have? I hope we can get decent fish.*

Mrs Bennet successfully forgot about Mr Darcy’s presence until she was called upon to say goodbye. Perhaps he would soon go away. After all, he had never shown a liking for the neighbourhood, and no one there wanted to see him.

ELIZABETH SLIPPED OUT OF THE HOUSE SHORTLY AFTER DAWN THE FOLLOWING morning. She intended to return before any of her family awoke, and as long



as the housekeeper did not see her—she would tell Mrs Bennet—she might evade questions about why she rose and left so early. She could not admit that she had hardly slept, plagued by her maddening thoughts. Her mother and sisters would want to know what had disordered her peacefulness, and to admit it was Mr Darcy was impossible. She hoped an invigorating walk would ease her agitation.

Not even Jane knew what had happened in Derbyshire. When Elizabeth and the Gardiners had returned to Longbourn the previous month, everyone had been consumed with Lydia's situation—understandably so—and there had been no interest in the tour. Elizabeth was exceedingly glad of it. Whatever connexion she and Mr Darcy had been forming had ended the instant Lydia had fled Brighton with Wickham. Just as Elizabeth had admitted to herself how much she admired Mr Darcy, all hope of their future together was ruined, leaving her heartbroken and full of regret for her failure to understand him sooner.

*And I am angry, very, very angry at Lydia for her stupidity and recklessness and at Wickham for taking advantage of a young, impetuous girl.*

Despite being thankful the couple had married, Elizabeth hated thinking of them because their union had come at the expense of the future she and Mr Darcy might have had.

Seeing him enter the drawing room yesterday was a shock. One slight glimpse of his tall, handsome form was all it had taken for Elizabeth to be suffused with love for him. How she had longed to fly into his arms and cling to him!

But he had not been there to see her. That much had been evident within the first few minutes. Mr Darcy had greeted the Bennet ladies politely and then taken a seat removed from them. He had not spoken a word other than to thank her mother for inviting him to dinner. Elizabeth had been embarrassed at her initial exultation, and her bitter disappointment at his indifference had robbed her of her tongue. He had only come to keep Mr Bingley company and perhaps to judge for himself whether Jane truly cared for his friend. If his impulse had been also to demonstrate that he had not turned his back on the Bennets despite knowing about Lydia's rash actions, then it was generous of him.

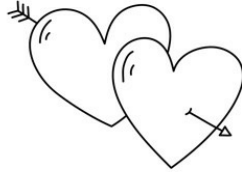
Elizabeth paused by a walnut tree and leant against the rough bark. A deep sigh crossed her lips, and she allowed sorrow to take over for a moment.

It left her body weak, and if the ground was not damp, she would have sunk into a seated position against the tree.

“It is an impossible situation. I accepted that long ago, and seeing Mr Darcy now should not matter so much, but, oh, how I pray he goes away soon. I shall not always be able to keep my feelings to myself,” she softly whispered, as though saying the words aloud would make her feel less lonely.

Several minutes later, she pushed herself away from the tree and began to walk home. She would devote herself to Jane and permit her sister’s joy at Mr Bingley’s return to lift her spirits and forget her feelings for Mr Darcy.

## TWO



“That was an excellent dinner, my dear. Rather more elaborate than I had expected,” Mr Bennet said.

He, Mr Bingley, and Mr Darcy had just joined the ladies in the drawing room. Mrs Bennet was pleased with the compliment but less so with his expression. She knew that quirked eyebrow of his all too well. He was laughing at her for taking pains with the menu, but she did not want Mr Bingley to realise the ‘family dinner’ was more than what the Bennets would usually have. She could not offer him just soup, a ragout, and another dish or two. She *would* make him understand Jane’s quality, and that meant demonstrating that her dear girl came from a family who knew how to host their neighbours correctly.

“I am sure you know best, but do be careful not to...do too much.” Mr Bennet awkwardly patted her shoulder. She scowled at his retreating form as he went to his favourite chair. What did he know about seeing their daughters suitably settled? It was not as though he would do anything about it.

Mrs Bennet forced her thoughts away from him and regarded her eldest daughter and her gentleman suitor with a fond smile. Mr Bingley was as caught up in Jane as he had been the previous year. That had been obvious when he had called on Saturday and from the moment they had met this evening. She anticipated them being engaged within the fortnight. Mr Bingley did not have the air of someone willing to wait long for what they wanted.

Thank God the Lydia...*affair* had been successfully resolved. What a disaster it might have been!

*What would have happened to my other girls if Lydia had been ruined?*

*Stupid girl!* Certainly, Mr Bingley would not have come back.

Mrs Bennet adjusted her cap and soothed herself. Mr Wickham was not as bad as they had reason to fear. He was nothing to Mr Bingley, to be sure, but he *had* married Lydia. If Mrs Bennet was deliberately ignorant of his true character, if she hid the truth of how the union had come about, what did it matter? It helped her sleep at night, and she would not blame herself. She had responsibilities to fulfil, and if she were forever moping and anxious about how Lydia was, what good would she be to anyone, especially her dear daughters?

*I allowed Lydia too much freedom.* Lydia had been her last baby, and it had been unexpectedly difficult to admit she was growing up and no longer the playful, innocent little darling who loved nothing quite so much as entertaining her mama. Lydia was terribly stubborn—more so than even Elizabeth—and Mrs Bennet prayed it would not land her in trouble with her husband. He did not seem like the kind of man who would be endlessly indulgent or respond kindly to being told what to do by his much younger wife.

*I shall keep a closer watch on Kitty, even if Mr Bennet forgets his resolution to ensure she improves her mind.* Kitty would find her mother a much more careful chaperon than she had been in the past.

At the moment, Mr Bennet was barely hiding his ennui. He yawned, only patting his hand over his mouth at the end of it. If he sat closer to his daughters or either of the other gentlemen, he would have someone to talk to, but he insisted on taking the horrid old armchair in the corner.

*One of these days, I shall have it tossed onto the rubbish heap when he is not looking. I will set fire to it so that it is destroyed, and he cannot demand we keep it. The other chairs and sofas are comfortable enough.*

“Mama, do you think the weather will continue to be as pleasant as it has been?” Kitty asked.

“I cannot say. Do you suppose I have become a witch of some sort who can predict the future?” Mrs Bennet’s brow furrowed.

Kitty’s visage turned pink. “N-no, it is just that you always say your left knee aches when—”

“Yes, well, I am sure I hope it remains fine. Rain would make it more difficult for Mr Bingley to enjoy his sport, and we would not want that, would we, Jane?” Mrs Bennet spoke before Kitty shared her ailments with Mr Bingley. And Mr Darcy—she must not forget he was there, even though

he said so little that it was easy to overlook him.

“Oh, I would not mind if it did, Mrs Bennet,” the affable gentleman said, hardly able to tear his eyes away from Jane to look at his hostess.

“Why?” Kitty said, evidently responding to Mr Bingley’s statement.

This time, it was his face that took on colour. Since he was gazing at Jane with affection that practically screamed out to the entire county, Mrs Bennet did not judge him for it.

“I would not find it in the least bit difficult to amuse myself on even the rainiest of days, not when there is such excellent company to be had,” he said.

*You very well might if there was so much of it that you could not leave Netherfield and had only Mr Darcy’s disagreeable company!*

As Mrs Bennet covered a dismissive huff with a quiet cough, her sight landed on Mr Darcy, and she saw the most curious thing ever. He was watching someone with an expression you would use for a dearly loved child...or wife! There was no one in the room upon whom he might bestow a paternal feeling; thus, it could only mean he *liked* one of her girls. Shock robbed her of her breath. Surely, it could not be! But she was *not* mistaken. There was a softness about his eyes, and his smile, although slight, was somehow powerful—even more so than one of Mr Bingley’s grins—because Mr Darcy rarely wore such a gesture of approbation. The gentleman quickly schooled his features and turned away from the object of his scrutiny.

Which of her daughters had he been observing? Based on where Jane sat, it was not her, thank goodness. Despite it being a romantic notion, Mrs Bennet knew it would, in actuality, be terrible if the two gentlemen fought over her most beautiful daughter.

*To call such a man my son-in-law would be something!* But did it even matter that Mr Darcy harboured such an affection? *None of the girls takes any notice of him. I doubt they have thought of him since he left Hertfordshire last November, and Lizzy positively despises him. Yet he is so rich and high-born.*

Mrs Bennet then recalled thinking that he was observing Elizabeth the other morning. But that was a look of disapproval, surely! The pair had never liked each other, and— Mrs Bennet forced her jaw closed to avoid gaping at her daughter. Elizabeth—*Elizabeth!*—had glanced at Mr Darcy, her countenance showing what appeared to be sadness and regret!

Suddenly overcome by these startling events, Mrs Bennet excused herself

from the room for several minutes to regain her composure in private. When she returned, she ignored Jane and Mr Bingley to study Mr Darcy and Elizabeth. Sure enough, throughout the remaining hour that the gentlemen were at Longbourn, the pair often stole peeks at each other, although their eyes never seemed to meet.

Could there be more to their connexion than she, Elizabeth's own mother, knew? Had Elizabeth's feelings for him changed that much?

Mr Bennet stood at her side as they said their goodbyes to their guests.

"Thank you, madam," Mr Darcy said, as solemn as a vicar at a funeral—not that she had ever been to one—before he turned to Mr Bennet and then the girls.

"I had an awfully good time. It was very kind of you to have us," Mr Bingley said.

"Yes, yes. You are very welcome, I am sure." Mrs Bennet had little time for him. Mr Darcy was about to speak to Elizabeth, and even if it was just to wish her a good night, she wanted to observe their interaction!

Once the gentlemen were gone, Mr Bennet asked, "Are you quite well, my dear? You were...unusually quiet after dinner."

"Oh, quite, quite well. Pray, excuse me, I must have a word with Mary before she retires."

She fluttered her handkerchief and hurried away. Mrs Bennet only recalled that Mr Darcy was from the north when he was politely bowing. Elizabeth had been on a *northern* tour with the Gardiners. Where exactly was Mr Darcy's estate, and had her brother's route taken them anywhere near it? Was it possible Elizabeth and the gentleman had met that summer and somehow become friends?

It became a matter of some urgency to ascertain the location of Mr Darcy's home. When Mary murmured that she was going to her room, Mrs Bennet decided her third daughter was just whom she needed. Mary hoarded facts like they were precious jewels.

Chasing up the stairs after her daughter, Mrs Bennet hissed, "Mary. Mary!"

Mary paused and looked at her. She said nothing but quirked an eyebrow, an irritating habit she had inherited from Mr Bennet.

"I must talk to you."

Mrs Bennet continued walking, soon reaching Mary, taking hold of her arm, and tugging her until they were in the first room at the top of the stairs.

It was Kitty's, but that hardly mattered.

"Yes, Mama?"

"From where is Mr Darcy? What is his estate called?"

"Derbyshire and Pemberley." Mary gave her a puzzled expression.

"Do we not know someone from the north? Not Mr Darcy, but another person?"

There was no mistaking Mary's disapproving sigh. "Aunt Gardiner lived in Derbyshire for some years as a child."

"Did she? Oh, yes, of course. I wonder if it was near Mr Darcy's estate."

"Why are you curious about him all of a sudden?"

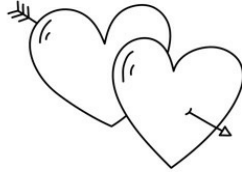
"Never you mind." Mrs Bennet nibbled on her lower lip, trying to remember what she had been told of the Gardiners' travels. Derbyshire sounded familiar, but that might simply be because she had heard it talked of as Mr Darcy's home county or her sister Gardiner's old one. Nevertheless, the coincidence was very interesting.

"Very well. I am going to bed. Good night."

It took Mrs Bennet a moment to realise Mary had left the bedchamber. She looked heavenward and shook her head. Of all her girls, Mary tried her patience the most. Elizabeth might think she was cleverer than other people—and she might be, though Mrs Bennet would never admit it out loud—but she hid her sense of superiority with smiles and laughs. Mary just went about looking dour and disdainful.

Speaking to her reflection in the dressing table mirror, she said, "I simply must have more information, and there is no time to waste. If Mr Darcy has tender feelings for Lizzy, I shall see them married. Lizzy must have discovered something to like about him, and he is Mr Bingley's friend. Everyone has some redeeming quality, do they not? Even Wickham does, though it might only be his good looks and ability to charm people." She shook her head and forced her thoughts back to Mr Darcy. "There is surely *something* about him to admire. I shall find it and use it to convince Lizzy she loves him—if she does not already. To think of my daughter married to such a man! Ten thousand a year!"

## THREE



For Jane's sake, Elizabeth was glad Mr Bingley was attentive, but she would have appreciated a longer separation from Mr Darcy than the mere two days since they had last called. As soon as the hour was reasonable, he and Mr Bingley were at Longbourn on Wednesday. It was difficult being with him and having to acknowledge that the friendly intercourse they had experienced in Derbyshire was gone. To add to her present woe, her mother was acting oddly, following Elizabeth about the house and mentioning Mr Darcy, which she never used to do. She seemed to want to ask something or expect Elizabeth to share her thoughts of him, which she never would. While it might be a relief to tell someone of her disappointment, she did not wish to burden Jane, who had long been her dearest confidant, and she did not trust her mother and Kitty with her secrets. Mary would be disinterested or, worse, it would make her disgust with Lydia even more severe to know her actions had cost Elizabeth the man she had fallen in love with.

"Darcy and I came to ask if the Miss Bennets would care to take a walk," Mr Bingley said.

"An excellent notion! I am sure they would be most happy to accept. I always say nothing is quite as good for the body and soul as a country walk." Mrs Bennet's gaze went first to Jane, then to Elizabeth, who unaccountably felt her cheeks heat.

She spoke a little longer, Elizabeth inwardly laughing at her mother's purported appreciation for exercise in the open air. Even for the short journey to Lucas Lodge, Mrs Bennet preferred taking the carriage—unless the horses were not available and she had an urgent need to gossip with Lady Lucas, in which case, she would walk and complain about her sore knee and feet for



days afterwards.

“I do not wish to go, but thank you, Mr Bingley,” Mary said.

Mary gave the appearance of politeness, but beneath it, Elizabeth sensed her displeasure. Given his behaviour the previous year, Mary’s opinion of him was low. Between that and her general dislike of society, Elizabeth was not surprised she had no wish to join a walking party.

“I think it is a jolly good idea! There is so little to do,” Kitty said.

“Now, Kitty, you know that is not true. Why, you are ever so busy. Do you not recall our conversation the other day? Besides, you would find it too...hot and tiring, I am sure. You had much better stay at home where you can attend to your chores and rest.” Mrs Bennet’s voice was slightly higher than usual, and Elizabeth saw her wink at Kitty, who looked puzzled.

“But, Mama—”

“Lizzy would never say no to such an excursion, and Jane will enjoy it immensely, will you not, my dear?” Mrs Bennet said.

“I-I would.” Jane apparently had noticed the strangeness of their mother’s manner.

“Excellent!” Mr Bingley predictably smiled at Jane.

The warmth in Elizabeth’s cheeks grew as she felt someone—or some *two*—watching her. She knew her mother did, but she was too afraid to determine whether Mr Darcy was the other person whose eyes were upon her. How she wished he was and that it was because he wanted to be by her side, the two of them chatting about everything and nothing at the same time, just as they had in the gardens at Pemberley after their unexpected encounter. Elizabeth reflected on the memory with great fondness—the marks of his favour, his desire to please her, the feeling of comfort at having him so close, to say nothing of his readiness to explain what they saw and the history of his home, all offered in his smooth, deep voice.

*If only I had known then that I should take care to recall each word he said because such occasions would be so few.*

Jane and Mr Bingley would want to talk only to each other, and perhaps when they were alone, Mr Darcy would exhibit more friendliness. If Elizabeth saw any sort of mark that he might still care for her, she would latch on to it and never let go.

“I shall fetch my bonnet,” Elizabeth said, feeling both anxious and hopeful.

DARCY FOUND IT IMPOSSIBLE TO STAY AWAY FROM ELIZABETH, DESPITE IT being evident she did not wish for his company. Part of him knew he ought to return to town and leave her in peace, but it was as though a thick, strong band connected him to her. He supposed if she told him definitively to go away, it would break the binding, but until that happened, he would remain.

Miss Bennet and Bingley were soon some distance ahead of him and Elizabeth, evidently content to ignore their presence. Her hands were clasped behind her, and he longed to grasp one of them, to entwine their fingers. Her blue gown added warmth to her complexion and highlighted the richness of her hair, which was partly obscured by a straw bonnet. If only he could take it from her head and throw it into the tall grasses at the side of the path! Her lovely—and loved—face would be exposed to his greedy eyes.

Elizabeth took in their surroundings, but she never looked at him.

*Just once, I want our gazes to meet so I might have the exquisite pleasure of looking into her beautiful, expressive eyes.*

“It is a fine day. We...have been very fortunate in the weather,” he said when he could no longer bear the silence. He thought he heard a soft chuckle before she replied, likely because it was an inane observation.

“I suppose it will change soon, now that September is almost over.”

Nothing more was said for several minutes. Darcy then recalled a subject that might be easy for them to discuss.

“How do Mr and Mrs Gardiner fare?”

“I received a letter from my aunt just yesterday. They are both well. Thank you for asking.”

Was that surprise in her voice, as though she did not expect him to wonder about the couple? A sort of tickle in Darcy’s mind alerted him to the possibility of the observation. He carefully considered his next words.

“I am sorry your trip with them was cut short.” Would she take the hint he was offering?

“As was I,” she said after a noticeable pause.

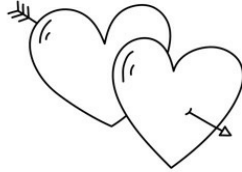
“I believe you were finding it...agreeable.” *It?* he silently repeated. It was such a small word for everything it meant—seeing him again and the changes he had made to his way of thinking and behaving towards others, viewing Pemberley, the home he so desperately wanted to give her, the evidence of his continued devotion and desire to take her as his wife.

Elizabeth turned her chin even further away from him, denying him even a tiny sliver of her face. Her response was a long time coming.

“I was. It is a shame it had to end as it did.”

It felt as though the air was violently pulled out of him. Voices were screaming four words over and over again: it had to end. She did not love him, not enough to forgive him for allowing her sister to be left vulnerable to Wickham. Perhaps if they had had more time, if she had come to feel for him what he did for her, then they might have overcome the barrier of his past errors. But they had not, and she was lost to him forever.

## FOUR



Mrs Bennet studied the two couples when they returned from their walk. She had spent the period of their absence day-dreaming of her daughters' weddings and indulging in sorrow at how much she would miss them once they were wives. Jane and Mr Bingley gave her nothing but pleasure. One glance was enough to know their connexion was progressing as it should.

Elizabeth and Mr Darcy were another matter altogether. Elizabeth's cheeks were red, but Mrs Bennet could not tell why. Was she angry? Disappointed? Frustrated? Whatever emotion Elizabeth was experiencing, between it and the way she and Mr Darcy were acting, Mrs Bennet was convinced something *interesting* was brewing between the couple. They sat apart and tried to give the impression they did not even know the other was there, yet frequently glimpsed in the other's direction. It was plain even to Mrs Bennet that, while Elizabeth might not understand her sentiments towards the gentleman, he knew what it was to love. And to think he had been so dismissive of Elizabeth's beauty when they had first met, only to fall madly in love with her! Why then was he not sitting with her, talking to her, and trying to earn her favour? Mr Bingley was giving him an excellent illustration of how a man should act towards the lady he wished to have for his own.

*I shall just give him a little nudge in Lizzy's direction. Encourage him. What could it hurt?*

It required some contrivance, but she managed to have a short, private conversation with him. She imagined him admitting to liking Elizabeth and requesting Mrs Bennet intercede on his behalf. He was sure to present her

with a very fine gift when her efforts were successful.

*Goodness, he is tall!* Mrs Bennet had never stood quite so close to him before, and she found him rather imposing. She wondered if Elizabeth did too, and if that might be part of the problem. It would be just like Elizabeth to tease him out of his attraction as a way to mask how he intimidated her!

“It is so charming to meet again in such a manner, is it not?” She smiled broadly.

“Ah...yes. Yes, it is, madam. I thank you for being so welco—”

Spying Mr Bingley preparing to step towards them, Mrs Bennet hastily spoke.

“My dear Lizzy is particularly glad. She is so lively, so quick-witted, and she relishes having a greater diversity of people with whom to talk, especially those with such wise conversation to offer. She is a good girl, as I am sure you have noticed. She is quite different from Jane in both looks and manner. I understand Jane more than I do her, I admit, but I am very fortunate to have such a daughter. Very fortunate indeed.”

Her brow gently furrowed, and her eyes drifted to Elizabeth, who stood apart from them. What Mrs Bennet had said to Mr Darcy was true, although it had never struck her before. Elizabeth *was* a good person, and she used her intelligence and sense to help those around her, including Mrs Bennet, who always struggled with the household accounts. And had Mrs Bennet not just been considering how much she would suffer when Jane *and Elizabeth* were married? Why had Mrs Bennet not recognised her value before? It would be terrible to admit it was only because Elizabeth was Mr Bennet’s favourite.

*Just because I am dissatisfied with him does not mean I should let it influence how I see my daughter!* Worse would be to acknowledge she had only seen her error because Elizabeth had attracted a gentleman of Mr Darcy’s quality.

As though fighting against a great weight of water, Mrs Bennet tore her eyes away from Elizabeth and searched the room until she saw Mary, her other least favourite—but still very much loved—daughter. Was there more to Mary than she had realised? Very likely there was, but how was she to discover it?

The sound of the front door closing shook Mrs Bennet out of her reverie. The moment of distraction had robbed her of hearing Mr Darcy’s reply. No matter, she decided. Vowing to remember her questions about Mary, Mrs Bennet followed Elizabeth as she picked up a book and left the drawing

room.

MRS BENNET FOLLOWED ELIZABETH INTO THE SMALL SITTING ROOM AT THE back of the house. She was staring out of the window, the book still clutched in her hand.

“There you are, Lizzy, my dear.”

Elizabeth turned towards her and appeared to sigh.

*Thinking about Mr Darcy, I hope!*

“Did you require my assistance?” Elizabeth asked.

“No, no. Come sit with me.” Mrs Bennet went to the old settee and patted the place next to her. Once Elizabeth was sitting, she continued. “What a good thing it is that Mr Bingley has returned for Jane.”

“Yes. I am happy for her.” Elizabeth’s hands were folded about the book, and she looked at it rather than her mother. Her voice betrayed nothing of her mood.

“You agree with me that he shows every indication of being in love with her? Do you think he will offer for her soon? I think he will, but that is also what I believed last year, and, well, we know how *that* ended. I spoke to your father about it last night—or rather, I tried to, but he made one of his jokes instead of treating the matter with the seriousness it deserves!” The man vexed her more and more each year.

Elizabeth glanced her way, and Mrs Bennet might have heard another soft sigh, but she was not certain.

“I do agree, but I could not say when he will propose. Likely, he is waiting to be sure of her feelings.” She made the oddest sound, almost like a bitter bark of laughter, which made no sense to Mrs Bennet; thus she chose to ignore it.

“Oh, I do hope so! What a relief it will be once— But that is not why I wanted to talk to you. Were you surprised that Mr Darcy accompanied his friend?” Mrs Bennet offered her daughter a fond smile that was meant to encourage the sharing of confidences, but Elizabeth did not see it because she continued to look downward. However, Mrs Bennet noticed the way her daughter started at the gentleman’s name.

“Why would I have an opinion on the matter? I could hardly know how Mr Darcy is likely to act.”

“I was thinking, my sweet, Mr Darcy is a very fine gentleman.”

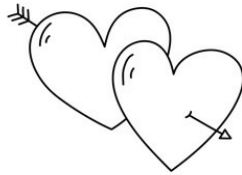
When Elizabeth regarded her with narrowed eyes, Mrs Bennet tittered nervously, but she had come too far not to carry on.

“He is so...educated, and-and I believe he likes books a great deal, just as you do. Have you ever considered that you and he might be well-suited?”

“Really, Mama, I believe the excitement of Jane and Mr Bingley renewing their friendship makes you see romantic intrigues everywhere. Mr Darcy would never look at me the way Mr Bingley does Jane. If you will excuse me.”

Elizabeth sprang to her feet and, without waiting for a response, strode out of the room.

## FIVE



Mrs Bennet grimaced as Elizabeth disappeared through the door.

“That girl is too stubborn for her own good! Can she not tell I am trying to help her? With a little effort, she could be Mrs Darcy. Ten thousand a year *and* a house in town! She has no notion what a comfort it would be to her to never have to worry about money or her children’s futures,” she muttered to the empty room.

Worrying her lace-edged handkerchief, she did her best to think rationally. If Elizabeth still detested Mr Darcy, there was no point wasting her time trying to bring the couple together. But did she? Since it was evident Mr Darcy loved Elizabeth, *she* must be the one preventing them from forming a lasting union—a phrase Mrs Bennet had lately read in the most romantic novel. In it, the hero and heroine were being kept apart by their wicked families for reasons she could not quite recall. At least *that* would not be Elizabeth and Mr Darcy’s fate; even though Mr Bennet did not care for Mr Darcy, he would not deny his permission if Elizabeth asked it of him, and Mr Darcy’s family could find nothing to object to in Elizabeth.

An idea came to mind, and showing more vigour than usual, Mrs Bennet went to find her fourth daughter. Kitty listened at doors, despite having been told many times not to, and might have interesting information to share about Elizabeth’s time in Kent, if she had overheard Elizabeth and Jane speaking about it. In addition, Maria Lucas was as much a gossip as her mother, and she had been there at the same time. Kitty and Maria were intimate friends, and Kitty would thus know whatever Maria did.

Kitty was in her room. Mrs Bennet let her speak for a few minutes about the trim she was adding to one of her gowns before interrupting.



“Seeing Mr Darcy brought to mind that his aunt and Mr Collins’s patroness are the same lady. I seem to remember hearing that he was visiting her when Lizzy was with Charlotte.”

Kitty nodded and smiled. “He was, along with a cousin who is a colonel. Maria said he was not particularly handsome, even though his father is an earl, but he was amiable. She said that Charlotte said she believed if the colonel had any money, he would have offered for Lizzy. His father—”

“Do you know if they saw much of Mr Darcy?” Mrs Bennet had no desire to hear about a penniless officer. Having one daughter married to such a man was quite enough.

Again, Kitty nodded. Her expression reminded Mrs Bennet of an eager puppy. The poor girl was likely lonely with Lydia gone, and she and Mary had never gotten along particularly well, their dispositions being so different. It might do them good to befriend each other. She set aside the notion to revisit once she sorted out Elizabeth’s future.

“Maria said that Mr Darcy called the very day he and his cousin arrived. Charlotte told her that Mr Darcy would not have done that for *her*, which means he must have wanted to see Lizzy. It was not to see Maria. They never said one word to each other when he was at Netherfield last year, and even in Kent, he said no more than good day to her or something like that. And Maria said she knew Lizzy and Mr Darcy walked together several mornings. She saw them or heard Lizzy talking about it. I do not remember how she knows, only that she does. Do you think he likes her? Poor Lizzy! I hope it is not always disagreeable men who take an interest in her. If I had to choose between Mr Collins and Mr Darcy, I would take Mr Darcy. He is handsome and rich. Mr Collins—”

“Very true, my dear.” Mrs Bennet patted her daughter’s arm. Her thoughts were already elsewhere, and she stood and went to the door. Before leaving the room, she turned back to Kitty. “You ought to spend more time with Mary.”

“Why?” Kitty’s expression showed confusion and, unfortunately, distaste.

Mrs Bennet did not answer and a moment later, was in her chamber. Her daughter truly could be Mrs Darcy! Such was her excitement, she swept her elderly cat, Felly, into her arms and clutched her to her chest as she skipped about the room. Mr Darcy was a very good sort, even if his manner was a bit...aloof. He might be proud, but did he not have ample reason for it? A house in town, a mighty fortune, a large estate, and master of it before he was

thirty years old! While she could not understand half of what he said, Elizabeth would, and she would find that much more interesting than being married to a stupid man. Mrs Bennet had often thought she and her husband would have done better had she been more intelligent and he less.

Mrs Bennet stopped walking and stared at the wall opposite her. It was covered with a floral pattern paper and a portrait of her mother, who had died soon after Mary's birth. Despite knowing what a good match Mr Bennet was, her mother had advised her to think carefully before accepting him because they were so unlike. Mrs Bennet did not regret the life she had, but she better understood her mother's caution all these years later.

"I tried to force Lizzy to accept Mr Collins. She would have been miserable with him and hated being a parson's wife." The realisation that she had wanted to condemn her daughter to such a marriage was shocking. "It is *not* the same with Mr Darcy. You agree, do you not, puss?"

She sat in a delicate bergère chair. Mr Darcy and Elizabeth were so stiff and awkward together. What could be keeping them apart?

There was a knock at the door; it was Mrs Hill. Somehow, the hours passed, and it was time to prepare for dinner.

MRS BENNET DECIDED TO SPEAK TO JANE THE NEXT MORNING, AS LOATH AS she was to do anything to distract her from Mr Bingley. If anyone knew Elizabeth's true feelings about Mr Darcy, it would be Jane.

But Jane's only response was to widen her eyes and shake her head as soon as Mrs Bennet hinted there might be a romance brewing between the couple.

"Mama, please do not talk to Lizzy about Mr Darcy or even suggest such a thing to her! They are not friends, and I am afraid nothing will change that."

"Not even after they saw each other when she was visiting Charlotte? Your sister was in Derbyshire recently, very likely near Mr Darcy's estate. Did they meet there?"

"If they did, she did not tell me, which would be unlike her. She does not look on him as a friend. She learnt to dislike him long ago, and although she does not regard him quite so poorly presently, they are nothing more than... indifferent acquaintances, if even that."

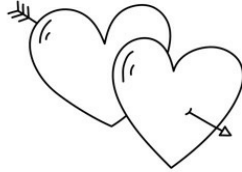
Jane's hand lifted to stroke the back of her neck, which told Mrs Bennet she was not disclosing everything she knew. Mrs Bennet made a

contemplative noise as she stood and left her daughter.

Jane was mistaken. She clearly believed what she said, which meant Elizabeth had not confided in her, which in turn only convinced Mrs Bennet that Elizabeth was hiding *very interesting* sentiments about the wonderfully wealthy and delightfully handsome Mr Darcy.

Although she supposed she ought not to interfere in her daughters' lives—and Elizabeth certainly would not appreciate it—she would see them married. It was for Elizabeth's own good, and what sort of mother would she be if she did not do what she could for her dear girl?

## SIX



After returning to Netherfield, Darcy claimed a need to finish an important letter and went to his apartment until dinner. In truth, it was an excuse to be alone. He was devastated by the conversation with Elizabeth, and all he could think about was finding a cave in which to hide so that he might grieve in private.

That evening, once he had picked at his dinner while listening to Bingley talk about Miss Bennet for as long as he could bear it, Darcy announced that he would leave the next day.

“What? You cannot!” Bingley said, sounding shocked by the suggestion.

“You do not require my presence any longer. The Bennets could not be more welcoming, Miss Bennet in particular, and I ought to leave you to it.” Darcy wanted to kick himself. The words sounded ridiculous, and he always prided himself on the elegance of his speech. Then again, considering some of his exchanges with Elizabeth, perhaps he ought to give up that pretension.

Momentarily, Bingley’s attention drifted, likely to the beautiful Miss Jane Bennet. “She is an angel and far more forgiving than I have a right to expect.”

Just as Darcy thought he could slip out of the room and go tell his man to prepare for their departure, Bingley fixed his attention on him.

“You cannot go, Darcy. I insist you remain.”

“Why?” He sounded petulant and hoped Bingley did not notice.

“Because I shall go mad if left alone in this huge house. As much as I might wish otherwise, I cannot be at Longbourn every hour of the day, and you know I do not have the means to entertain myself. But more than that, I require your advice. No, do not say it. I know you will tell me I need to make

my own decisions. Very well. I would *appreciate* your advice. Please, I beg of you, do not leave me here alone.”

After all the ways Darcy had failed Bingley as a friend, he could not deny his request.

“Of course. I shall be glad to bear you company for as long as you like.”  
*And pray I do not go mad myself, having to see Elizabeth.*

THE DAY AFTER THE WALK WITH MR DARCY AND MR BINGLEY, ELIZABETH sought out Jane to ask if she would like to take a walk in the gardens. Jane agreed, and as they strolled, arm in arm, enjoying the warmth of the sun and stillness of their surroundings, Elizabeth asked about Mr Bingley. In Derbyshire, it had been evident Mr Bingley did not know anything of what she had told Mr Darcy about Jane during their horrible exchange in Kent. She surmised that Mr Darcy had since informed his friend of it, which meant he had told him *after* learning of Lydia’s disgraceful behaviour.

Elizabeth appreciated it as the mark of the excellent gentleman she knew him to be. He plainly did not mean to renew his attentions to *her*. His words when they had been alone had made that clear—he regretted their time together in Derbyshire had ended so abruptly. He meant that he was sorry *the connexion they were forming* had ended. She did not blame him. Why would he want to align himself to a family Wickham was a part of? It occurred to Elizabeth that he might only have accompanied Mr Bingley to Hertfordshire to deliver this message to ensure she did not retain any hope or expectation where he was concerned.

“I shall not waste my breath to ask if you are glad Mr Bingley returned. I can see that you are, and equally that he is very happy to be with you again,” Elizabeth said, doing her best to mask how wretched she truly felt.

“You should not tease me. Though if you did not, I would believe you were ill.” Jane chuckled and her cheeks turned pink. “I am glad he is come, and I...I hope he does still like me.”

“He is as much in love with you as he ever was, if not more so.”

“I had thought I no longer favoured him as I once did, but, oh, Lizzy, I do. I have been struggling not to permit myself to hope, but everything he says, the looks he gives me—all of it is too much to ignore. But I shall not feel secure, or not anxious, until he proposes.”

“You might consider asking him to marry you. It would alleviate your

suffering—and Mama’s.” Mischief made the corners of Elizabeth’s mouth twitch.

“While it might help me, Mama would have apoplexy if she learnt I had done such a bold, unladylike thing!”

The sisters shared a laugh, and Elizabeth allowed Jane to speak of her gentleman without interruption for some minutes.

“I have been debating if I should tell you, but I think you would want to know,” Jane said.

“Oh?” Alarm stole a portion of Elizabeth’s ease.

“Mama asked me about you and Mr Darcy. It seems she has taken the notion that the two of you...care for each other. I do not know why.”

“What did you tell her?” Elizabeth asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“I would have said nothing, but that would not satisfy her. I reminded her that your dislike was formed long ago, and it would be kinder not to ask you about him. Was I right to tell you?”

Elizabeth nodded but worried if she tried to speak, she would only manage to snort or sob at the irony. For her part, she *was* in love with Mr Darcy and could imagine nothing better than to marry him. The realisation of her true sentiments had burst upon her the instant he had left her at the inn in Lambton after she had told him about Lydia. She supposed that was the moment his wishes regarding her had died. While usually so quick to spot a possible romance, her mother misunderstood Mr Darcy terribly if she believed he harboured intentions towards Elizabeth. That she must have discerned Elizabeth’s tendre for him meant she would have to do a better job of hiding it.

MRS BENNET STRODE ABOUT HER CHAMBER, FELLY ONCE AGAIN IN HER ARMS. What with one thing and another, she had been occupied with other matters all day, but finally, she could turn her mind to the matter of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. The cat was purring, though Mrs Bennet hardly noticed as she tried to remember everything she had observed since Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy had returned to the neighbourhood—more particularly, everything that had to do with Mr Darcy and Elizabeth. All the hours watching them studiously not talking yet constantly taking shy glances at each other had been enough to tell Mrs Bennet that they were not merely acquaintances.

“I would wager my pin money for a year that they saw each other this

summer, and between that and last spring, something has changed between them! I do not know what keeps them apart, but I must see the situation put to rights!”

Mrs Bennet held the cat aloft and stared into her eyes. “You would like to see Lizzy married to such a man, would you not, dear little Felly? I know I did not always like him, but that is all to be forgot. Yes, I shall like him very well, as long as he makes Lizzy happy!”

Kissing the cat’s head, Mrs Bennet placed her at the foot of the bed where she usually spent the night. Sure enough, after spinning in a circle several times, Felly curled into a ball, tucked her nose under a paw, and went to sleep. Elizabeth had given the cat her name. It was short for *felis*, which apparently meant cat in Latin or some other foreign tongue hardly anyone spoke, but Elizabeth had insisted on learning. It was an odd thing to call a cat, but Elizabeth, then twelve years old, had been so proud of herself, and Mrs Bennet could not bear to disappoint her by insisting on a different name.

She climbed into bed and extinguished the last candle. With her head so full of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy’s situation, sleep was a long time coming. She must find a way to bring the couple together, to make them admit their mutual love and desire to spend the remainder of their lives together in marital bliss—or at least connubial harmony—but how? Given Elizabeth’s stubbornness, Mrs Bennet required assistance. Her other daughters would be no help. Jane truly believed Elizabeth still disliked Mr Darcy, Mary was disdainful of anything romantic—which was a problem for another day—and Kitty was too indiscreet—also an issue Mrs Bennet would need to attend to in due course.

Inspiration struck her as she was eating breakfast the next morning. Naturally, her dear sister, Mrs Philips, would be her first choice of co-conspirator, but they needed another, someone who would keep them on task. Together, she and Mrs Philips might do little but exchange fond remembrances of their girlhoods and talk over the neighbourhood news. It was only with a mouthful of toast, richly covered with butter and strawberry jam, that she hit upon the right lady: Mrs Goulding.

*She is a mother and has successfully married off her daughters, and likely will have her sons married when they are an appropriate age. She did a fine job of it, too, and will understand my feelings and need to make this match happen!*

AFTER BREAKFAST, SHE WENT TO HER SISTER'S HOME AND INSISTED THEY call on Mrs Goulding, who had been a lifelong friend.

"I am always very pleased to see you, but it appears you have a special purpose for coming this morning." Mrs Goulding, of middle years and no longer the slim, handsome girl she had been when they were all young, adjusted the position of her glasses, which she claimed pinched her nose. She studied them, evidently awaiting an explanation.

"I have no notion what my sister's haste is, but she would not even come up when she arrived at my door. She demanded I join her in the carriage at once," Mrs Philips said.

"I shall tell you, if you let me get a word in," Mrs Bennet said. Her sister always had been excessively chatty, and it was just like her to jump in when she had nothing useful to add to the conversation.

Once her companions were quiet, Mrs Bennet told them of her conviction Elizabeth and Mr Darcy were in love. "But some silly, inconsequential matter is keeping them apart. Likely Lizzy acted against her best interests and told him she used to hate him. As if he is not rich and connected to the nobility! His uncle is an earl, you know? Can you imagine the jewels he has to present to his wife? I *will* see them married. He is a proud, disagreeable man, but if he loves my girl—as he surely does—and since she returns his affection, or very soon will, I have my heart set on it. I am sure to find some redeeming quality in him with time. He is handsome, which is something."

"Lizzy and Mr Darcy?" Mrs Philips exclaimed.

Mrs Bennet nodded, and she might have looked a tad self-congratulatory. If she did, who could blame her? Mrs Goulding's daughters might all be married, but none had husbands with ten thousand a year.

"I shall tell you everything I have witnessed and discovered since he and Mr Bingley took residence at Netherfield Park again. You must promise to help me. We shall contrive ways to have them spend more time talking to each other. With any other gentleman, I would worry about him hearing too many of her impertinent opinions, but Mr Darcy must be aware of Lizzy's manner by now, and he does not object. I do not understand it, but I suppose there is someone for everyone, and she is the one he wants. That girl has caused me more vexation than all the others put together!" She tilted her head to the side. "Perhaps not including Mary."

"What does that matter right now, Sister?" Mrs Philips said.

"Are you certain?" Mrs Goulding's eyes were slightly rounded as though



she were in shock.

Mrs Bennet shot her sister a scolding expression before nodding and addressing Mrs Goulding. "Oh yes, without a doubt."

"And you would want Lizzy to marry him? He is so...stern and cheerless, so different from that lovely Mr Bingley," said Mrs Philips.

"I dare say he is not always like that. If he were, Lizzy would have more sense than to like him." Mrs Bennet gave them a full accounting of what she had seen and heard, including her conversations with her other daughters.

"A card party! You know how much everyone enjoys my card parties. I shall ensure Lizzy and Mr Darcy sit together." Mrs Philips gave a curt nod.

Mrs Goulding, showing her worth as a friend, leapt into the spirit of their scheme. "Excellent notion! You can have it soon since such affairs do not take all that much preparation, and I shall begin arranging a dinner party at once. They will keep each other company at the table, and it is nothing to make sure the meal is long. If the right people are at their other sides, they will naturally only want to talk to each other."

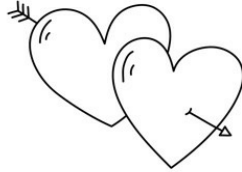
"There must be music. My niece has such a lovely voice, and a man like Mr Darcy will surely appreciate it," Mrs Philips said.

"I knew I could depend on you to help me!" Mrs Bennet clapped her hands together in glee.

The ladies spent an hour refining their plan of attack before Mrs Bennet and Mrs Philips prepared to depart.

"I shall have both Jane and Lizzy married by Christmas. You just see if I do not," Mrs Bennet said as she pulled on her gloves.

## SEVEN



Darcy spent a minimum of a quarter of each day wondering why he had given in to Bingley's plea that he remain at Netherfield. But Darcy had wronged him when it had come to Miss Bennet, and as long as Bingley wished for his company, he was obligated to remain and offer his support. It was doubly important that he do so since Bingley's sisters were unremitting in their disapproval.

Recently, Bingley had begun speaking endlessly about proposing to Miss Bennet.

"Do you think it is too soon? I believe she cares for me. You do, too, do you not?" Bingley said, repeating himself over and over until Darcy wanted to strangle him.

He also spoke of what he would say, and Darcy had almost guffawed when Bingley asked his advice. After how he had insulted Elizabeth when he had proposed, he was the last man Bingley should ask.

The very faint hope Darcy had retained that he had mistaken Elizabeth's meaning during their walk was gone. Whenever they met, her manner towards him was cold. Indeed, she appeared more irritated by his presence at each meeting while, to his vexation, Mrs Bennet was evidently intent on explaining the excellence of her second daughter to him.

Darcy did his best not to force his company on Elizabeth, yet he could not stay away when the opportunity to see her arose. On Friday, he and Bingley had received an invitation to a card party from Mrs Philips; it would be Monday. Bingley had accepted without asking Darcy's opinion, which was neither a surprise nor a disappointment. Of course, Darcy would want to attend; Elizabeth would surely be there.

The necessity of attending to important letters—to his steward, solicitor, uncle, and sister—kept Darcy from joining Bingley when he called at Longbourn on Saturday, but he had the pleasure of seeing her at church on Sunday. He was certain he could hear her dulcet voice rise above all others when they sang.

After the service, he stood by himself, trying to be surreptitious in his observation of Elizabeth. She was speaking with Mrs Bennet, though it was only the matron who appeared to be talking. Then, in a movement so swift he had not time to prevent it, Mrs Bennet had pulled the evidently unwilling Elizabeth over to him.

“Oh, Mr Darcy, good morning.” Mrs Bennet sounded surprised to see him, although her actions were too deliberate to make that believable.

Darcy greeted the ladies, his eyes lingering on Elizabeth, who only curtseyed.

“Is it not a lovely day? I was very disappointed to hear from Mr Bingley that you and he are engaged with the vicar and his wife this afternoon. Lizzy was terribly upset when I told her, were you not?”

Elizabeth managed a smile, but she looked like she wanted to flee the awkward scene. She might have, had her mother not been holding her arm.

“Mrs Carson will give you a good meal, but I am sure you would find the company at Longbourn more to your liking.” Mrs Bennet tittered.

“Mrs Carson was kind to invite us.”

“To be sure. I was consoling Lizzy by reminding her that we shall have the pleasure of seeing you tomorrow at my sister’s. Young people do enjoy sitting down to a game of cards together. So many opportunities to talk to each other about, well, whatever they like to talk to each other about. That reminds me that I must say something to Jane. Lizzy, you stay here and keep Mr Darcy company. I cannot bear to see such a kind gentleman standing alone.”

As Mrs Bennet walked away, Elizabeth’s eyes closed briefly. When she opened them, she looked beyond his shoulder. She was pale, and Darcy attributed her discomfort to being forced to talk to him.

“I believe it will rain this afternoon,” he said after an awkward silence that seemed to last half the morning.

She looked at the sky and then made a noise of agreement. “My mother spoke precipitously about today’s weather.”

Her eyes met his briefly before she again averted them. For his part,

Darcy could not tear his gaze from her. In Derbyshire, he had come so close to winning the right to caress the soft curve of her cheek, to clasp her hand in his, brush his lips across hers. Not being able to do so created such a painful ache deep in his belly that he felt physically ill.

The sound of laughter drew their attention. It was Bingley, who stood with Mrs and Miss Bennet. The sight made Elizabeth smile.

“I hope my mother is not teasing him about accepting Mrs Carson’s invitation. She truly was disappointed to learn of it when Mr Bingley called yesterday. She had hoped that you would spend the day at Longbourn.”

*And you? Were you saddened to hear we could not? Did you miss my company as I missed being able to see you?*

Before he had time to think of what to say, Mr Bennet approached. He gave Darcy a perfunctory nod and said his name before turning to his daughter.

“Come, Lizzy, let us return home. I want my breakfast, and nothing short of us walking off will convince your mother to leave Mr Bingley alone. He and his friend will want to get on with their morning, just as I do mine.”

Mr Bennet took Elizabeth’s elbow to guide her. Darcy watched as they moved in the direction of Longbourn. It meant he saw when she looked over her shoulder at him. What did it signify? A desire to spend a few more moments with him? Regret at the circumstances that kept them apart? A plea for him to stay away because she found his presence difficult to tolerate?

He spent the rest of the day contemplating that look, going so far as to ignore Bingley all evening after their return to Netherfield.

PREPARING FOR MRS PHILIPS’S PARTY, DARCY FELT A TREMOR OF anticipation deep in his belly. It was ridiculous, he knew, and he berated himself for being stupid, but that final look Elizabeth had given him in the churchyard had remained with him. Something in it gave him a sliver of hope that her heart was not as closed to him as he had believed. He begged the universe to allow him to see just a speck more of it that evening. If he did, he would tell her that his wishes for their future were unchanged, and he loved her even more than he had at Easter. She could have as much time as she needed to decide whether she could return his affection; as soon as she gave him a sign that she was prepared to hear it, he would propose again.

He saw nothing to justify his hope. Instead, the best way to describe her

manner was arctic. As ever, she was polite, and when they first greeted each other, she even briefly met his eye. Thereafter, she would not look at him. Was he intent on torturing himself by expecting more? His situation was not made better by Mrs Bennet, Mrs Philips, and Mrs Goulding, to whom Darcy had said no more than a dozen words over the whole of their acquaintance. They were seemingly determined to speak to him of Elizabeth. It was as though he were being punished for every misstep he had ever taken. If he did not have relief from his misery soon, he might be tempted to throw himself into the River Lea.

“Now, Mr Darcy, you take a seat at this table. My dear niece will see that you are entertained, will you not?” said Mrs Philips.

She directed the question at Elizabeth, who appeared to clench her jaw. Her eyes flickered towards him but went no further than his shoulder.

“Of course,” she said, sounding irritated.

“She is such a good girl. What a delight she is to our entire family. My sister always says she is the most fortunate woman in the world to have such a daughter. If Mr Philips and I had had children of our own, I would have wanted a daughter just like Lizzy. I know Mrs Bennet takes it very hard that her girls will marry and go away, but I always tell her, it is her own fault for having such charming, capable girls. Naturally, they will attract very fine husbands, which is what any loving parent wants for their child.”

“I thank you for the flattering portrayal, Aunt. You are very good,” Elizabeth interjected, a puzzled expression clouding her countenance.

Mrs Philips giggled—rather silly for a lady her age, in Darcy’s opinion—and after patting her niece’s shoulder and grinning at him, went away. Elizabeth sighed and bowed her head, but an instant later, she was engaged in light conversation with the couple who shared the table with them. Darcy played poorly; he was too intent on studying the lady by his side. Even when the game required her to speak to him, she would not look at him and kept her shoulders turned away just enough to be noticeable.

Later in the evening, he was talking to Mr Stuart, one of the local gentlemen, when Mrs Goulding all but pushed her way into the conversation. She ignored Mr Stuart, who soon went to find someone who appreciated his company, Darcy supposed.

“Such a pleasant evening, is it not, sir?”

Mrs Goulding was at least a foot shorter than him, and as she stood close, Darcy’s chin nearly touched his chest as he tilted it to see her. He could not

step back; there was a wall behind him. It was no wonder he felt trapped.

“It is, madam.”

“We are very glad you and Mr Bingley returned to the neighbourhood—some of us more than others.”

Her eyes flickered to the side, and she might have winked at the same time; Darcy was not certain. Looking in the direction her gaze indicated, he expected to see Bingley and Miss Bennet. Instead, it was Elizabeth, who was especially lovely in a yellow gown. Her mood had evidently improved once she was no longer required to keep him company. She was chatting easily with several young people.

“I am arranging a little dinner party and will send cards soon. I do hope you will accept, Mr Darcy. I am quite counting on it,” Mrs Goulding said.

“Of-of course. I shall be delighted. Thank y—”

“Mr Goulding and I recently procured a new pianoforte. I am absolutely wild to have Miss Lizzy perform. You have heard her sing, I believe?” She did not pause to let him respond, though he did nod. “Does she not have the most exquisite voice?”

Darcy could not keep his eyes from again seeking out Elizabeth. If he responded, he was not aware of it, but it mattered not. Mrs Goulding left him to his memories. He had heard Elizabeth sing a number of times, but the first stood out to him. It had been at Lucas Lodge the previous autumn, and Darcy had been entranced. That was also the evening he had noticed the unique beauty of her eyes. There was so much life and expression in them, and he would give just about anything to spend the rest of his years staring into them, doing what he could to make them dance in merriment, flash in interest, grow warm in love, and how, he wondered, would they look when she was full of passion?

*That* was not a thought he should be having in a crowded parlour, if at all.

Still later, Mrs Bennet approached him, a lacy handkerchief clutched in her hand. Darcy noticed it because she kept her arms folded by her chest, almost as though she were cold or anxious.

“Oh, Mr Darcy, is this not a delightful evening? Everyone adores my sister’s card parties. I was very glad when she told me she would have one and invite you.”

“It was kind of her.”

“I just happened to notice you sat beside my darling Lizzy.” The expression she gave him was one of satisfaction.

“I had that pleasure.”

“Lizzy excels at cards, but then, she is very capable. If I can be forgiven for crowing about my own daughter, my dear girl is *very* clever. I dare say that is not a surprise to you. She is such a help to me. No one else has her head for figures, and ever since she was such a little thing, she has liked nothing quite so much as reading about this and that.” She chuckled awkwardly and her cheeks flushed. “I admit, I do not understand half of what she says some days. I suppose many parents feel that about their grown children, yet how can one possibly like to say it? My Mary makes me feel the same way, but not my other daughters. Odd, is it not, how five girls could be so different despite having the same parents and upbringing?”

Her voice trailed off, and for just a moment, she was more contemplative than Darcy had ever seen her—and to an extent he never would have imagined possible. She shook herself.

“What was I saying? Oh, yes, my Lizzy. She looks very fine tonight, if I say so myself. Jane is acknowledged as the beauty of the family, but all my girls are pretty.”

“They are, indeed, Mrs Bennet,” Darcy replied when the matron paused and waited for him to speak.

“Lizzy has something...different about her, does she not? I always thought it must be because she takes after her father. They are both so quick-witted, but while Lizzy does love a laugh, she is kind and, and...”

“Admirable.” Darcy had not intended to speak, but it had slipped out when Mrs Bennet could not find the word to explain herself.

A broad grin spread across her face, and Darcy felt her tap his arm. “Just so. Well, I shall leave you to your contemplations.”

Mrs Bennet might have given him a half-wink, as he thought Mrs Goulding had done earlier in the evening, but he was unsure. She wandered into the crowd.

Darcy began to feel as though he were in some bizarre dream where everyone about him knew he loved Elizabeth and was tormenting him by reminding him that he was not good enough for her.

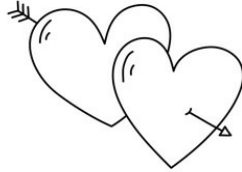
Either that or they were trying to interest him in her. With Miss Bennet on the point of being engaged, Mrs Bennet wanted to see Elizabeth settled, and Darcy *was* an eligible match.

*If that is their purpose, they might as well save their breath to cool their porridge.*

He recalled Elizabeth saying something similar to him once. It had been at Lucas Lodge, that night he had heard her sing for the first time, and his attachment to her had sparked to life. A quiet, bitter laugh escaped before Darcy could stop it.



## EIGHT



Elizabeth's attempt to escape the house and take a solitary walk early the following morning failed. Unlike her mother's usual habit—one Elizabeth had been accustomed to for as long as she could recall—she was out of bed, poking her head into the corridor and beckoning to her as soon as Elizabeth opened the door to her chamber.

“Sit, sit,” her mother urged when Elizabeth entered the room.

Mrs Bennet pointed to a satin chair while perching on the edge of a chaise longue across from her. A tray of tea and biscuits was on the table between them. Elizabeth took note of the two cups, a sign her mother had anticipated their chat. A mix of emotions battled within—frustration, irritation, and trepidation most of all.

“Last night was amusing, was it not?”

“It was,” Elizabeth said with some wariness. Her mother had behaved very peculiarly the day before, examining Elizabeth carefully as she dressed for the party. She had insisted on choosing the gown Elizabeth wore, which she never did, and had demanded their maid redo her hair.

“You want to look your very best, do you not? A *certain gentleman* will be present, after all,” her mother had said.

Then, during the party, Elizabeth had seen her mother talking to Mr Darcy; heaven knew what she had said to him. Mrs Philips had insisted on placing him next to her at cards, and Elizabeth had caught a glimpse of Mrs Goulding standing with him. None of this would be remarkable if Elizabeth had not also witnessed the three ladies in urgent whispers to each other and recalled the occasions on which her mother had talked to her about him in recent days. She had wanted to scream at them to leave the man alone.

Worried that Mrs Bennet had seen her watching Mr Darcy and gotten the wrong impression, Elizabeth had purposely avoided him. It helped that *he* wanted to avoid *her* and that by not talking to him, it alleviated a modicum of her sorrow. He had seemed reluctant to accede to Mrs Philips's request that he sit with Elizabeth, and while he might have had letters to write on Saturday, it sounded like an easy excuse to make for not calling at Longbourn. Could he not have attended to the task in the evening?

"You were beside Mr Darcy at the card table."

"Yes," Elizabeth said, drawing out the word.

Mrs Bennet made a happy little noise and smiled. "I dare say you found his company interesting. He is quite an intelligent gentleman, which suits you well. You would hate to...converse with a stupid man."

*True, yet you wanted me to marry an exceedingly foolish one.*

"Mr Darcy has such an athletic air too. You like to always be active, wandering through the fields as you do. I understand he has a large estate. Mr Bingley says it is a grand place. You would like to explore it."

Images of her time in Derbyshire flashed through Elizabeth's mind; she roughly thrust them aside to attend to her mother's speech, lest she find herself inadvertently saying something she would later regret.

"He will make a fine husband. He is rich, which is no little thing. Trust me. I would not have been so anxious about you girls if your father had half what Mr Darcy does." Mrs Bennet took a sip of her tea and adopted a casual manner that was plainly false.

For the next few minutes, Elizabeth listened as her mother spoke about the importance of choosing one's marriage partner wisely, all the while insinuating Mr Darcy was an excellent match for Elizabeth. Elizabeth managed to remain stoic, despite wanting to cry desperately. If her mother were another sort of woman, Elizabeth would confide in her; how good it would feel to share her inner turmoil! She would begin by agreeing wholeheartedly that Mr Darcy was the perfect man for her.

Instead, Elizabeth most desired to end the tête-à-tête and escape to the outdoors. It was increasingly difficult not to laugh. Apparently, her mother was playing matchmaker—likely with the assistance of Mrs Philips and Mrs Goulding. They were months too late. If only they—and especially Elizabeth—had recognised Mr Darcy's true character last autumn!

*Perhaps I ought to tell her the entire sad tale. At least then she would understand the futility of her efforts.* Besides, Elizabeth did not believe other

people could force a couple together, as it was all too easy to break them apart. If she and Mr Darcy had any future together, they would have to manage it on their own.

*If? I must give up such wishful thinking. He no longer wants to marry me. His words that horrible morning were clear enough. Both those horrible mornings—the one in Lambton and more recently when he talked about our time together ending. It is utterly hopeless.*

EARLY THE AFTERNOON FOLLOWING MRS PHILIPS'S CARD PARTY, BINGLEY sent word that he was going out. Darcy was in his apartment, ostensibly writing letters but really staring out of the window, contemplating making an excuse and insisting he needed to return to Pemberley at once. Although Bingley did not say what errand drew him from Netherfield, Darcy suspected his purpose was to call on Miss Bennet and propose. If he were correct, his friend surely would have no further need for his company, and he would be free to leave. Oddly, the idea increased rather than decreased his despondency. It would mark a definitive end to his connexion with Elizabeth. They might never see each other again; indeed, Darcy believed he would have to ensure they did not. It was the only chance he stood of forgetting his love for her.

Shortly before the dinner hour, Darcy's supposition about Bingley's errand was proved correct. A hastily scribbled note arrived from Longbourn, begging him to come at once.

---

*I have done it, Darcy! Miss Bennet, my dear Jane, has made me the happiest of men. Mrs Bennet insists you join us for a celebration. It will be just the family and us at dinner. Make haste!*

---

Dismissing the notion of claiming illness, Darcy threw a glass of strong wine down his throat, hoping it would give him courage to face Elizabeth's disinterest, and called for his horse.

EVERYONE AT LONGBOURN WAS IN A JUBILANT MOOD, WHICH WAS TO BE

expected. As soon as the housekeeper showed him to the drawing room, Mrs Bennet rushed towards him.

“We are very glad you are here, especially Lizzy.”

She half turned as though to look for her daughter. Darcy wanted to tell her that Elizabeth was sitting in the corner with Miss Mary. Her back was to them.

“I offer you and your family my congratulations. Bingley is a very fortunate man,” Darcy said.

She smiled, and colour blossomed in her cheeks. “That is very good of you, sir. I have always said Jane could not be so beautiful without a reason. I knew she would catch the eye of a deserving gentleman, and I am glad to see her so happy. Mr Bennet might not show it, but he is pleased to finally have a son, even though it is a son-in-law, which is not quite the same as—Oh, how I am going on! You will want to talk to someone more interesting than I am. Lizzy was reading a new book earlier today. I am sure she would enjoy telling you about it.”

The blood rushed from his face. “I-I-I pray you would not disturb her, madam. I am sure she would prefer to...think about her sister’s wedding and other happier topics.”

He executed a polite bow and went to shake Bingley’s hand before seeking a seat beside Mr Bennet, who sat apart from the others in an ugly old chair he apparently favoured.

There was no mistaking Mrs Bennet’s hope that he and Elizabeth would make a match of it. Determined to think the best of her, having been so mean-spirited in the past, he decided the matron had noticed that he and Elizabeth were particularly well-suited.

*She means to do good. If I thought she could truly help my situation, I would gladly confide in her. But how could I tell her I might have prevented her youngest daughter’s marriage to an unworthy man, but I failed to act, and now Elizabeth hates the very sight of me? That supposes she forgives me for insulting her family in Kent. There is nothing Mrs Bennet can say or do to convince Elizabeth to give me another chance to earn her love.*

“Quite a lot of to-do, is it not, Mr Darcy?”

Darcy was startled by Mr Bennet’s sudden speech; they were the first words he had spoken, despite having been seated next to each other for upwards of a quarter of an hour. They had only nodded in greeting.

“The ebullience is understandable.”

Mr Bennet grunted, the sound suggesting he did not agree. “Young people have been getting engaged for centuries. Today alone, I imagine dozens, perhaps even hundreds of couples have done exactly as they have.” He dipped his chin to indicate Miss Bennet and Bingley. They were listening to Miss Catherine, who appeared to be speaking rapidly.

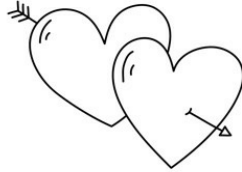
“I fail to see why we must tolerate all this noise about it. But that is most likely hunger talking. Lizzy assures me I am quite the curmudgeon when I am most desperate for my dinner. I am glad your friend came to the point at last. I most heartedly pray he proves himself worthy of my girl.” Mr Bennet frowned as he regarded the newly-engaged couple.

“He will. I assure you, his attachment to her is everything it should be.”

Darcy’s eyes drifted to Elizabeth. He might as well have been speaking of his feelings for her. She remained with Miss Mary, who scowled as she watched Bingley. Mrs Bennet was at Elizabeth’s other side and was chattering away, though Elizabeth said nothing.

Soon after, they were called into the dining room.

## NINE



With the jostling of moving to dinner, Elizabeth tried to ensure she did not end up sitting next to Mr Darcy. Being confronted by his disinclination for her company would be difficult enough, but she knew her mother would spend half the meal watching them.

*If he heard half of what Mama said to me about him and marriage, he would immediately set off to Derbyshire, even if he had to walk the entire distance!*

Elizabeth had been talking to Mary, attempting to convince her to be pleased for Jane and forgive Mr Bingley for going away as he had the previous year. After all, she argued, Jane had done so, and it was wrong to hold on to resentment for his past mistakes.

“Jane is too easy on him. He does not deserve her,” Mary had said countless times over the ten days since the gentlemen had returned to Netherfield.

“No man does. Yet, I am not content to force her into a life of spinsterhood because of the failings of the male sex. Mr Bingley’s behaviour was wrong, but he knows that, and Jane is very, very happy. She loves him.”

Elizabeth had made similar arguments several times, and just today, she believed she was making progress. Elizabeth understood her sister’s disappointment with both Jane and Lydia—Jane for being too forgiving, and Lydia...well, there was no need to recall why any of them should think harshly of her. A part of Elizabeth remained vexed with Mr Bingley for being too accepting of his sisters and Mr Darcy’s wrong-headed advice. Still, she had an added incentive to forget the matter entirely: Mr Darcy. While accepting that he would not repeat his proposal, she still loved him and

considered him one of the best men she had ever met. How could she think well of him while thinking poorly of Mr Bingley?

Elizabeth was not certain how it had come about, but despite her efforts, Mr Darcy took the chair next to hers. Seeing the satisfaction in her mother's countenance, it was obvious she had something to do with it.

*Thank goodness Mary does not know everything that passed between Mr Darcy and me or how he interfered with Jane and Mr Bingley's relationship. She would take up the nearest poker and beat him with it.*

The image made Elizabeth press her lips together to avoid laughing. Her mood instantly sobered when she recalled how Mrs Bennet had interrupted her conversation with Mary to, yet again, sing the praises of Mr Darcy and marriage.

"Jane will soon discover how lovely it is to be a married lady. You will not wish to remain 'Miss Bennet' for long, not seeing how happy she is. I dare say the same is true of Mr Darcy. Just think—if you were to marry him, your and Jane's husbands would be good friends. You would always be together." Mrs Bennet had continued along this theme until the call for dinner had come, fortunately speaking quietly enough that no one had overheard.

Images of being Mrs Darcy danced in Elizabeth's head.

"Are you not enjoying the soup?"

Elizabeth's head swung to the side, her eyes immediately meeting Mr Darcy's warm brown ones. It had been his deep voice that had startled her. Her cheeks warmed, and she sought to hide her embarrassment by looking into her bowl.

"No, not at all. I-I mean to say, I am enjoying it, I was simply distracted for a moment. Is it to your liking?" She sipped a spoonful and glanced at him.

"Very much. Your cook is excellent."

It was the sort of innocuous chitchat one often had with their dinner companion. It saddened her, knowing how much more interesting their conversation could be when they felt free to share opinions and observations. They would learn from each other while laughing and engaging in light-hearted debates. She forced a polite smile to her lips. His question was surely meant to show that he hoped they might become more comfortable with each other. It would help on those occasions when they would meet in the future.

*I shall do my part. Holding onto the past is ridiculous, unforgivably so, considering how unlikely it was that we would ever end up married. Chance brought us together in Derbyshire, and it was never meant to be more than*

*an opportunity for us to acknowledge that we had treated each other poorly in Kent. There. Now that I have understood that, I can be easier with him!*

“My mother prides herself on setting a good table. She would be thrilled to know a gentleman of your quality and experience approved.”

He chuckled, apparently taking her words for a jest. It had been what she meant to convey, and Elizabeth drank in the way he seemed to relax.

“She does like to entertain others. Doing so well is a particular skill she possesses, and she is fully aware of it. I am sure she has already half-arranged a party to celebrate Jane’s engagement with our neighbours. As for the wedding itself, Jane and Mr Bingley had best act quickly before she makes every necessary decision for them, from their attire to the breakfast dishes. I do not expect she will allow them to choose the date, no matter how much they argue they should,” Elizabeth said.

His laugh was a little louder this time. “While Miss Bennet might like some say, Bingley will leap at the opportunity to let your mother do it all, if only because it allows him more time to spend by your sister’s side. I am very happy for them.”

“As am I. When they are kept apart by such inconveniences as it being too early or too late for even an engaged couple to visit with each other, I know Jane will want nothing more than to talk to me about your friend’s excellence and her joy. I might find myself devising schemes to escape the house before she can pin me down lest I go mad.” She smiled, and it felt more genuine this time.

There was an uncommon mischievousness in his eyes, and he leant closer. “I beg you will not do anything too drastic. I suspect Bingley will be trying my nerves by the end of tomorrow. You and I can form an alliance to preserve our sanity, despite their best efforts to threaten it.”

Elizabeth had just opened her mouth to make another joke, when her father called for her attention.

“What was it Patterson told you the other day, something about the north field right by the border between Netherfield and Longbourn? I wanted to tell Mr Bingley—”

“Must you right now? Mr Bingley is not interested in fields, not when he and Jane only just became betrothed, and Lizzy and Mr Darcy were speaking,” Mrs Bennet said from across the table.

As her father insisted there was no reason not to talk about estate business and her mother argued there was, Elizabeth offered Mr Darcy an apologetic



look. He shook his head just enough for her to notice, and they finished drinking their soup in silence.

It was just as well. Elizabeth had forgot herself, and by the gravity of his demeanour, he realised he had too. He would worry about encouraging her to hope for more than he could offer.

MRS BENNET HUMMED AS SHE SAT AT HER DRESSING TABLE. HAVING JUST dismissed her maid, she reached into the very back of the drawer to extract a small pot of face cream she had been promised would prevent the formation of wrinkles, possibly even erase the ones she saw about her eyes. It had been enormously expensive, and if Mr Bennet ever learnt of it, he would never cease laughing at her. Did he not benefit by her efforts to retain her youthful beauty? She might have five grown daughters, but she did not need to look as though she did; she was only four and forty, after all. She saw her cat in the reflection and spoke to her as she dabbed spots of cream about her eyes and spread it in a thin layer.

“I knew Mr Bingley would not wait long to propose. Jane will soon be mistress of Netherfield Park. She will have her own carriage, and he must have some of his mother’s jewels to present to her, even though he has two sisters and his family is not as illustrious as Mr Darcy’s. If he does not, I will give him a little hint here and there until Jane has an appropriate collection.”

All she needed to complete her happiness was for Elizabeth and Mr Darcy to become engaged. Unbidden, her lips formed into a scowl. Seeing it in the mirror, she quickly schooled her features. She wanted to knock their heads together! Could they not see how much they longed for each other? There had been a brief moment at dinner when they looked especially happy and more at ease together than she had yet witnessed, and then Mr Bennet, the blockhead, had interrupted them!

“Everyone speaks of them being so clever, and they very well might be, but when it comes to him recognising that my daughter is madly in love with him, or her admitting that he loves her, they must be the most ignorant people in all of England! If you saw them together as I did, Felly, you would agree with me.”

Placing the pot back into the drawer, Mrs Bennet rose and lifted the cat from her cushion to cuddle and kiss. Walking about her chamber, she hummed a gentle tune just as she had done with her girls when they were

babies. Before long, she might have a grandchild to soothe. The thought stopped her movement for a brief moment. She closed her eyes and bowed her head as though in prayer.

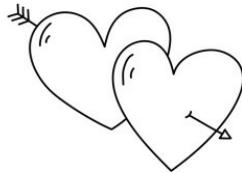
“Please let it not be Lydia who has a child, not for several years at the very least. Jane is a good age to be a mother—older than I was when she was born—but Lydia...

“Oh, why am I thinking about *that*, especially when there is a wedding to plan! A *double* wedding. Jane and everyone else might believe there will only be one bride that day, but I am determined there will be two. What do you think, my darling little puss? Can I have Lizzy and Mr Darcy engaged and ready to marry by the end of November? Jane and Mr Bingley will not want to wait more than six or eight weeks, and who could blame them? A young couple does not want to delay long after reaching an understanding.”

Mrs Goulding’s dinner party was in a few days. No doubt, Elizabeth and Mr Darcy would see each other before then, and Mrs Bennet would take every opportunity to throw them together. Then, by the time they met at Hays-Park, they would be practically engaged already. Perhaps he would speak to her that night, or even before!

So delightful was the expectation that she would soon have two daughters married to rich gentlemen—one of them the grandson of an earl—that she giggled and twirled in a circle, her protesting cat clutched to her bosom.

## TEN



Darcy listened to Bingley recount the details of his proposal for more than an hour. They sat in the drawing room; Darcy was glad to have chosen a comfortable chair and footstool, since it appeared Bingley meant to continue his chatter all night. His excitement was understandable, and Darcy was genuinely pleased for him, but there were only so many times one could listen to the same story before becoming bored.

“I am glad you are here with me. I would not have had the courage to approach my dear Jane again, or known what to say, if it were not for you!” Bingley held his glass, still half-full of wine, aloft in a salute.

“Thank you, but I do not believe either statement to be true.”

“No, no, Darcy, your advice has been invaluable.” Bingley shook his head. “I shall insist Jane and I name our first son after you.”

“You must be drunk to suggest naming your child Darcy, and Fitzwilliam would be even worse. Fortunately, Miss Bennet is too sensible to agree to either.”

Bingley laughed in such a way that proved Darcy correct; he was drunk, on happiness if not wine.

“Now that you have been accepted, I believe it is time to discuss my going away,” Darcy said once Bingley regained control of himself.

“What? Why?”

“You have no more need of my advice, and I expect you will want to spend every waking hour with Miss Bennet and her family.”

Bingley shook both his head and his finger. “No, no, no. I cannot see you chased away because I am an engaged man. An engaged man. Does that not sound wonderful? You ought to find yourself a young lady and follow my

example.”

*If only you knew.* Darcy marvelled that Bingley had not noticed his attentions to Elizabeth and the Gardiners in Derbyshire, but it was just as well he had not.

“I want you to stay. Say that you will. With my sisters being so hateful, I need you. I told you about Louisa’s letter, did I not? Let me find it to show you.”

“That is not necessary. You read it to me at breakfast.”

“I cannot believe how she and Caroline continue to object to Jane. Sweet, beautiful Jane. She will be an excellent sister. Teach them a thing or two about kindness and-and being kind. You know what I mean. I ought to write that to them. Can you imagine what they would say?” Bingley sniggered.

“No good would come of antagonising them.”

“Very true. Do you see? *That* is why I need you to stay. The wedding will be in just a few weeks. No more than six. Mid-November sometime.” He waved a hand as though the exact date was immaterial, and Darcy supposed that, to his friend, it was, in his present celebratory mood. “If you could stay that long, I would be very grateful. I want you to stand up with me, of course. And do not forget that you promised Mrs Goulding you would attend her dinner party.”

Rightly or wrongly, Darcy allowed himself to be convinced. But then, the next morning found him on the road to London.

IT WAS NO SURPRISE THAT MR BINGLEY CAME TO LONGBOURN IMMEDIATELY after breakfast the next day, and Elizabeth was pleased to see him. The joy he and Jane shared brought light to her heart and helped sustain her through her sorrow, which was made worse when Mr Darcy did not come with his friend.

“Where is Mr Darcy this morning? He is not ill, is he?” Mrs Bennet asked.

Everyone apart from Mr Bennet was in the drawing room. Elizabeth tried to hide that she was listening for Mr Bingley’s answer rather than to Kitty describing the gown she hoped to convince their mother to buy her for Jane’s wedding.

“Darcy is in excellent health, but he received a summons from his uncle first thing this morning. He is needed in town on family business,” Mr Bingley explained.

*That is convenient, if it is entirely truthful. I expect he was looking for an excuse to leave. And yet...*

“He is coming back?”

Looking at her mother when she spoke, Elizabeth was struck by how alarmed she appeared. Her wide eyes and the way she leant forward in her chair reflected the anxiety Elizabeth felt as she awaited Mr Bingley’s next words. She could not accept losing Mr Darcy’s company so abruptly. She needed more time, another occasion to look upon him and hear his voice.

“He promised he would. Mrs Goulding invited us to dinner, as you know, and Darcy expects to be back in time to attend. It is some estate matter or other. I cannot recollect exactly. Some property once held by a cousin or aunt that was left in an odd manner when they died, and now Darcy, the earl, and the earl’s sons have to...” He waved his hand in a gesture that told Elizabeth he did not understand the situation. He then started and turned to her.

“You met one of them, did you not? Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

Elizabeth nodded and ignored the way her mother was watching her, her eyes narrowed in contemplation or suspicion. Likely she was questioning why Elizabeth’s cheeks were red, but she could hardly help it with her emotions being tugged this way and that.

“I did. He visited his aunt, Lady Catherine, when I was staying with the Collinses last spring.”

“I saw him in town at the start of September, and he mentioned it.” Mr Bingley grinned at Jane, apparently intending to devote himself to her.

“A colonel? Maria mentioned him to me. Did *you* find him handsome? She did not. Did he wear his uniform?” Kitty asked, touching Elizabeth’s hand to get her attention.

“I would have thought we had quite enough of handsome officers in this family,” Mary, sitting beside Elizabeth, muttered.

“There is nothing I can tell you other than he was friendly.” Elizabeth pressed Mary’s hand. If she could, she would remove Mary from Longbourn and teach her not to be so angry.

*I am sure Jane intends to take me with her and Mr Bingley once they are married, but I ought to insist she take Mary instead. I have no wish to remain at home, but Mary’s need for diversion is greater. Besides, I am safer from seeing Mr Darcy if I stay at Longbourn.*

DARCY DID NOT REGRET HIS BRIEF ABSENCE FROM NETHERFIELD. HE FELT THE separation from Elizabeth terribly, even though he was only gone two nights. It was almost enough to make him write to Bingley with some excuse for not returning, despite his promise to do just that. The more time he spent with her, the worse it would be when they were parted for good. He was too honourable to lie to Bingley, especially after having done so in the past, and so, the afternoon of Mrs Goulding's dinner party, he was once again in Hertfordshire. Bingley welcomed him warmly and provided a detailed recitation of what he had done during Darcy's absence. He would have preferred silence to prepare himself for seeing Elizabeth.

*Should I attempt to sit beside her at dinner? It was not unpleasant when we did so at Longbourn, and perhaps we would have another easy exchange. If nothing else, I shall have it as a pleasant memory. What might I say to encourage her to talk to me? Please, Lord, let me do more than make another insipid remark about the weather!*

What he would also like to avoid was talking to Mrs Bennet, her sister, or friend more than was absolutely necessary. Their attempts to inform him of Elizabeth's excellence were trying.

The Bennets were already present when he and Bingley reached Haye-Park, and as he was greeting the Gouldings, his and Elizabeth's eyes met across the room. Darcy could not make out anything particular in her expression. There was no smile to encourage him to immediately go to her, but there was also no scowl to warn him to stay away.

Mrs Goulding's chattering demanded his attention. "I cannot tell you how relieved I am that you are here, Mr Darcy. We heard from Mr Bingley that you had to go to town, and I was ever so worried it would mean you would miss tonight. Despite his assurances you would not, I was prepared to cancel the whole thing until we knew you would be in the neighbourhood again."

"That is very kind of you," he said, though he doubted she heard him, because she continued to speak.

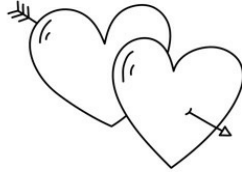
"We are all so pleased about Jane and Mr Bingley's betrothal. You will find us in quite the celebratory mood, and who knows? Perhaps we shall have more good news soon. One engagement often leads to another! I would love to see another of the Miss Bennets snatched up by a handsome young gentleman. I have known the girls since they were born, of course, having lived nearby all my life. Mrs Bennet is fortunate with her daughters, is she not? My own children are everything they should be. I am not one to brag

about them, but I have no such concerns about singing the praises of another woman's children. Lizzy, for example. Who could fail to recognise her many fine qualities?"

To Darcy's relief, Mrs Goulding's speech was interrupted by a servant announcing that dinner was ready. Anxiety briefly left Darcy feeling dizzy; he had wanted to talk to Elizabeth, to ascertain if she would welcome his company at the table. But he ought to have trusted in whatever scheming Mrs Goulding and her friends were engaged in. Somehow, she had arranged it so that he escorted Elizabeth to the dining room. Mrs Philips led Elizabeth towards them while speaking animatedly, only to abruptly stop once they reached him.

"Well, never you mind, Lizzy. I can tell you another time. Look, here is Mr Darcy. How do you do, sir? You will be so good as to take my niece from me, will you not?" Without waiting for an answer, she linked her arm with Mrs Goulding and passed into the corridor.

## ELEVEN



They were more than halfway through dinner before Darcy could speak to Elizabeth. He was unsure if she was ignoring him, if she was content to allow others to demand his attention, or both. Having decided she would not readily talk to him, he was startled when she did.

“I hope your business in town was successfully concluded.”

“It was, and I am glad to have it over with. It has been ongoing for some time.” He ought to say something more, but the way the candlelight was making her radiate beauty and vitality made him forget how to speak. Her gown was a shade of light lilac, and he almost believed he could smell the flower too, as though she was blossoming. Once again, he longed to pull her into his arms and kiss her. Feeling like he was gazing at her like the love-struck fool he was, Darcy struggled to make his smile merely friendly and polite, which would match her demeanour.

“Did you see Miss Darcy? Is she in town or...”

“Georgiana remains in the country. We have an uncle on my father’s side, and he and his wife are at Pemberley with her.”

“I am sure that is very pleasant for her.”

“I would like to have her closer to me, but given the difference in our ages, it is not always possible.” *If only you would marry me, that would change—one of the many wonderful differences our union would bring to my life. As much as I love Georgiana, I believe it would be the least amongst them, but then, I am a selfish being and think chiefly of how I would benefit.*

Neither of them spoke. After a brief interval, she turned her attention to the meal. Darcy took a surreptitious deep breath and shook off enough of her enchantment to act like a rational adult. He was not the most brilliant



conversationalist, but perhaps, possibly, if they spoke more, it would open a door through which they could pass and find their future happiness. Even if there was only a slight chance, he had to take it.

“I saw Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst.”

Elizabeth fixed him with a quizzical expression.

“We met by chance. In the park. Yesterday. I was riding with my cousins, Colonel Fitzwilliam and his elder brother, the viscount. I wish the ladies could be happier for their brother. They are fortunate to be gaining Miss Bennet as a sister.”

“I must naturally agree.”

“I am very happy for them. I hope their joy erases the months of separation they endured,” he stated with emphasis, wanting to acknowledge his past errors and make it clear that he fully supported Bingley’s choice of wife.

Her features softened. “I am certain it will. They are both so agreeable and always see the best in everyone and everything. Jane will convince herself their relationship has unfolded just as it was meant to and their life together will be all the sweeter for...the bumpy road they have travelled.”

Their eyes remained locked on each other, and Darcy’s heart began to race. They might be speaking of their own situation; they had certainly been on an uneven path, more so than Miss Bennet and Bingley. Did Elizabeth feel as he did, that if only they could find a way to breach the most recent barrier between them—that of her youngest sister’s marriage—they could find such exquisite joy as husband and wife?

Darcy was thankful that Mr and Mrs Gardiner had kept his role in the Wickhams’ marriage secret, as he had asked. Elizabeth would have mentioned it if she had learnt of his actions. If his greatest dream came true and they married, then he would tell her. At times, he wondered if it would help if she knew. It would demonstrate the lengths he would go to correct the consequences of his past actions. Would it make her think better of him and, yet again, forgive him? Or was the greater danger in her knowing and feeling a sense of obligation to him?

For the remainder of the evening, he and Elizabeth had little occasion to speak privately. He caught her looking at him several times, and there was something in her expression that made him think she regretted it, almost as though she had something she wanted to ask or say to him. Seeing it made his mouth grow dry, and he felt an odd tremor of mixed anticipation and dread.

For the first time, he wondered if the impetus behind Mrs Bennet's scheme was because she suspected her daughter liked him. It had made more sense to believe the matron recognised his feelings for Elizabeth, but Mrs Bennet was her mother and might understand her sentiments far better than he could.

He refused to believe it without further proof. *The best course of action would be to observe her—no, better than that, talk to her, which is what I had hoped to do this evening, to little effect!*

As had happened at Mrs Philips's card party, he garnered more attention than he wanted from that lady, Mrs Bennet, and Mrs Goulding. As individuals, in pairs, and once as a trio, they sought him out with the apparent purpose of praising Elizabeth.

"My niece is lovely, is she not? She is second in beauty only to Jane," Mrs Philips said.

"All the Miss Bennets are pretty." Darcy did not know what else to say, but it evidently satisfied her, and Mrs Philips soon took herself off.

When he saw Mrs Bennet and Mrs Goulding walking in his direction a short time later, he imagined jumping out of a window to avoid them.

"I have always thought how much Lizzy would like to explore other counties. Even as a small child, keeping her active mind busy was such a challenge, and seeing more of the world would be a great benefit to her," Mrs Bennet said.

"Oh yes, and when she is mistress of her own establishment, what a good job she will do!" Mrs Goulding said.

"To say nothing of when she is a mother," Mrs Bennet interjected.

The ladies giggled, actually giggled.

"I always regretted that my son is too young for her. He is at school, you know, Mr Darcy, and is still a year away from entering university," Mrs Goulding explained.

"I am sorry not to have met him yet," Darcy replied when it became clear they expected him to say something.

The two women regarded each other, some silent communication passing between them, and they went to join Mrs Philips across the room. Darcy watched as they spoke in what appeared to be an urgent manner, one or another glancing his way, and Mrs Philips pointing at Elizabeth. If only he could be open and say that they did not need to tell him about Elizabeth's excellent qualities. He was familiar with them all and would do anything to win her regard. All he wanted was a sign that she was willing to hear him

speak of love and marriage, despite having once rejected him.

ELIZABETH SAT AT THE WINDOW OF HER BEDCHAMBER, STARING INTO THE night. The moon was bright, but she could still see countless twinkling stars. Despite her best efforts, she had been unable to ease her agitation enough to sleep since their return from Hays-Park. Her thoughts were too full of Mr Darcy. Every adjective she could bring to mind failed to adequately describe how much she admired him. She knew her love for him would overwhelm her if she let down her guard.

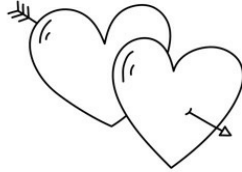
It had been wonderful to see him again. Her relief when he had entered the Gouldings' drawing room had been so profound that she had felt lightheaded; she had not previously realised how afraid she was that he would not return, despite his assurances to Mr Bingley. She ought to do more to control such feelings but was not strong enough to overcome them.

*I am glad we spoke about Jane and Mr Bingley*, she mused. It seemed like an acknowledgment that they had once argued about the couple and that the matter was finally settled and behind them. At present, Elizabeth was debating whether she was brave enough to broach the subject of Lydia and *that man*? She would rather not, but she felt it looming over her, threatening her peace of mind.

*I know it will be unpleasant for both of us and may make no material difference, but it seems important that we speak of it. Yet, I am afraid of hearing him say he could never marry a lady who had that man as a brother. He might as well thrust a dagger through my heart.*

Still, she could not deny the compulsion that made her long to tell him that she was glad the couple had married, and she hoped never to see them again. She might thank him for keeping the truth about Lydia's elopement to himself. Did she not always say that her courage rose in the face of any attempt to intimidate her? Vowing she would remember her inner strength, Elizabeth resolved to talk to Mr Darcy as soon as possible. With that, she crawled into her warm bed and willed sleep to take her.

## TWELVE



On the chance that she would encounter Mr Darcy, Elizabeth set out for a walk early the next morning. There was no sign of him, however, only birds and other wild creatures who inhabited the fields. Another day, she would have delighted in the blue sky and the beginnings of autumn colours on the trees, but it was impossible currently. Disappointed, she returned to Longbourn and joined her family at the breakfast table.

To her surprise, contrary to his recent habit, Mr Bingley was not there. Elizabeth said as much to Jane.

“Are you not missing him dreadfully? Whatever can he mean to be ignoring you thus? Pray tell me it is not because he finds Mr Darcy’s company preferable to your own. I thought better of him.”

Behind her teasing, Elizabeth’s true purpose was to discover when they would see the gentlemen so that she could talk to Mr Darcy. With Mrs Bennet already attempting to matchmake, Elizabeth could not ask directly; her mother would drag her to Meryton to order wedding clothes.

“Mr Bingley is engaged today. Did you not know? An old connexion of his father’s now lives in Hertford with one of his children. Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy visited him and will remain until Monday.”

Elizabeth did her best to hide her disappointment. It would be at least two days before she might see him again! Her appetite fled, and her courage—which she had done so much to bolster the previous night—went with it.

LATER THAT MORNING, MRS PHILIPS AND MRS GOULDING CAME TO CALL.

Elizabeth and Jane sat with the ladies and Mrs Bennet in the small parlour. Mary had gone to help the vicar's wife, while Kitty amused herself elsewhere.

Elizabeth soon wished she had had an excuse to join Kitty, even if she was occupied with something inane, such as reorganising her closet. The three older ladies insisted on repeating to Elizabeth everything they had previously said about marriage, all with the evident purpose of convincing her she should secure Mr Darcy as quickly as possible. She was assured she would be envious of Jane once she was a married lady; it was only natural that she, too, would want her own home and that she would be unhappy if she remained single.

"Mr Darcy is quite the fine gentleman. The lady who captures him will be very fortunate, indeed!" Mrs Bennet said.

She accompanied her words with a wink, and the three matrons exchanged a look, Mrs Goulding pressing her lips together as though to prevent a giggle. Any subtlety they had previously employed was gone. Elizabeth supposed they felt their matchmaking was taking too long. Of course, they did not understand the situation fully.

"One of my chief pleasures in life has been that my dear friends and I married gentlemen who are friends. Despite growing up and becoming wives and mothers, we retained a strong connexion because our husbands know each other." Mrs Goulding smiled at Mrs Bennet and Mrs Philips, sitting together on a sofa.

"Very true. When two ladies are intimate friends or sisters, I highly recommend their husbands be brothers, cousins or close friends. Even should their husbands have estates some distance apart, they will have added reasons to spend as much time together as possible," Mrs Philips said.

Mrs Bennet bobbed her head in agreement—or perhaps approval—at this attempt to hint to Elizabeth which gentleman she should select as her bridegroom. "Women must always find the company of ladies we know and love such a comfort. I do not know how I would have made it thus far without my nerves failing me completely if I did not have you two."

Elizabeth dared not look at Jane. She could feel her sister's puzzled expression, and if she actually saw it, she would be unable to keep her composure.

"Jane and I shall leave you to enjoy your visit," Elizabeth said. She stood and glanced at Jane, who nodded and practically raced to the door, hardly

remembering to say good day to their guests.

NO SOONER HAD THEY EXITED THE HOUSE THAN JANE GRASPED ELIZABETH'S arm to stop her from walking further into the gardens.

"What was that about, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth looked heavenward and shook her head before tugging Jane to where they were less likely to be overheard.

"Mama is attempting to make a match between Mr Darcy and me."

Jane looked aghast. "But I told her not to bother you about him! Why would she want you to marry someone you do not like?"

Elizabeth made a noise halfway between a laugh and a snort. "When it comes to husbands for her daughters, I would not say our mother has the most discerning tastes. Do not forget she wanted me to marry Mr Collins, and she believes Wickham is all that is charming. Fortunately, she is right to like Mr Bingley."

"Lizzy!" Jane's tone was exasperated.

Elizabeth led them towards the wood bench, grey with age, by a grouping of three ancient elms. Once they were seated, Elizabeth kept her gaze on the arrangement of bushes and flowers across from them.

"I do not know why my mother has decided he and I should marry. She did not like him last year, but then, few did, given his poor manners and the way he insulted me at the assembly. Now, I am sure you have seen how he has improved."

"I have supposed it is because of what passed between you at Easter."

"Mama might simply see a wealthy young gentleman and want to secure him for one of her daughters."

"That is unfair. If Mama was only interested in his fortune, she would have attempted to encourage his interest last autumn."

Elizabeth inclined her head in apology but did not know what to say. Jane was silent for a long while.

"Mr Bingley told me you saw a great deal of each other when you were in Derbyshire—as much as possible, given your short time there. I was surprised *you* never mentioned it," Jane said.

Tears filled Elizabeth's eyes, and Jane wrapped an arm about her shoulders. After a short interval, Elizabeth told her what happened in Lambton.

“Can you imagine, just as I was beginning to understand Mr Darcy and see my feelings for what they truly were—*are*—we learnt of Lydia’s disgrace? I do not know why he returned with Mr Bingley. I have told myself it is to show the world that he will acknowledge our family, despite the gossip about us, and to demonstrate his approval of his friend’s engagement. What he said to me the first time we walked together, seemed to make it plain that he cannot overlook my connexion to Wickham. I do not blame him, if that is the case.”

“Do you think my mother, aunt, and Mrs Goulding see that—I can hardly believe I am saying this— you are in love with Mr Darcy, and mean to encourage you?”

“I can conclude nothing else.” Genuine laughter bubbled out of her. “I have seen all three of them speaking to him, and I pray they are not so clumsy as they are with me. They are hardly subtle, as you noticed.”

Grasping Jane’s hands in hers, Elizabeth gave her a stern look. “I do not want you to do anything about this. I am serious, Jane. I know your instincts will be to tell Mr Bingley, but that will serve no purpose. It will only cause awkwardness, perhaps even cost Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy their friendship. It is an impossible situation, and if—mind you, I said *if*—there is any hope that our situation can have a happy ending, he and I shall have to sort it out on our own.”

“I want you to know the happiness I feel with Mr Bingley.” Jane’s expression was slack, and she blinked away tears.

“I shall be myself again, whatever happens with Mr Darcy.”

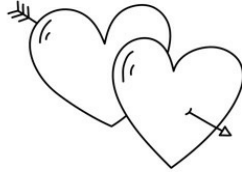
The sisters embraced and a few minutes later, began to stroll quietly along the paths that wound through the gardens.

“There is an assembly on Thursday. Do you realise it is almost exactly a year ago that we met them?” Jane said as they approached the house.

“How could I forget that night?”

Perhaps something momentous would happen this year, just as it had the previous one.

## THIRTEEN



“They ought to be engaged by now! If only Mr Darcy had not gone away.

Everything would be settled, I am certain of it. First his uncle insists he goes to town—I do not care that he is an earl, it was very inconsiderate of him—and then Mr Bingley drags him to Hertford. The dear boy did not understand what he was doing, so I can forgive him, but why was it necessary to go today? Why could it not have waited until *after* Lizzy and Mr Darcy reached an understanding?” Mrs Bennet’s heart fluttered, and she felt alternately hot and cold. While knowing she should calm herself, how could she when her daughter’s future was at stake? She had kept her feelings to herself until Jane and Elizabeth left the room, which was quite the feat.

Mrs Goulding offered her salts while Mrs Philips fixed her sister a fresh cup of tea.

“It is not so desperate a situation as you seem to think,” Mrs Philips said.

“They were much more comfortable together last night than I recall ever seeing them. When you first mentioned wanting them to marry, I could not see why, but now I do,” Mrs Goulding said.

“I watched them at dinner, and I also noticed that. Really, you must not let your nerves get the best of you.” Mrs Philips nodded vigorously, her cap shifting until it was crooked. She never had been able to affix it properly.

Mrs Bennet allowed them to fuss over her a while longer. She finished her tea with several large gulps and pointedly adjusted her cap and shawl, hoping her sister would understand the hint. She did not.

“If what you say is true, then our efforts have had an effect, and we must redouble them! I shall not have a peaceful moment until he has proposed. If she does not accept him after all of this, I wash my hands of her. It would be



unconscionable of her, especially when anyone could see they suit each other perfectly,” Mrs Bennet said.

“Yes, indeed.” Again, Mrs Philips nodded and further dislodged her cap. Mrs Goulding poked the annoying thing into a better position, to Mrs Bennet’s relief.

“We must decide on our next course of action,” she said.

Mrs Goulding waved a hand as though asking for permission to speak. “There is an assembly on Thursday.”

“Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy will attend, will they not?” Mrs Philips asked.

“Of course they will! Mr Bingley will want to dance with Jane, and naturally, his friend will attend with him.” Mrs Bennet’s brow furrowed as memories from the previous year came to mind. Mr Darcy had insulted Elizabeth, claiming he did not wish to dance with her. She grinned as inspiration struck. “Mr Darcy will not only be at the assembly, he will dance with my Lizzy. I guarantee it. They will flirt a little, and the music and the movement will sweep them up in its romance. Mark my words, by the end of the night, they will be engaged. All that will be wanting is Mr Bennet’s approval—you know he will not escort us, no matter how much I tease him—and he will not dare to refuse a man such as Mr Darcy.”

“What will she wear? It is not every day a girl gets proposed to, and she must look her best.” Mrs Goulding slid forward in her seat, her eyes round with excitement.

“You must direct her, Sister. She is young and does not know how to capture a man’s attention. Even though Mr Darcy is in love with her, if she looks especially well—”

“It will show him that she had made a special effort to please him!” Mrs Goulding said.

“Never you worry. I know how to handle my daughter. Come Thursday, Lizzy will be almost beautiful enough to rival Jane!”

DARCY COULD NOT DECIDE WHETHER HE WAS PLEASED AT HAVING TO GO TO Hertford. On the one hand, he wanted nothing more than to be near Elizabeth, but on the other, he sensed a final confrontation of some sort coming, and it frightened him. If he could assure himself it would end with him and Elizabeth being engaged, he would set up camp outside Longbourn. But if heartache was in his future, he wished to put it off as long as possible, and

continue to live with the dream of having Elizabeth for his own.

He and Bingley called at Longbourn on Monday. Darcy saw Elizabeth, but they had no occasion to speak. On Tuesday, rain kept everyone at home; on Wednesday, when he and Bingley again went to see the Bennets, Elizabeth was not there. Fortunately, Mrs Bennet was also absent, and he was spared having to listen to her views on marriage and her second daughter.

It was only later that he realised Miss Bennet's manner towards him had been altered. He could not quite grasp what had been different, but it had been as though she wanted to tell him something but could not bring herself to do it. Previously, she had been polite, even welcoming, but not particularly warm. He assumed that was because Elizabeth had confided in her sister about their tumultuous past.

On this occasion, he had been sitting with Miss Bennet and Bingley, when she turned slightly towards him, giving the impression that her words were especially meant for him.

"Mrs Stuart begged Lizzy to keep her company today, since Mr Stuart had to go see someone about a piece of business. I am afraid I have forgot the details, but he will be gone all day. Since she has had a child recently, she must remain at home and feels the want of company sorely. I am sure Lizzy will regret having missed seeing you, but she could not deny our friend."

"It is very good of her to give up her day," Darcy had said.

"Lizzy is the most excellent sister and friend. She is always willing to lend a helping hand. I shall be sorry to lose her when she marries. I have considered being selfish and speaking against any man she might feel an attachment to, so that I might keep her with me always, but my greatest wish is that she will know the love and joy of being a worthy man's wife and mother to their children."

Darcy had not known how to respond and squirmed in his seat, and avoided acknowledging Bingley's evident confusion.

At last, it was Thursday, and Darcy was certain to see Elizabeth. The moment they arrived in the assembly rooms, Bingley left to find Miss Bennet. Darcy intended to undertake his own search for a young lady, but before he could, he was seemingly surrounded by three middle-aged women.

"Mr Darcy, how wonderful to see you tonight," Mrs Bennet said, Mrs Philips and Mrs Goulding echoing the sentiment.

"Thank you, ladies. I trust you are all well this evening." He struggled to keep frustration from his voice.

“He does look handsome tonight, does he not? Lizzy will—” Mrs Philips whispered to Mrs Bennet, unfortunately not softly enough to avoid being overheard.

Mrs Bennet hushed her, and Mrs Goulding spoke louder than was strictly necessary, perhaps hoping it would make him forget Mrs Philips had spoken.

“Do you not find assemblies terribly exciting? My daughters—I have three, you recall, all married—spoke of nothing else for a week before and after we attended a ball. I always find it so charming to see young people dancing.”

“My nieces are exactly the same. So much to-do over what they will wear and, my goodness, how they do like to speculate on who will ask them for a set,” Mrs Philips said.

Mrs Bennet tapped his arm, and he looked into her upturned face. “When your own dear sister is out, you will see the truth in what they say. Why, even my Lizzy, who is usually the most sensible of girls, has talked of nothing other than what she would wear for days. She is not usually so anxious to make a good impression.”

“Lizzy is a remarkable girl. I pray all my sister’s daughters find husbands, of course, and I am very glad Jane and Mr Bingley will be married soon, but I have always hoped that Lizzy, who has a little something extra to her, as my brother Bennet always says, will gain the esteem and love of a gentleman who appreciates her.”

With that, Mrs Philips took Mrs Goulding’s hand and led her away, leaving Darcy alone with Mrs Bennet. Darcy wanted to roll his eyes or let out a loud, heavy sigh. He had heard one or other of the ladies express the same sentiments many times.

The music signalled it was time for the lines to form for the opening dance.

“Lizzy is standing up with John Lucas for the first set. He asked her days ago,” Mrs Bennet said.

Her tone suggested she no more liked that than he did.

“You *will* ask her to dance, will you not?”

Mrs Bennet’s voice was firmer than Darcy was used to, and for the first time, he could imagine her as a woman capable of keeping her children in order when she chose to. He tried to stammer an answer but was too startled by this new view of her.

“She does so like to dance, and I would hate to think that she will not

have enough partners. It is always sad when there are not enough gentlemen for all the ladies. That does happen at some assemblies, as perhaps you have observed?”

“Yes, madam.” Shame burnt Darcy’s cheeks. There was no mistaking it; she was alluding to his mortifying behaviour the previous year.

“Very good!” She smiled, tapped his arm with her fan, and walked off in the direction the other ladies had taken.

DARCY SEARCHED THROUGH THE CROWD UNTIL HE SPOTTED ELIZABETH. HE had always intended to ask her for a set but felt compelled to do it as soon as possible after what amounted to Mrs Bennet’s demand. She stood across from John Lucas. Darcy approached and bowed, but before he could greet her, she spoke.

“Mr Darcy. I did not see you arrive.”

Her eyes were bright and she smiled, although she looked more nervous than pleased to see him. Quite possibly, her mother was pushing her to secure him. Had Mrs Bennet made her daughter tell her everything about their relationship? If either Mr or Mrs Bennet knew that he had proposed and written her a letter, they could insist on them marrying. Darcy would hate for Elizabeth to feel compelled to accept him.

“How do you do, Mr Darcy?”

Startled, Darcy looked across at John Lucas; he had forgot the young man was there. He greeted him and then turned to Elizabeth again.

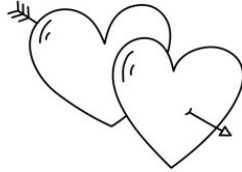
“Will you save a set for me? Whichever you have available.”

She nodded, and he thought he saw her swallow heavily. “Mr Bingley claimed the second. Will the third suit?”

“Thank you. Yes.”

No other words came to mind, and he withdrew, going to stand where he could observe her. The more he did, the greater his anxiety grew; beads of cold sweat slid down his spine. They had to talk of Mrs Bennet’s attempts to throw them together. That was what he had been sensing of late, what their confrontation would be about. He would ask what her parents knew of events in Kent and Derbyshire. Then, he would lay his heart bare and admit he loved her as much as ever and would gladly marry her, but if her only reason for accepting him were because her parents insisted on it, he would accept whatever punishment necessary to save her from that fate.

## FOURTEEN



The trepidation Elizabeth felt when Mr Darcy approached her at the start of the assembly had yet to fade by the time their dance began. He had sought her out almost as soon as he arrived, and she was not sure what to make of it. She was resolved to speak to him of Lydia and Wickham, feeling certain it was important for them to acknowledge the terrible morning in Lambton.

Standing across from him, she both wanted to blurt out her words—not that she knew exactly what to say—and keep them to herself forever. Her palms were clammy in her gloves, and it was all she could do to stay upright and follow the steps of the dance.

*It would help if I felt easier in my appearance,* she thought, gently rolling her neck from side to side. She had spent the day trying to avoid her mother, who persisted in forcing her finer accoutrements on Elizabeth.

“You are a very pretty girl, but I shall make you even lovelier. *Certain* gentlemen, one in particular, will be very glad, and you never know where *that* might lead!” Mrs Bennet had said, accompanying the words with a wink that almost made Elizabeth scream.

While she understood her mother’s impulses were for the good—assuming as she did that Mrs Bennet wanted to see her daughter happily settled and not just married to a rich man—the lack of subtlety in her actions was vexing. Elizabeth wished they had a different sort of relationship, one in which she felt comfortable confiding in her mother, or in which Mrs Bennet would ask her openly about her feelings for Mr Darcy. Since they did not, Elizabeth was destined to remain irritated with her mother.

In the end, Elizabeth had agreed to add lace to the neck of her gown and wear a pair of earrings that she found too heavy and showy.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, she and Mr Darcy were silent as they moved through the patterns. As much as possible, she kept her eyes on him, not wanting even to blink and miss a second of seeing him. Her mouth grew increasingly dry as she talked herself into being bold.

*If only the past could be set aside! If only we had not been so foolish last year—him so prideful, me so unwilling to reconsider my first impression of him. We might be standing here as an engaged or married couple, and I would not have to hide how desperately I love him.*

Even as she opened her mouth to speak, she was not certain what words would come out.

“I was writing to my aunt Gardiner lately, and it brought to mind a memory from when we were in Derbyshire.” She laughed awkwardly. “I have this fantasy that she and my uncle will decide to return to Lambton. I know my aunt did not see all the old friends she wanted to, and there were one or two nearby sights she hoped to show us. In my imagination, they invite me to go with them.”

Again she laughed, although what she really wanted to do was pinch herself for making such a ridiculous speech. Praising Derbyshire to him? What would he think? She supposed her mind thought it was a good way to approach the topic of Lydia and Wickham, but in execution, it was badly done. The way Mr Darcy gaped at her was her proof. She could not look at him, and kept her eyes on his shoulder, so strong and *solid* looking, and dreamt of resting her head on it, his warmth enveloping her at the same time his arms did. The dance separated them, and it was only when they were reunited that he spoke, stammering the first words.

“W-what...? Pardon me, but I am not sure I heard you correctly. You would wish to return to Derbyshire?”

He sounded surprised—stunned, really—and she met his eyes, swallowing heavily against the tightness in her throat. Her head swam. Something noteworthy was transpiring, but what?

“Of course. The ending might have been distressing, but before that, I...”

“You?”

“I believe the short period I spent there was the most illuminating, wonderful time of my life. That it ended so abruptly will always be one of the —” She stopped, afraid of going too far, of exposing herself fully to Mr Darcy. She had meant to end by thanking him for keeping the secret about Lydia’s elopement and for being kind to her *that* morning, but she had ended

up almost confessing that she would always regret what had happened to them.

Mr Darcy continued to stare at her, even as the steps separated them, and no force on Earth could have torn Elizabeth's eyes from him. Coming together again, he held out his hand, and without hesitation, she placed hers in it and willingly permitted him to pull her away.

ONCE IN THE CORRIDOR, DARCY STOPPED. LOOKING INTO HER UPTURNED face, he tried several times to speak but was unsuccessful. In the dim light, he saw that her cheeks were deep pink, and her expression was a mix of trepidation and—if he was correct—hope. His mouth was dry, and it made his voice raspy when he finally spoke.

“Please, finish what you were saying.”

She averted her gaze. “Mr Darcy—”

“Please,” he begged.

“I...I will always look back on that time with a great deal of fondness and regret that it was interrupted, that Lydia's actions meant I could not remain longer and...” Her voice trailed off, and she shrugged.

Was this different from what she had said in September, the words that had convinced him she would not forgive him for Wickham running off with her sister? Darcy wanted to tear his hair out, because he did not know. Then it occurred to him; there was an easy way to resolve his confusion.

“During the walk we took with Bingley and Miss Bennet, soon after he and I returned, you said you regretted that your distressing news represented an *end*.” Her eyes met his. “What exactly did you mean? *What ended?*”

“Our holiday, the time we had together.” She made a noise of frustration and seemed to brace herself before continuing. “I wanted to stay longer. Meeting you again was an opportunity to know you properly, to-to show you I understood how horribly I had misjudged you, and then Lydia eloped. That was bad enough, but that it was with *that* man! I do not blame you. It is only natural that you would not want to connect yourself to anyone named Bennet when we are forced to claim him as—”

“I blame myself,” he interjected. “I thought you did too, for not warning people about him. It does not matter to me that he is your brother-in-law. I wish I could have prevented their marriage, but it was unavoidable.” Miss Lydia, as she was then, had refused to leave Wickham.

“But you said—oh, I cannot recall your exact words, but I understood you meant that you had completely given up any thought that you and I might—”

“Elizabeth, I assure you that for a man who knows what it is to truly, deeply love a lady, nothing—*nothing*—would prevent him from being with her. *If* it was what she wanted also.”

He leant forward, peering at her, desperate for a signal that he should go on. They stared at each other for as long as it took his heart to thud against his ribs a dozen times. Almost without volition, they reached for the other at the same time, his fingers touching hers halfway in the space between them. He grasped her hand.

“Dare I believe you feel as I do? My wishes— No, I ought to speak more plainly than that. I fear miscommunication has stolen precious time from us. I love you, Elizabeth Bennet, more even than I did last spring. By telling me the faults you saw in my character, you humbled me and showed me how to be a better man. That you did says a great deal about you, all of it admirable.”

She laughed and wiped at a tear that slowly ran down her cheek. “You call it admirable that I unjustly abused you?”

“That you defended your sister and family and explained how ungentlemanly my behaviour had become, yes. Then, when we met again in the summer, I saw at once that you believed what I wrote to you. Despite every reason you had to despise me, you were willing to meet again as friends. You are a remarkable woman, and I admire you, I respect you, esteem, adore—”

Her laughter and a hand on his arm silenced him. “I believe you have a question to ask me, sir. I assure you, my response will be very different from what it was at Easter. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

It was difficult to speak through the broad grin which stretched his mouth to a greater extent than it had ever had cause to do before. His eyes filled with tears of joy, ones matching hers. “Will you be my wife? I will endeavour to be the husband you deserve every day, every hour of our lives.”

“Yes, oh, yes, I will. You are *the only* man in the world I could possibly marry.”

Darcy was not so lost to reason as to forget they were in a public assembly room; it was only that which stopped him from doing as he wished and sweeping her into his arms and kissing her soundly. Instead, he drew both her hands to his mouth and pressed his lips to them over and over again.

“I do love you, very dearly. I knew it the morning I received Jane’s



letters, and I have been telling myself for weeks that, at the exact moment I realised you were the only man I would ever want to marry, any possibility of our union vanished. I believe I always admired you for your intelligence, even when I assured myself my dislike was implacable. All I wanted was a better understanding of your true character. Once I had that, I was quite lost.”

Darcy rested his forehead against hers and took a deep breath. “I wish we could remain apart from everyone else forever, but someone is sure to miss you soon, if they have not already. We must return.”

“I know we should, but I do not want to.”

“May I speak to your father tomorrow?”

She nodded. After a long look into each other’s eyes, they returned to the ballroom.

THE REST OF THE NIGHT WAS SPENT IN EACH OTHER’S COMPANY, HIS DARLING Elizabeth refusing the next request for a set. Miss Bennet saw them and briefly left her partner to come to them.

“You are not dancing, Lizzy. Is all well?” Her eyes flickered to him and back to her sister in a manner that suggested she was asking another question.

“Everything is exactly as it should be. Perfectly perfect in all ways,” Elizabeth said.

Miss Bennet kissed Elizabeth’s cheek, smiled at him, and returned to the dance.

Later in the evening, Mrs Bennet and Mrs Goulding walked by. Mrs Goulding smiled, and Mrs Bennet looked smug, but neither said anything.

Elizabeth sighed. “I do not know if you have noticed anything odd about my mother’s behaviour of late.”

“And Mrs Goulding and Mrs Philips.”

She chuckled. “A trio of conspirators. My behaviour must have betrayed my feelings for you to her. Despite my lack of encouragement, she and the others have been attempting to convince me that I long to be married and that you would make a good husband.”

“And they informed me in many different ways that you were the very best of ladies and I could not do better than to make you my wife. I hardly needed them to tell me.”

“Nor did I need them to point out your excellence. I almost wished I could confide in my mother, but I believe if I had, she would only have

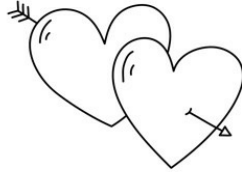
adopted more drastic measures. I imagine her dragging me to Netherfield by my ear and giving you a stern lecture until you agreed that Lydia's marriage was a ridiculous reason to keep us apart and refusing to leave until you had proposed."

He laughed. "I am glad it did not come to that, though she would not have been wrong. For my part, I think it is nonsensical that your sister's marriage should mean we suffer. Yet, I would never have blamed you if you felt it did."

"Let us not talk about Lydia and her mistakes. I consider her choice of husband the most grievous one she has ever made. We cannot celebrate our understanding openly tonight, but nevertheless, we are only to think about that which makes us happy."

"As you say, my love. As for your mother and her friends, let them believe our union was all their doing. I only care that we have found our way together. This time, nothing will come between us."

## FIFTEEN



**B**efore breakfast the next morning, Elizabeth went to her mother's room to announce her engagement. She had avoided being alone with her the night before, not wanting anything her mother said to disrupt the joy she felt. Darcy intended to be at Longbourn early, along with Mr Bingley, and he would talk to her father as soon as possible. Elizabeth viewed it as a formality; he would not refuse his consent or blessing.

With Felly on her lap, the cat's purrs guarding Elizabeth against an excess of vexation, she said, "Mr Darcy asked me to marry him, and I accepted."

Mrs Bennet's exclamation almost woke the elderly feline, but Elizabeth had long ago determined she was accustomed to the loud noises her mother made and was immune from being startled by them.

Mrs Bennet slapped the arm of her chair, and with a self-satisfied grin, said, "I knew how it would be. I could see it at once. The very first day he and Mr Bingley called, I told myself I would soon see two girls married. You will share Jane's wedding day next month."

"Mama—"

"I have it all sorted out. Mr Darcy will have to obtain a licence, but I am sure he knows how to go about that."

"Mama," Elizabeth said again, this time at a slightly louder volume. "Even if we were to marry the same day as Jane and Mr Bingley—and that is not a decision I can make on my own, the three of them must be consulted—there would be time for the banns to be read. It is almost six weeks away."

"No, Lizzy, I have decided. You and he will marry by licence. Tomorrow, we shall go into Meryton and order your clothes. I have a list of what you need, and I have my eye on some fabrics that will suit you and your new

station in life wonderfully. Ten thousand a year! The very mention of it gives me such shivers all over my body. I am certain he has many fine jewels to gift you, ones that have been in his family for generations, besides what he will purchase for you. I must just give him a hint that rubies and sapphires would be best with your colouring.”

“I pray you would not.” Felly nudged her hand, and Elizabeth began stroking her, wondering if the cat realised she needed to engage in a soothing activity. The commingling of embarrassment and irritation made Elizabeth want to leave the room before she began an argument with her mother.

It was unlikely Mrs Bennet heard her; she continued talking, enumerating the number of gowns Elizabeth would need. “I do not believe we shall find everything you need in Meryton. I shall write to my sister Gardiner today and ask that she send some silks and velvets. It might be better if we were to go to town ourselves.” Her tone became more speculative, and she looked beyond Elizabeth. “Jane’s wardrobe is not such an issue. To be sure, Mr Bingley is rich, but he does not have fine relations who will expect her to have gowns from the most celebrated dressmakers, no matter what impression those sisters of his wanted to give.” She huffed. “Not that they have bothered to even send a note of congratulations to my dear girl. I say Jane is too good for them, no matter what Lyd— Well, enough of that.”

Elizabeth gaped. Had her mother been on the point of saying something unkind about Lydia? Once it was announced Lydia and Wickham would marry, Mrs Bennet had been all smiles, acting as though she had forgot how disgracefully the couple had acted. That her mother had criticised two fashionable ladies and her youngest daughter at once was shocking to say the least.

Mrs Bennet’s gaze returned to Elizabeth. “We will make a decision about going to London today, and I shall write to your aunt, either to say we are coming or that she needs to send fabrics for you. Hmm... Perhaps Mr Darcy will want to take you to town to introduce you to his family and show you off as his betrothed. Mr Bingley and Jane will go as well, and if we remain no more than ten days or perhaps a fortnight, we can do all your shopping, attend an amusement or two, and return to Longbourn with more than enough time to finish preparing for the wedding. I have another list for it, arrangements and such. Where is it?” She stood and began shuffling through novels, magazines, and various pieces of paper.

“You are arranging *Jane’s* wedding, Mama. Mr Darcy and I have not yet

discussed it, but I think it would be best to leave any consideration of our wedding until after Mr Bingley and Jane's. I would not want to take any attention away from them."

Mrs Bennet scoffed and regarded her with a furrowed brow and puzzled expression. "Whatever are you talking about? I told you I knew how it would be. I have been planning for you to share the day from the very beginning. So much less fuss that way, which you know will please your father, and it means both of you girls will be settled before Christmas. With Mr Darcy living in the north, he will want to be at his estate before the weather becomes too much of an impediment to travel. By the by, one day, when I am not so distracted with everything that goes along with seeing two daughters married to such rich gentlemen, I expect you to tell me the truth about you and Mr Darcy. There is a great deal I do not know, and I am your mother. It is my right to know all your concerns."

Elizabeth bit her lips together to avoid laughing. Tell her about Darcy's disastrous proposal in Kent, their subsequent bitter exchange, and his letter? Never! It was also impossible to believe she would ever want to explain her slow realisation of her fallibility when it came to determining someone's character. She stood and carefully placed the cat on the chair.

"We should go downstairs. The gentlemen will arrive from Netherfield soon, if they have not already, and it must be almost breakfast time."

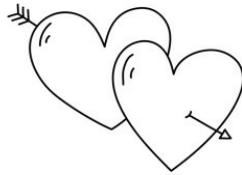
"Oh, yes, yes, let us go down." Mrs Bennet immediately walked towards the door, talking and waving a sheet of paper as she did. "I must offer Mr Darcy my congratulations and tell him the dishes I selected for the wedding breakfast. He might have others he wishes to add. How many of his family do you think will come? His uncle is an earl! Can you imagine having an earl attend your wedding? Oh, my dear girl! I am more excited than I have ever been. Ten thousand a year! He must speak to your father at once, and then, after breakfast, I shall go tell my sister and Mrs Goulding of our success. They were such a help, you know?"

There was nothing Elizabeth felt capable of saying in response to any part of her mother's speech. Soon, Mrs Bennet would be calmer and even, if they were fortunate, slightly more rational. Then they could decide how to proceed with the wedding and everything necessary to prepare her to embark on her life as Mrs Darcy.

*As for today, Elizabeth thought as she descended the stairs, I refuse to allow anything to vex me! I intend to do nothing more than rejoice in the love*

*my darling Darcy and I are now free to share.*

## SIXTEEN



To say Darcy was ecstatic would be to undervalue his joy. Immediately upon returning to Netherfield after the assembly, he shared his news with Bingley. Given how Miss Bennet had acted when she approached him and Elizabeth, he was not entirely surprised when Bingley expressed no shock, even though he would not have minded a little more enthusiasm.

“Jane will be pleased. She told me recently how much she hoped you and her sister would come to an understanding. When will you speak to Mr Bennet?” Bingley said before going on to describe his own interview with the gentleman without bothering to hear Darcy’s response.

Darcy was awake half the night writing letters to his sister, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and other family members to tell them of his engagement. He supposed he should wait until he had Mr Bennet’s approval, but he reasoned the letters would not be received until after it was done. It might be presumptuous to believe the man would give his consent, but Elizabeth assured him he would. Besides, she would be one and twenty soon and would marry him then, should her father decide to withhold his permission.

Shortly before breakfast, he and Bingley went to Longbourn, and he immediately sought out Mr Bennet in his book-room. Upon hearing that Darcy had proposed to his second daughter, the older gentleman regarded him with an arched brow for a long, awkward moment.

“Like that, is it? I should say I am surprised, but that would not be entirely correct. I have not noticed anything myself, but my good wife has been muttering about you and Lizzy since you came back to the neighbourhood.” He laughed. “If anything, I am more shocked that she was right than that you recognise my Lizzy’s excellence. Well, I suppose if she

wants to be your wife, there is nothing I can do to stop her.”

It fell to Mrs Bennet to greet the news with enthusiasm, and she did not disappoint. She insisted on kissing his cheek “to welcome you to the family” and leapt into a discussion of the wedding before anyone had a chance to tell Miss Mary and Miss Catherine about the engagement. Miss Catherine said all that was proper; Miss Mary did too, although she spoke with more hesitation in her tone and seemed to spend the rest of the morning observing him with an air of suspicion. Another time, he would ask his darling Elizabeth about it, but for today, he gave himself permission to simply be happy.

Amongst the many ideas and decisions she had already made about the wedding day—including that it would be on the nineteenth of November and coincide with Miss Bennet and Bingley’s—his soon-to-be mother-in-law insisted he obtain a licence. Darcy heard a soft noise of disgust from across the table, and turned to look at Miss Mary when she spoke.

“There is no need for that. There are enough Sundays before then for the banns to be read.” She tore a muffin into ever smaller pieces.

Elizabeth laughed. “So I told her, Mary, but—”

“It is enough to ask the vicar to announce them for Jane,” Mrs Bennet said.

Although he was confident Mr Carson could manage both, Darcy settled the debate. “I have no objection to marrying with a licence, as long as Miss Elizabeth agrees. Miss Bennet and Bingley might prefer not to share their day with us, however. I would not want—”

“Think nothing of it, Darcy!” Bingley interjected. “I think it is a capital notion. Do you not agree, my dear?” The last was said to Miss Bennet.

“It would only add greater felicity to the morning.”

Elizabeth indicated she would not argue against the scheme, and the matter was settled.

Over the next few days, more decisions were made, including that he and Elizabeth would go to town for the better part of a fortnight. Miss Bennet and Bingley rejected the notion of going with them, preferring to remain in the country, and Mrs Bennet insisted she had too much to do to accompany them, sending Miss Catherine in her stead.

“It might do her good to leave home now and again,” the matron said.

She would not explain herself when asked why. As Miss Catherine was pleased with the treat of a trip to town, no one enquired further.

Darcy was glad for the excuse to be away from Meryton. There were a



number of tasks he could best attend to in town, including meeting his solicitor regarding the marriage contract and changing his will, and it was difficult not to find some of the company fatiguing. Most notably, this included Mrs Bennet, Mrs Philips, and Mrs Goulding, who were effusive with their congratulations and went about with an obvious air of satisfaction at their part in the engagement. Another source of ennui was Mr Bennet and his sardonic wit and endless supply of jokes about young lovers and the many ways they would disappoint each other beginning a mere year after they united their lives with promises of living together in harmony.

His favourite moments were those he and Elizabeth spent alone, and he defied anyone to see fault in that. They went for as many walks as Mrs Bennet and the weather permitted. While she insisted they have a chaperon, it was usually either Miss Bennet and Bingley or one of the other Miss Bennets, and they left him and Elizabeth to themselves.

On one such occasion, shortly before they were to leave for London, Darcy proposed a plan for the coming months. Elizabeth's hand was clasped in his, and Miss Mary walked about thirty feet behind them.

"I thought we might spend a week in town before going to Derbyshire. It would give us time together before undertaking the long journey. Georgiana remains at Pemberley, and my aunt, Lady Romsley, proposed visiting us at Christmas or Twelfth Night, if you do not object. The earl's estate is less than sixty miles away, and as long as the weather permits, it would be an excellent occasion for you to know them."

Elizabeth squeezed his hand and gave him such a look of contentment and—there was no mistaking it—love, that his heart swelled.

"It sounds wonderful. I long to see Miss Darcy again. Georgiana, I should say." She laughed fondly.

Georgiana had sent Elizabeth a lengthy letter in which she wrote of their marriage answering a prayer she had made after they met that summer.

Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder at her sister, then, in a tone unlikely to be overheard by her, said, "What do you think of having Mary stay with us in the spring? I am worried for her."

"Oh?" Darcy stopped himself from looking at the subject of their discussion.

"Mary took Lydia's...well, she took it very hard. It can be difficult to tell with her, but when she is particularly disappointed or angry, she becomes increasingly silent. She kept her jaw clenched so tightly when Lydia and that

man were here, I was afraid she would do herself permanent injury. She is not best pleased with Mr Bingley either.”

“Why not?” This time, his eyes strayed enough towards the rear to catch a glimpse of the young woman.

Elizabeth looked apologetic. “Because of the way he left last year and how despondent Jane was afterwards.”

“Since she is polite to me, I take it she does not know about my own misdeeds?”

“Not even Jane knows everything that happened between us, and if you would please stop mentioning any errors you made in the past, I would soon forget them and my own.”

Darcy lifted her hand to his lips for a kiss. “Miss Mary is a loyal sister. I admire her for it. I would never tell you not to invite one of your family to stay with us.”

“Except for the two we shall avoid talking about as much as possible.”

He made a noise of agreement, but said, “*Him* I could never admit to my company. As for your youngest sister, I do not think it is impossible, though I would not ask Georgiana to see her.”

“I would never expect it of her. You are very good to be willing to entertain the notion, but I am not certain I will ever wish to have Lydia stay with us.”

In a few minutes, they came to a fork in the path, and Elizabeth paused to speak to her sister.

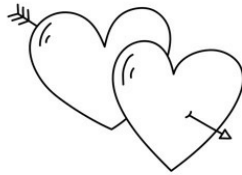
“Mr Darcy has never seen the stream down here, and you know how much I love the willows. We shall run ahead and take a look and meet you back on the path.”

Without awaiting a response, she pulled him in the direction she had indicated. Darcy readily followed. It soon became clear that she had other motives than showing him a picturesque view.

When they were out of sight, she turned to him with a coquettish smile. “I have secured us several minutes of privacy, Mr Darcy. What do you suppose we should do with them?”

He grinned, but only until his lips reached hers.

## SEVENTEEN



Elizabeth, Darcy, and Kitty went to town as arranged. Her sister was overly excited, in Elizabeth's opinion, but she began to see what her mother meant about Kitty being away from Longbourn. Seeing how other people lived and behaved and understanding there was a much larger world beyond their small Hertfordshire neighbourhood would be to her benefit. Kitty's undisciplined manner was not tolerated or considered charming by her aunt and uncle Gardiner, and even after a few days, Elizabeth saw improvements in her sister. It made her more determined to see that Mary and Kitty spent time with her or Jane once they were settled in their new homes. Darcy was amenable; when Elizabeth shared her thoughts with him, he admitted to noticing that Kitty was 'calmer' and keenly interested in every opportunity to see something new.

What surprised Elizabeth the most about their brief sojourn to London was how well Darcy and the Gardiners got along. She noticed it when Darcy escorted her and Kitty to Gracechurch Street the day they arrived. The couple and Darcy greeted each other warmly, and her aunt and uncle appeared almost as pleased to see him as they were to welcome their nieces. Elizabeth was grateful for their generosity, but as the encounters increased and it became evident they were more comfortable together than their too-short time in Derbyshire warranted, she asked first her aunt and uncle and then Darcy about it. They told her an extraordinary story about Darcy following them south in August, searching for Lydia, and arranging her marriage when it was plain no other alternative would do.

To say Elizabeth was shocked was not going far enough. She stared at them, speechless, for what felt like a quarter of an hour. Her love for Darcy at

that moment brought tears to her eyes; he truly was the best man in the world, and she could not account for her good fortune to have won his devotion.

The Gardiners permitted them short visits in the parlour without a chaperon, as long as the door remained open, and when they were alone, she asked him why he had not previously told her.

He shrugged, and his cheeks took on a dusting of colour. "I was embarrassed and angry at myself for not doing more to prevent Wickham from harming other ladies and their families. I did what I knew was right in going after your sister. I only wish I could have convinced her to leave him, to allow your father and uncle to make other arrangements for her, such as marriage to a better man. I would have helped, if they had permitted it. But she would not be persuaded to abandon him. At first, I did not want you to know, afraid you would feel obligated to me. Perhaps that is doing you an injustice. If it is, I apologise. Later, since we came to an understanding, my mind has been engaged with happier thoughts, and when it occurred to me, I was not sure how to broach the topic."

Elizabeth kissed him. She had quickly become accustomed to doing so and had learnt the many messages a kiss between lovers could represent. In this instance, it was understanding and acceptance of his explanation. As her surprise wore off, she realised what he had done was exactly like him; it was an excellent representation of his character.

Kissing was also a great deal of fun, and she was happy to take every opportunity to indulge in the activity. Those moments when their passion grew, and the air about them seemed to heat and thicken, she understood the danger and promise of a connexion such as theirs. Once they were married, the former would recede, and they would be free to explore all the joy of being young, in love, and fortunate enough not to have worries about their well-being.

After a long, slow kiss, Elizabeth whispered, "It is rare that I cannot find the words to say what I mean, but to describe all that you mean to me, is difficult. You are a wonderful, caring, kind man, and I will forever be grateful for the gift you have given me in offering to share your life with me. I promise to strive to deserve it."

"I am the fortunate one, my darling, loveliest Elizabeth. We shall have an extraordinary life together. That is a promise I will never cease attempting to fulfil." He ran his fingers across her cheek.

During the ten days they remained in town, Elizabeth met a few members

of Darcy's family and several of his friends. She, Kitty, and Mrs Gardiner went shopping, and—displaying one of the improvements Elizabeth witnessed in her—Kitty refrained from whining about not getting new things for herself. Instead, she enthusiastically assisted Elizabeth in selecting her wedding clothes. Kitty remarked that it would be her getting married one day; until then, she would celebrate her sisters' good fortune and anticipate being an aunt. She did not speak of Lydia, unless it was to disparage the way she had found a husband.

By far, Elizabeth's favourite parts of the trip were those occasions she could be with her beloved. They walked in the park, went to a concert and a museum, talked about their future, learnt more about each other's pasts, and dreamt about their children. Every possible moment they could, they found ways to express their love and dedication.

Returning to Longbourn, they knew they would have to dive into preparations for the wedding and Elizabeth's removal to Derbyshire. Darcy and Mr Bingley dined at Longbourn the first evening, and Elizabeth looked about the table, experiencing a pleasant, quiet sort of contentment. Some members of her family would likely always drive her to distraction—such as her mother—but since they all shared a genuine love for each other, it hardly mattered. Kitty spoke at length about her adventure in London, and insisted Mary must go too.

“Lizzy has spoken to me about making a visit to her and Mr Darcy next spring,” Mary admitted.

“You have?” Mrs Bennet said.

Elizabeth nodded, saying to Kitty, “I hope you understand. You will have your turn.”

“Mary is older, and I have just been to London. Besides, there is always Jane. She might like to have me or Mary with her this winter,” Kitty said.

“Of course I will,” Jane said in her usual sedate tone.

“We shall always be happy to have one or both of you! Any of you!” Mr Bingley, a wide smile on his countenance, looked at each person about the table.

“Unless you build a library to rival what Mr Darcy tells me he has at Pemberley, I am afraid you will have to do without *my* company.” Mr Bennet spoke as though serious, but he was not. He winked at Elizabeth, who promptly rolled her eyes.

They spoke briefly about Mary, who had decided to embrace the

opportunity to take a holiday from her usual life and accept Elizabeth's offer. After that, in a voice loud enough to ensure everyone was listening to him, Mr Bennet addressed Darcy.

"I wonder, have you heard from Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the esteemed patroness of my delightfully ridiculous cousin and heir?"

"I have." With him sitting beside her, Elizabeth felt Darcy stiffen. Lady Catherine had taken the news of their engagement poorly. She had written him a letter containing so much abuse that he burnt it at once and severed the connexion.

"Would I be mistaken in saying she is not pleased with your choice of Lizzy?"

Darcy cleared his throat before admitting, "I regret to say she is not. I expected nothing different, and I assure you, I will not allow my aunt or anyone else to insult Miss Elizabeth."

Mr Bennet waved this away. "Of course you will not."

Mrs Bennet spoke at the same time he did. "How could you know that? And what are her objections to my girl? Lizzy is good enough for anyone—"

"Yes, my dear, on that, we agree. Unfortunately, the world is full of people whose views are not as liberal as ours. As to how I know"—Mr Bennet pulled a sheet of paper out of his jacket pocket and held it aloft in triumph—"I have had a letter from Collins."

It transpired that her father had written to Mr Collins to tell him about his daughters' engagements. "I suspected it might cause a bit of mischief, but he would learn our happy news through one means or another, and I did want to assure him my girls, especially you, Lizzy, would be happily situated before long. I cannot forget that he said you were unlikely to receive another offer of marriage."

"Mr Collins proposed to you?" Darcy said to Elizabeth, his lip curling in disgust.

Elizabeth laughed, and she, Kitty, and her mother recounted that tumultuous morning. No one mentioned that Mrs Bennet had threatened never to speak to Elizabeth again if she did not marry the man, something the lady herself had apparently—and conveniently—forgot.

As they walked to the drawing room afterwards, Darcy whispered to Elizabeth, "I cannot imagine you married to such a man. The thought of it makes me ill."

"I would never have accepted him, and Papa would not have asked it of

me or any of my sisters, even though it would have provided security for my mother. I am grateful for that.”

Once they were all comfortably seated, Kitty asked her father to tell them about Mr Collins’s letter.

“I shall spare you his exact words—his letters are truly tedious—but the long and the short of it is that he is full of indignation, his patroness is furious, Lizzy has tricked Mr Darcy into proposing, I must not allow it, and, to my shock and horror, apparently Mr Darcy is engaged to Miss de Bourgh.”

Darcy’s expression hardened, though Elizabeth did not believe her father was the subject of his anger. “I am not, nor have I ever been engaged to my cousin.”

“Of course you have not! What nonsense! Anyone who sees you together can tell in an instant that you and Lizzy are formed for each other. That woman! That man! You hear me, Mr Bennet, your heir or not, Mr Collins will never be a guest in this house again as long as I am mistress of it. To speak so of *my* daughter? Ha!” Mrs Bennet averted her chin, lifting it high as though Mr Collins was there to see her snub.

Elizabeth pinched her leg to stop herself from laughing out loud. Several others regarded her mother with expressions of shock.

“I promise you, my dear, I shall not ask it of you. Our daughters are fortunate to have a mother who will guard them against such insults.” Mr Bennet spoke more kindly than he usually did.

Her mother sniffed but remained silent.

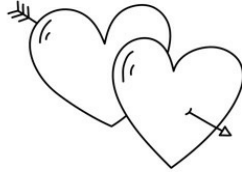
“I heartily agree, Mrs Bennet. I have never seen Darcy so pleased with himself as he was when he told me Miss Elizabeth had agreed to marry him, and watching them together since, I am convinced that, next to me and my dear Jane, they are the most suited couple in the kingdom and will be extremely happy together,” Mr Bingley said.

Saying good night an hour or so later, Elizabeth and Darcy stood just outside the entrance. The evening was chilly, but she did not mind, because it meant they could be alone for several minutes.

“In seventeen days, we shall be married. I cannot wait to be your wife. I promise never to give you cause to regret your choice.” She laughed. “Well, not frequently.”

“I will never doubt that I made the best possible decision. The nineteenth of November cannot come soon enough.” He kissed her.

## EIGHTEEN



Two months to the day after Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy appeared at her door again, Mrs Bennet was proud to witness them marrying her two most deserving daughters. The wedding was the most wonderful that had ever taken place in Meryton. The girls were beautiful, the gentlemen handsome, the breakfast superb, and Longbourn was displayed in such a way that reminded the many guests that it was the second most prominent home in the neighbourhood, next to Netherfield Park, of which her daughter was mistress.

Even Mr Bennet congratulated her, saying, “You outdid yourself. This is a day Jane and Lizzy will remember with pleasure for the rest of their lives.”

With that, he did a most unexpected thing; he kissed her cheek. She looked about to see if anyone had witnessed the gesture, which had become very—very—uncommon. She was not certain whether she was glad or upset that no one had. Another person could assure her she was not day-dreaming and would surely spread the news that he still held some affection for her, but, on the whole, it was better not to be seen.

Since they were travelling to London, Mr and Mrs Darcy—she delighted in calling Elizabeth by her new name—left before Jane and her husband or many of the guests. Everyone crowded by the front door to say a final goodbye before quickly returning to the drawing room to escape the damp autumn weather. Mrs Bennet stood with her sister to one side and Mrs Goulding to the other.

“You said they belonged together, and you made them see it. I congratulate you,” Mrs Philips said.

A light blush added colour to Mrs Bennet’s cheeks. “I could not have done it without you two. I cannot thank you enough.”



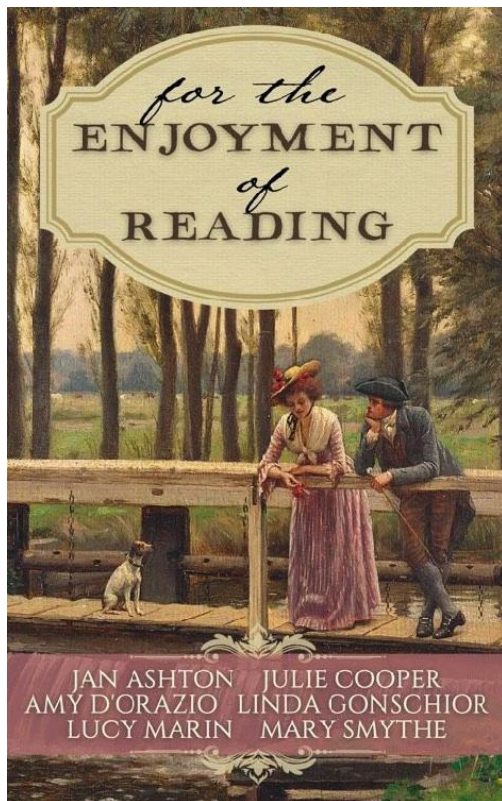
“But you were the one who knew our efforts were necessary,” Mrs Goulding insisted. “I remember when Lizzy—Mrs Darcy, I should say—was just a wee babe. Now she is the mistress of a fine estate the likes of which none of us have ever seen. When will you go?”

She shrugged, her thoughts on her daughter, not when she would be asked to endure the arduous carriage ride to Derbyshire. She would do it once at least, to see Mr Darcy’s estate, but she expected Mr Bennet would rouse himself to go more often, to see both Elizabeth *and* Mr Darcy’s library.

*They will be very happy*, Mrs Bennet mused as she continued to watch the Darcys. Jane and Mr Bingley were too affable not to have a comfortable sort of marriage, but she foresaw great things for her second eldest child. What a grand lady she would be! Knowing Elizabeth, she would use her new position in life to do good for Mr Darcy’s dependents and those in her neighbourhood. Mr Darcy had hidden passion she was not certain he had yet acknowledged, but it would help sustain their mutual love for the long years of their lives.

Even when the ladies returned to the drawing room and the front door was closed, Mrs Bennet continued her observations through a window, unseen by the newly married couple. They stood, hands clasped, gazing into each other’s eyes and exchanging a few words. There was such a look of profound joy on Elizabeth’s face; it made her truly beautiful and caused Mrs Bennet’s heart to swell with pride. Mr Darcy leant forwards and kissed his wife tenderly before they stepped into the waiting coach which would carry them into their happily ever after.

## GET A FREE EBOOK!



The authors and Quills & Quartos Publishing thank you for choosing this book. The favor of your rating or review would be greatly appreciated.

You can receive a free collection of short stories by signing up for the Quills & Quartos mailing list! This collection is not sold in stores and is available only to subscribers.

[Get your copy HERE.](#) Quills & Quartos will never spam you or sell your information to others. Thank you!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lucy Marin developed a love for reading at a young age and whiled away many hours imagining how stories might continue or what would happen if there was a change in the circumstances faced by the protagonists. After reading her first Austen novel, a lifelong ardent admiration was born. Lucy was introduced to the world of Austen variations after stumbling across one at a used bookstore while on holiday in London. This led to the discovery of the online world of Jane Austen Fan Fiction and, soon after, she picked up her pen and began to transfer the stories in her head to paper.

Lucy lives in Toronto, Canada, surrounded by hundreds of books and a loving family. She teaches environmental studies, loves animals and trees and exploring the world around her.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to Amy and Jan for devising the 'inspired by a cover' project. It got my creative juices flowing, and I loved being able to explore Mrs Bennet. As always, I also thank them for being awesome at what they do to help make my stories the best they can be.

ALSO BY LUCY MARIN

[A Matter of Prudence](#)

[Being Mrs Darcy](#)

[Christmas at Blackthorn Manor](#)

[Her Sisterly Love](#)

[The Marriage Bargain](#)

[Mr Darcy: A Man with a Plan](#)

[The Recovery of Fitzwilliam Darcy](#)

[The Truth About Family](#)

COLLABORATIONS AND ANTHOLOGIES

[Happily Ever After with Mr Darcy](#)

['Tis the Season](#)