



# The Missing *Valet*

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

*Clarissa Joy Thomas*



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This book was edited by Christine Combe.

*For Chad,  
Thank you for your immense patience as I locked myself away writing this  
book.  
I love you.*

## *Author's Note*

Although this story takes place during the regency period of England's history, some elements of the story are taken from later eras. For example, the penny press that created the penny papers that Lydia and Elizabeth enjoy was not in common use until the 1830s. Similarly, the unrest that forms the basis for much of the story remained mostly in the north of England during the Regency. This tale is meant to be based in an alternative history, wherein these events and inventions would have been in place during the regency. However, as far as is possible with these changes in place, I have tried to remain true to the era and add as much historical detail as possible. I hope you enjoy my variation on Jane Austen's work.

## Chapter 1

“Lizzy! Please slow down!” called Lydia after her elder sister. “You need your cloak.” As the November wind blew harshly, Lydia’s hair was whipped out of her hat. She ran after Elizabeth, grateful when she slowed her pace to let her catch up. “Jane sent me with your cloak,” she said while handing her sister the woollen garment. “She was worried that you would catch a chill. She is busy tending to Mamma.”

“My thanks.” Elizabeth put on the cloak, glad for its warmth. She had not thought to grab any outerwear in her haste to be away from Mr. Collins.

“Are you well, Lizzy?” Lydia looked genuinely concerned. “What did Papa say? He will not make you marry that toad, will he?”

“No, he will not. That is why Mamma is in such a state. I am glad, for I would not marry him even if Papa tried to force me.”

Lydia frowned. “But you are not yet of age.”

“I have two feet,” said Elizabeth. “I had quite decided that if Mr. Collins proposed and Father took it into his head to force me, that I would run away and work as a maid or some such.”

“You are not eloping now, are you?” asked Lydia, her eyes growing wide.

“Of course not!” exclaimed Elizabeth. “I simply wished to be away from it all; Mamma’s fit, Mr. Collins’s absurdity, Mary’s moralising, it was all too much for me.”

Mr. Collins was Mr. Bennet’s cousin, and the heir to Longbourn, the estate where the Bennets lived. He had written some weeks before, requesting to visit the Bennets and his future inheritance. The letter had been enough for Elizabeth to know that the correspondent was not someone of sense. When she met him, these conclusions were confirmed.

As soon as he entered the house, Mr. Collins made his intention to marry from among his cousins clear. Mrs. Bennet steered him towards Elizabeth, given that Jane was being unofficially courted by Mr. Bingley, a wealthy gentleman who had recently become master of Netherfield Park. It did not matter to Mrs. Bennet that Mr. Collins would have been much better suited to Mary. She simply assumed that Elizabeth would accede to her wishes. Elizabeth could not.

Perhaps had the parson not been enthralled with his patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, or if he did not spit when he spoke, Elizabeth might have ensured him. If he read books other than sermons and the bible occasionally or if he washed regularly, he might be more appealing. Even if he just understood basic manners and social mores, he might be acceptable. However, as he was, Elizabeth could never see herself marrying him, even if he was the heir to Longbourn.

In actuality, Elizabeth wished to marry for love, but she knew that this was unlikely. She was too poor for most gentlemen, given that she had a dowry of only one thousand pounds, which would only be paid after her mother died. The interest of this was only fifty pounds a year, about the same as what a housekeeper earned. While this portion ensured that she would never starve, it was not enough to entice most gentlemen.

“Shall we walk into town?” asked Lydia, breaking Elizabeth free of her thoughts. “I wish to buy a Sir Francis paper. The last chapter of *The Count’s Conundrum* ought to be out today.”

Elizabeth grinned and threaded her arm through her sister’s. “Then we must go to town. I would not have you perish with agony as you await the conclusion. After all, how could you breathe not knowing if Sir Francis got his man?”

Lydia scowled at her sister before breaking into a smile. “I know it absurd, as they everything is always settled in the end, but I cannot be left with the Count in such danger

and Sir Francis off in London. I am quite certain that the nephew killed the countess, but one never knows.”

“You think that the nephew did it?” asked Elizabeth, surprised. “I am quite certain that the count killed his wife.”

Elizabeth and Lydia continued to speak of the latest of the penny papers they were reading, called such because they were sold for a penny at the circulating library. They contained stories of romance and mystery, separated into chapters that were sold separately. Elizabeth had been the first sister to begin reading the penny papers, eventually convincing her sisters to begin as well. While Jane and Kitty both enjoyed them well enough, Lydia had been engrossed in the Sir Francis Mysteries for weeks.

Sir Francis Wagner, the hero of the tales, was a magistrate in a small village named West Kiteton in Yorkshire. This village must certainly have a very high rate of theft, kidnapping, and murder, for there always was something afoot. Elizabeth questioned why people didn’t move or improve their locks. Lydia thrived under the attention that her elder sister had paid her of late while they discussed the mysteries, leaving Elizabeth with a slight pang of guilt for previously neglecting her. She swore she would do better, never neglecting her younger sisters in favour of her elder.

“Did you hear that?” asked Lydia.

“What?” asked Elizabeth, who heard nothing but the wind rustling the fallen leaves.

“Someone is calling out.”

Elizabeth listened again, her heart pounding, and this time she could make out a faint whisper in the distance. As they walked nearer the voice, it became more distinct. “Witting! Witting!” it called.

Elizabeth came to an abrupt halt, causing her sister to quickly reach out and grab her to steady herself.

“Lizzy!” was the dismayed response.

“Shh,” Elizabeth urged, listening to the voice once more. “That is Mr. Darcy’s voice. I am certain of it!”



The two sisters hurried forward, wondering what Mr. Bingley's friend was doing wandering in the woods, calling out for someone. As they followed the sound of Mr. Darcy's voice, they looked for any sign of the 'Mr. Witting' he was looking for. They saw no one, so they continued along the path towards Netherfield, until they found Mr. Darcy. He greeted them politely, if absentmindedly, then asked them if they had seen his valet come this way.

"I do not believe so," said Elizabeth. "What does he look like? If we see him, we can tell him that you are looking for him."

Mr. Darcy told them the man was of medium height, about six inches shorter than himself. He was near forty, with curly black hair he wore short that was greying at the temples. He wore no moustache or beard and had a prominent cleft in his chin. Mr. Darcy thought his eyes were brown, but he could not quite remember. He did not think they were his most notable feature, as he would have remembered if Witting had bright green eyes or something distinctive, given how close a valet must stand to shave his master. Female servants found Witting attractive, despite his age.

Mr. Darcy's knowledge of his servant surprised Elizabeth. The servants were of the same importance as the furniture to most gentry. You might notice if your sideboard suddenly disappeared, but it would only inconvenience you if it was not replaced with another. She had always despised this about those of her class and sought to remember the names of all the servants at Longbourn, as well as details of their lives.

"No one has seen him since last night before the ball. I told him not to wait up for me, since I knew it would be late before I returned. His bed has not been slept in and all his belongings are still in his room. I know it sounds incredibly foolish, but I have the direst foreboding that something is amiss. He would not just abandon his duty in this way." Mr. Darcy stopped for a moment to call out Witting's name, but he received no response.

Elizabeth wondered if the servant had simply taken himself off and had not slept at Netherfield for his own

reasons. She suggested to Mr. Darcy that perhaps he had awakened in time, after staying out too late.

“No, I am quite certain he would not do that. I have known him a long time. He does not go drinking or gaming. Even if he did, he would not do that on a night when he knew he would have to work in the morning. He has been a loyal servant. He worked for my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, as his valet first, until Witting decided he did not wish to travel nearly as much as my cousin’s work required. My father hired him then, about six years ago. Unless sick or given a day off, he doesn’t miss work.”

“I assume that you have already searched Netherfield and asked the servants there,” said Lydia.

“Indeed. None have seen him, not even his particular friends,” was Mr. Darcy’s answer. The gentleman once again called out his valet’s name but was met with no response. He sighed, running his fingers through his hair as he scanned the area.

“We are close to Lucas Lodge,” said Elizabeth, an idea emerging. “We can go thither and enquire if any of the servants have seen your valet. Even if they have not, we can ask Sir William for assistance. He is the magistrate, and he organised the search several years ago when Mary King broke her ankle and was not to be found for several hours. He can do the same for Mr. Witting.”

Mr. Darcy, unable to deny the logic of Miss Elizabeth’s plan, agreed. He had not realised how near they were to Lucas Lodge, for it was not more than ten minutes before they reached the small estate. Lady Lucas hurriedly exited just as they approached the door to the manor house, nearly colliding with them.

“Elizabeth! Lydia!” she exclaimed. “What a surprise! I was just about to call on your mother to discuss the happenings of the ball last evening. Charlotte and Maria are in the kitchens, but if you do not mind waiting a moment, I am certain they should be glad to see you.” Lady Lucas then noticed Mr. Darcy and was visibly taken aback. “Mr. Darcy,

what? I mean, how pleasant for you to call. I am sure Sir William will be happy to receive you.”

Mr. Darcy bowed to Lady Lucas. “I am sure I should be glad to speak to him.”

“In fact,” said Lydia, pushing herself forward. “We all wish to speak to him.”

Lady Lucas was puzzled by this but did not object. She led her guests into the house and ordered a servant to inform her husband of their arrival. Sir William appeared a moment later, his expression filled with delight upon seeing them. It faltered only upon seeing the concerned looks on their faces. Sensing that the subject to be discussed should not be overheard by servants or young children, Sir William promptly escorted them into his study and closed the door.

Mr. Darcy reiterated his explanations to Sir William, who initially seemed unconcerned upon hearing the story. “You are quite certain that there is no... person with which he might have passed the night? A lady perhaps?” Sir William’s eyes flickered towards Elizabeth and Lydia as he spoke, feeling uneasy about broaching the subject in front of maidens. “Perhaps he might even now have returned to Netherfield.”

“Well,” Mr. Darcy said slowly, “I know he was rather smitten with Sarah from Longbourn, but I do not believe anything happened between them. He would not dishonour her, as he cared for her.”

This interested Elizabeth greatly. She had deduced that Sarah had a liking for a servant at Netherfield, but she had not known it was Mr. Darcy’s valet. Often Sarah was the first to volunteer to take notes or invitations thither, as it meant she could spend time in the servants’ quarters there, speaking with whoever was about. She did not believe it was Mrs. Nicholls who had suddenly inspired such energy, and therefore had assumed it to be one of the footmen.

“And nothing is missing from Netherfield. The silver has all been accounted for? Jewels?” asked the magistrate.

“My valet is not a thief, sir.” Mr. Darcy’s voice was stern but not angry. “Nevertheless, we did have the silver counted, and Mr. Bingley’s sisters are not missing any jewels. Nothing else in the house has been noticed missing either.”

Sir William nodded and pulled the bell for a servant. “Ben, go to Longbourn and inquire about Mr. Witting among the servants. He is friends with several people there, and he is missing. Keep an eye out as you walk in case he is somewhere along the way. You might ask around Longbourn Village as well,” he said to the manservant who answered the bell. The servant asked how he should travel, and was given leave to take a cart, in case he came upon an injured Mr. Witting.

“I do appreciate your help, Sir William,” said Mr. Darcy.

“It is my pleasure to assist you, Mr. Darcy,” said the older gentleman with a smile. “Now, I assume that you have had servants search Netherfield and the grounds?”

“I have. He has many friends there, all of whom are quite anxious as well. They have been searching the house and grounds quite thoroughly, I assure you.”

“There is not a possibility that Mr. Witting left a note that was thrown away or gave a message that was simply not delivered?” asked Sir William. “Perhaps there is a perfectly innocent explanation.”

“I suppose that is a possibility, but when I left Netherfield, nothing of the sort had been found. It would be a relief to learn that he was in Meryton buying shoe polish or some such, but I do not know why he would do so when he knows what time I awaken and that I would wish for his services.”

“Does he have family?” asked Sir William.

“He has an elder brother. I cannot recall his name. He works at Verity Manor, near Ferling in Sussex.”

“You ought to send an express thither. If a message did go awry, it is possible that Mr. Witting was called to visit his

brother if he was taken ill. It is strange that he would not wait and request leave from you himself, though.”

“If it was urgent, he would know he could leave and I would not fault him, so long as he informed me in a note. I would not force him to wait until morning, if a family member was very ill,” said Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth and Lydia both looked at Mr. Darcy in astonishment. Prior to today, they would have assumed it would be rather unpleasant to be Mr. Darcy’s personal servant, but it seemed that he granted his staff a great deal of freedom. Never had she heard of a servant being able to simply write a note to his employer explaining that he had to attend to an ailing family member before taking themselves off. Though, she supposed that long service granted servants privileges that might not be granted to those with less tenure.

“Very good. Then we will not panic just yet,” said Sir William reassuringly. “He may have left for Sussex, and the note could be lost, perhaps mistaken for rubbish.”

This idea evinced some slight relief in Mr. Darcy’s countenance. “Very practical. Thank you, sir.”

“Still, messages ought to be sent out to all the major families in the area, asking about him. You might continue to Meryton too. As you said, you might find him buying shoe polish. Do let me know what happens? I am at your service, Mr. Darcy.” Sir William stood when Mr. Darcy did and offered his hand. Mr. Darcy shook it and thanked him again for his assistance. Elizabeth and Lydia trailed behind him, expressing their gratitude to Sir William and taking their leave from Lady Lucas and Charlotte.

“Let us take the longer way to Meryton,” said Elizabeth. “If he decided to take the faster route, someone will likely encounter him soon. The other path is not so well travelled.”

Mr. Darcy was unaware of the alternate route to Meryton; consequently, the Bennets guided their party along a meandering path amidst the trees which eventually led to Oakham Stream. The stream wound its way through the

woods, releasing the scent damp soil and foliage as they neared town.

“What is that?” Lydia cried out unexpectedly, disrupting the companionable silence that had settled between them. She pointed at the stream and the strange dark object that seemed out of place.

As they drew nearer, the dark, sodden form began to take shape. A hat was caught on a rock beneath the surface of the stream, partially hidden by a layer of leaves. This particular area of the stream was of considerable width, and the hat was close to the centre. It was not possible to simply extend an arm and grasp it, so the three of them began to search for a long branch to secure it with. Elizabeth found a suitable stick first but left the task of retrieving the hat to Mr. Darcy. His effort to move the hat only resulted in the surrounding leaves becoming loose. After several minutes, Elizabeth grew tired of watching his vain attempts.

“Mr. Darcy, pray, turn your back,” she requested.

He looked at her strangely.

“I am going to remove my shoes and stockings, then hike up my skirts and go to retrieve the hat. I would prefer it if you did not watch while I did so,” she explained.

Mr. Darcy had no response to her statement, but did as she requested, turning his back. Only once he had done so did he realise that he ought to have insisted on retrieving it himself. It was too late, however, as he could hear Elizabeth’s slight gasp as she entered the cold water. A moment later, he heard her sister assisting her to dry her feet with her scarf.

“You may turn around now, Mr. Darcy,” said Elizabeth.

Upon his doing so, she presented him with the hat. It was a basic black hat that most gentlemen would own. However, when he looked inside, he saw the hat came from Feltmaker’s Company and there were the initials KW sewn onto the label.

“It is his. I often buy hats from Feltmaker’s and he gets my old things. KW are his initials,” Darcy said grimly.

“We ought to make sure that Sir William sees this,” said Elizabeth.

“Wait!” cried Lydia. “We need to mark this point in the stream, so we do not forget. It’s terribly important in all of the stories to know exactly where clues were found.”

Neither of the others argued with Lydia, so she took the stick that Darcy had been using earlier and stuck it upright into the wet dirt. She then took another stick and did the same nearby. “Then if one falls over, there will still be another marker,” she explained.

Darcy smiled at the girl. Regardless of her occasional lack of refinement, at this particular moment, she brought Georgiana strongly to his mind. His sister read the same penny papers as Miss Lydia and had some notion of someday solving a mystery. “Not a grand mystery. I do not wish to see a dead person. That would be terrible. Just to help a lady who has lost her diamond necklace or some such,” was how his sister had described her desire.

“You have not taken a chill?” Mr. Darcy looked at Elizabeth for any signs of illness. “Should we not hurry to Meryton and take you to your uncle’s home?”

“I shall be well,” said Elizabeth with a laugh. “I never take cold.”

Nevertheless, Mr. Darcy prevailed upon them to go to Meryton so that Elizabeth might be warmed by the fire in her aunt’s apartments. It was not far to Meryton from where they were, but the streets were very empty. He supposed that such was the aftermath of the ball, for servants would delay their tasks in town a little while if they could.

Mrs. Phillips was still at breakfast when he delivered her nieces to her. She was delighted to have Mr. Darcy in her sitting room, but he could not be persuaded to remain long. He explained the situation to her, leaving her exclaiming about ‘Poor Mr. Witting, who was no doubt dead from an aneurysm or run over by a drunken carriage driver’. He could not linger, needing to send the hat and a note via a messenger back to Sir

William, as well as stop in the many stores to inquire if anyone had seen his valet.



## Chapter 2

Witting's eyes fluttered open, yet the darkness persisted without relief from the deep black surrounding him. His head throbbed with a terrible ache, especially at the back. He tentatively touched the area where the pain was most intense, feeling a sharp, searing sensation that caused him to recoil with a hiss. Touching the wound left a sticky feeling on his hand. Blood, he assumed. That was not a promising sign.

He searched his body for any additional signs of harm, running his hands over his limbs and torso. Despite feeling tender and bruised in several places, especially his left shoulder and collarbone, he reassured himself that he had not suffered any broken bones or major injuries apart from the head wound. That was some comfort, at least. Even so, a head wound could cause death, especially if the wound was left open.

He attempted to stand, but his head spun and his vision blurred, causing him to quickly sit back down. He surveyed the room he was in and found that his eyes were adjusting to the darkness. Although the shapes were unclear, he saw something that looked like haystacks on the far side of the room. Nearer to him, he could make out the rough stone of a wall. With careful movements, he slowly made his way to the wall, his hands growing colder as they touched the cold dirt floor. Exhausted, he leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

He tried to remember anything that might give him a clue as to why he was here or where he was, but it was in vain. The last memory he had was conversing with Sarah outside the Meryton Inn. He smiled fondly at the thought of her.

“Sarah,” he whispered to the darkness.

As he slipped into slumber, he imagined a vibrant, wide-eyed maid with fiery hair whose laughter lit up his life.



Mr. Darcy emerged from the milliner's shop, frustrated and tired. The owner had seen Mr. Witting the previous day, but that was in the afternoon. The only other place that had seen Witting was the inn, where he had gone to drink a pint of ale with a few other servants. The only information he obtained was a list of the servants' names that the innkeeper could recall. Mr. Witting had apparently left the inn, briefly spoke with a woman outside, and continued towards Netherfield. Amidst attending to his patrons, the innkeeper, Mr. Trantor, could not recall much of what had transpired that evening. Despite this, he firmly believed that the valet had only had a couple of drinks and left the inn without showing any signs of being drunk.

Frustrated with the lack of information, Mr. Darcy marched towards the Phillips's apartment, the sound of his footsteps lost among the clapping of hooves on the road. He really should see how Miss Elizabeth fared. As he approached, Mrs. Phillips leaned out the window and waved to him. He cringed at her inappropriate actions, but quickly agreed to come inside, hoping to silence her. Thankfully, it did.

Five minutes later, he was sitting with Mrs. Phillips, Miss Elizabeth, and Miss Lydia in Mrs. Phillips's sitting room, listening her tell in detail about the ball the previous evening. Miss Lydia appeared exasperated, even telling her aunt that they were all present at the event and didn't require a description of the decorations. Elizabeth reprimanded her sister for her disrespectful behaviour towards their aunt, but Lydia remained unapologetic. Mrs. Phillips appeared genuinely hurt by her niece's criticism, prompting Darcy to swiftly shift the conversation to something he had learnt during his sojourn into the shops of Meryton.

"He did not say who the woman was?" asked Elizabeth with a slight frown. Darcy found this expression of hers endearing, as he did most of her expressions. She had a slight resemblance to a petulant child who could not have cake.

“Perhaps he could not see whom it was, only that it was a woman,” Darcy offered as explanation.

“Perhaps,” she answered thoughtfully.

Darcy was able to share the names of the servants that Mr. Witting had spent his evening with, at least those that the innkeeper remembered. Two were farmhands, one from Netherfield and the other from Longbourn. Mr. Hill, the manservant at Longbourn who served as both butler and Mr. Bennet’s valet, had also been present, and seemed to be the one whom Mr. Witting talked most with.

“I think, then, that we ought to go to Longbourn,” said Elizabeth after a moment.

“Are you certain you should not remain here and continue warming yourself?” asked Mrs. Phillips with a concerned tone, but Elizabeth was quite sure that she was well. She did, however, accept Mrs. Phillips’ offer to lend them a cart and a manservant to transport them thither.

As they arrived at Longbourn, Elizabeth noticed the Lucas carriage being taken to the stables. “Sir William must be here,” she said aloud. “Perhaps he has word of Mr. Witting.”

This thought seemed to cheer Mr. Darcy, for the corners of his mouth turned up slightly. However, upon meeting Sir William and Mr. Bennet in the parlour, no such good news was forthcoming. Despite thorough investigations, including searching Mr. Witting’s possessions, interviewing the servants Mr. Witting had dined with, and examining the vicinity of the hat’s discovery, very little had been uncovered. Sarah had been the woman whom Mr. Witting had spoken of, but she knew nothing except that he had said he needed to return to Netherfield soon.

“He said that he was to go home that evening. I assumed he meant back to Netherfield instead of staying in Meryton, but I might have mistook his meaning,” Mr. Hill had said.

Chuck, the farmhand, repeated much the same. All three said that Mr. Witting had appeared to be in good spirits

and that nothing of note had occurred. They might not even have remembered the conversations if the man had not gone missing the next day.

“One of them must be lying,” said Lydia once all the servants had left.

“Why do you think that?” asked Sir William.

She gave a slight shrug. “Someone must have seen something. He did not just disappear.”

“Lydia,” said Mr. Bennet sharply, “you cannot simply make accusations like this. If a crime has been committed against Mr. Witting, it is very likely a hanging offence. We wish for the truth to be found out. Unfounded suppositions do not help with that.”

Lydia recoiled at her father’s harsh words, feeling the heat of his disapproval. Instead of his light-hearted remark that she was a silly girl, his voice was edged and his eyes held a determined look.

“Indeed,” said Sir William, rescuing Lydia from her father’s gaze. “Finding the hat changes matters, if it is his. Going forward, I shall be operating under the assumption that Mr. Witting has gone missing. If this is the case, very likely whoever harmed him is dangerous. We do not wish you to get hurt, Miss Lydia. You must leave this to me and your father.”

Lydia opened her mouth to protest, but Mr. Bennet cut her off harshly, “This is not a penny paper or a novel, my love. You cannot simply poke around and expect not to be bitten when you find a snake. For once in your life, child, use the brain in your head.”

Lydia’s eyes filled with tears, but she swiftly blinked them away. She would not let her father see her cry. Elizabeth glared at Mr. Bennet and wrapped an arm around her sister.

Sir William gave the ladies an empathetic look, his eyes filled with understanding, but when he turned to Mr. Darcy, his gaze hardened, and his expression turned serious. “Mr. Darcy, sir,” he said. “I must request that you not involve yourself further in this case. Should anything come to light

that definitively makes this a crime, any evidence must not be corrupted by persons connected with the missing man.”

Mr. Darcy’s face clearly displayed his surprise. “I am not certain I understand, sir. I must continue to look for my missing servant.”

“You cannot intimately involve yourself in the search, Mr. Darcy,” said the magistrate. “You must leave the search to me. If you wish, you might send to London for a runner or investigator, but your direct involvement would be unwise. Additionally, I must insist that you and the other residents of Netherfield remain within the vicinity, allowing me the opportunity to question either you or them, should the need arise.” Sir William’s voice was more severe than Elizabeth had ever heard, leaving her unsure of what to think about the man she had known her whole life.

“You suspect Mr. Darcy, Sir William,” asked Mr. Bennet in surprise. “Or is it the Bingleys you suspect? I must say, I never would think any of them capable of such villainy.”

“Neither would I, if it were not essential to do so,” said Sir William, softening his expression. “I must, however, fulfil my role as magistrate in this area. Therefore, everyone is suspect until we either find Mr. Witting or find proof of innocence or guilt.”

Elizabeth was surprised by how little offence Mr. Darcy took to Sir William’s words, as he only asked her father for the use of paper, ink, and a pen, so he might write to Mr. Bingley immediately. “As you may know, sir,” he said to Mr. Bennet, “Mr. Bingley was planning to depart today on some business, but he delayed in order to assist in the search for Witting.”

Mr. Bennet promptly granted this request and before a quarter hour had passed, a footman was on his way to Netherfield with a note. Another was sent express to London, requesting that Mr. Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, employ a Bow Street Runner or investigator on his behalf.

“Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, the son of the Earl of Melbridge, is your cousin, sir?” In awe of the grand gentleman

before him, Sir William momentarily forgot his magisterial sternness.

“He is,” said Mr. Darcy, his mien returning to the stony expression that Elizabeth had come to regard as his natural expression.

“Is the Earl your direct relative or connected through his marriage, sir?” asked Sir William, either uncaring or unconscious of his impertinence.

“He is my late mother’s brother, sir,” was the terse reply.

“I am very sorry for your loss,” Elizabeth said, her voice barely above a whisper.

As Mr. Darcy’s gaze met hers, his haughty demeanour thawed, and the lines on his face relaxed. “I thank you, Miss Elizabeth. She has been gone a long time now, but the loss can never fully be erased.”

“I feel very fortunate to have both of my parents still,” she replied.

Lydia observed the pair with interest, noticing how their interaction mirrored the dynamic she often saw between Harriet and Colonel Forster — not quite flirtatious, but definitely not a typical conversation. Both Colonel Forster and Mr. Darcy were far too proper to openly flirt with a lady. Regardless of how dull Lydia thought such propriety, she decided that she should have to watch Mr. Darcy and her sister, for she was not quite certain what was behind that. Did Mr. Darcy like Lizzy? What a joke that would be!

They spoke a while longer, with Sir William expressing a desire that there should be a town meeting soon, allowing all those in the area to write to distant relations inquiring if they had heard anything of Mr. Witting. Mr. Darcy, in a show of great generosity, offered to pay the cost of posting all such letters. There was not much more that could be done at that moment. Mr. Darcy and Sir William were invited to stay for dinner, but only Sir William accepted. Mr. Darcy

thought that he ought to return to Netherfield, since his friend would be curious about what was happening.



As she brushed her hair, Elizabeth looked at her reflection in the mirror. She enjoyed caring for her own hair before bed, leaving Sarah to assist her sisters. Her hair, curlier than her sisters', often suffered from rough brushing by those who lacked curly hair themselves, resulting in great pain.

The sound of a knock interrupted the silence, causing Elizabeth to beckon the visitor to come in. As Jane entered, her white nightdress and her pale blonde hair styled in two long plaits made her look like an angel. She smiled at Elizabeth and sat on the bed, watching as she finished brushing her hair and secured it in a long plait of her own. When she was finished, she tied a pink ribbon around the end, before joining her sister on her bed.

“So, Mr. Bingley will not be leaving for London,” said Elizabeth, her eyes dancing with mischief. “Are you very pleased, Jane?”

“Oh, Lizzy.” Jane attempted to look stern but failed given the embarrassment writ on her countenance. “How can I be? A man is missing and Mr. Bingley and the others at Netherfield have been deemed suspects.”

“Only technically. I cannot believe that Sir William actually believes that any of them would have anything to do with Mr. Witting’s disappearance.” Elizabeth patted her sister’s hand, trying to hide the uncertainty in her own voice.

“Do you truly think he was harmed? I cannot think why anyone would wish to hurt him,” said Jane, laying back on the bed. “I met Mr. Witting once, you know. I didn’t know who he was, but once I heard his description, I’m almost certain it was him. He was in Clarke’s library. I was browsing the books to find something I want to read. I hadn’t reserved anything, but I caught sight of the book I had been longing to read on the shelf. Mr. Witting got to it first, but upon seeing

my disappointment, he gave it to me. He said he could wait until I was finished with it. Such a kind man could not have angered someone so much.”

“He does sound very kind. Mr. Darcy speaks very well of him, too. I do not know why or if anyone would harm him, but that is what Sir William is trying to discover.”

Jane’s eyes glistened with tears, her chin nodding slightly as she attempted to wipe them away. Elizabeth pulled her sister into a comforting embrace, feeling the softness of her sister’s hair against her cheek. Jane quickly regained her composure, as she was not the type to remain emotional for long. It was likely her fear that Mr. Bingley would be blamed that had broken her serene manner now.

“You look troubled as well, Lizzy.” Jane scrutinised Elizabeth, uncertain what might cause her sister such concern.

“Do I?” Elizabeth let go of her sister and laid back so she could stare at the ceiling. “It’s not only Mr. Witting’s disappearance that troubles me. I feel I’ve been too harsh in my judgement of Mr. Darcy when I hardly know him.”

“What do you mean?” Jane asked, her brow furrowing with confusion.

Elizabeth was initially perplexed by her sister’s confusion, but then understood her sister’s thoughts were on the valet’s disappearance. “I never believed he was involved in Mr. Witting’s disappearance. I do not at all suspect him of that,” she assured Jane. “I mean, in the matter with Mr. Wickham. I condemned him without hearing his side of the story. I trusted Mr. Wickham completely, but now I worry that I was mistaken. How is it possible for someone who values their servant so much to coldly dismiss their father’s godson?”

Jane’s sister’s words caused a faint glimmer of happiness to shine through her troubled face. She always made an effort to see the best in people, and she believed she was right in this case. There certainly must have been some misunderstanding between the two men. She had never thought Mr. Darcy so deficient in goodness as Elizabeth did, but now she was even more convinced of his virtues. “Our



Uncle Phillips told me once that wills are often the cause of breaches in families. One party believes the deceased promised them something — and perhaps they did, verbally or otherwise — but it was never added to the will. Or perhaps there were limitations or clauses that cannot be met by one or other of those involved. Neither need be duplicitous in order for both to believe themselves in the right.”

Elizabeth had to admit that her sister spoke sense. “I fear that I was set against him ever since the first assembly. It’s surprising to discover that I have been blind to my own tendencies of prejudice and vanity. Why else would I have judged so quickly?”

Jane urged her sister to not abuse herself so, but Elizabeth could not be swayed. “I must do justice to Mr. Darcy. When next I talk with him, I must ask him for his account of the matter, if he will tell me it. I also must tell him what Mr. Wickham says of him, in case Mr. Wickham is spreading tales.”

Jane supported the idea of letting Mr. Darcy know what was being said against him so he could have an opportunity to defend himself. The sisters remained in Elizabeth’s room, although their conversation turned to lighter subjects. Eventually, they both drifted off to sleep, but Elizabeth’s slumber was restless.

## Chapter 3

A loud and steady thumping noise jolted Witting awake from his slumber. It took him a few moments to shake off the remnants of his dreams and realise he was no longer asleep. He found himself in such odd circumstances upon awakening that his bewilderment was understandable.

Small windows high on the walls let in soft rays of light, creating a subtle glow in the dim chamber. The room, which had a dirt floor and brick walls, was quite spacious. Most of the room was dominated by two mountains of unsightly and malodorous rags. He had previously mistaken them for haystacks due to their size and shape; he would have much preferred haystacks, given the comparative odours of a barn compared to the miasma that currently permeated the chamber. One fabric mountain was mainly composed of white rags, while the other contained a mixture of colours, with a predominance of brown and grey. Two large, serviceable wooden doors stood at the far end of the room, big enough for a carriage to pass through when opened.

He tried to rise but felt unsteady and promptly sat back down, nearly spilling a dish of food. Upon laying eyes on the food, his stomach began to grumble loudly. The food was not the sort he was used to. Not even the poorest tenants of Mr. Darcy had to live on thin gruel and barley water. He looked around, hoping to find some utensils to eat with, but there were none to be had. As he lifted the bowl of slimy, cold gruel, he wrinkled his nose at the unpleasant aroma of spoilt milk that came from it. He took a sip, hoping he would not regret his actions later. The taste was just as revolting as the foul smell, yet his intense hunger compelled him to finish the serving.

Although it had a slight cabbage aftertaste, the barley water was a significant improvement over the gruel. When he had finished his repast, he leaned back against the cold wall and closed his eyes. He comforted himself with the thought that he would only rest briefly, as he had to determine his

location and plan how he would return to Netherfield. To accomplish this, he needed to see if those doors were locked.



“Good morning, Kitty. Good morning, Lydia,” said Elizabeth as she entered Longbourn’s kitchens.

The sound of their sister’s sudden appearance in the kitchens made the two girls jump. “Good morning, Lizzy,” they said together once they had calmed their racing hearts.

“It is rare that I find you two awake so early.” The corners of Elizabeth’s mouth lifted as she regarded her sisters.

“Well, yes,” said Lydia. “That is true. I have decided, however, that we ought to change that. *Carp deem*, and all that.”

Elizabeth could not help but stifle a chuckle at her sister’s incorrect pronunciation of the Latin phrase. “Indeed. Would you both like to join me on my morning walk?”

Kitty’s gaze shifted towards Sarah, who seemed completely absorbed in kneading bread dough. Elizabeth’s gaze followed the same path as her sister’s. “What are you two up to?” she asked as she turned back to Kitty.

“I have no notion of what you mean by that,” said Lydia with such innocence that Elizabeth nearly believed her. “We are just waiting for Hill’s muffins to finish baking. There is nothing more delightful as warm muffins dripping with melting butter.”

Elizabeth had to agree with the sentiment, but she did not believe it was the reason why her youngest sisters were in the kitchens. She smiled warmly at Lydia and said, “Very well! Perhaps I shall wait with you, then we may all walk together after we break our fasts.”

“No!” cried Lydia. “I mean, no, you don’t have to do that. The muffins have only just gone into the oven. It will take some time for them to be ready. We can bring you some

muffins once they've cooled down if you walk your usual route."

Kitty nodded enthusiastically in agreement. "We will wrap them up and bring butter and a knife with us, in a basket. We could have a picnic to break our fasts."

Sarah exited to attend to other tasks after placing the dough in a covered bowl to rise and changing her apron. As soon as she had left, Elizabeth rebuked her sisters, "I know what you are about. I shall not let you distress Sarah."

"Lizzy! We must question her! Surely you must know that we could ask questions that Sir William wouldn't think of," whined Lydia.

Elizabeth considered her sister and her imprudent manner. If she forbade them from questioning Sarah or anyone else, it would be of little use. They never listened to her or Jane anyhow. "Very well," she agreed after several minutes of listening to her sisters' arguments. "I shall do the questioning, however. You may have good intentions, dear sisters, but you have not yet mastered subtlety."

"Oh Lizzy! Thank you! I thought you were going to say that you forbid us to speak with her and were going to tell Papa," Lydia exclaimed.

Kitty agreed. "I was certain of it. I am so glad you will not."

"We will not be harsh or accusatory," said Elizabeth sternly, "and you shall be mostly silent. I shall not interrogate her, just ask her a few questions about her missing friend."

Her sisters agreed, albeit with some pouting.

As Sarah walked into the room carrying a basket brimming with eggs she had collected, Elizabeth took a step towards her. Sarah's slightly untidy appearance and red-rimmed eyes caught Elizabeth's attention as she got closer to the maid. "Good morning, Sarah," she said softly.

"Good morning, Miss Lizzy," said Sarah with a small smile and a curtsy.

“How are you this morning, Sarah?”

“I am well, Miss. I hope you are as well. Can I assist you with something? The bread will be awhile yet, but the muffins will be done soon, or I can fry you an egg.”

“No, Sarah. I do not need anything. I just wished to know, since Mr. Witting has gone missing and he was a friend of yours, if you truly are well,” asked Elizabeth. “I know it is not regular, but you can speak to me of it, if you wish.”

The maid’s eyes grew as wide as saucers. “That is very kind, Miss,” she said as she wrung her apron with her hands. “I shall be well. I’m sure Mr. Witting is just off visiting his brother, as Sir William thought at first. A lost hat don’t mean anything, Hill says.”

“I’m sure that is true,” said Elizabeth with a reassuring smile. “Mr. Witting never mentioned to you any other friends or family that he might visit, did he? He did not have parents or a lover?”

Sarah blushed as red as her bright hair. “Everybody has parents, miss,” she said, ignoring the second half of the question. “Or they did at some time. I never heard Mr. Witting speak of his parents, though. I don’t know if they are still alive or not.”

“I see, and there was no one else he cared for that you know of? I heard that he had some sort of understanding with someone, but perhaps I was mistaken.”

Eager to hear the maid’s response, Kitty and Lydia leaned forward with anticipation.

“Not that I know of, Miss. I am sure I wouldn’t know. None of my business, who Mr. Witting might care for.” Sarah calmly separated a few eggs from the overcrowded basket, carefully schooling her features into a neutral expression. “The new hens are laying very well. If only the old ones would keep laying, we wouldn’t have to turn them into food for the hounds.”

Elizabeth ignored the diversion and responded to only what Sarah said about Mr. Witting. “Of course, I was just

wondering. It would be dreadful if we all worried for nothing when Mr. Witting had only gone off to see a sick relative. Well, my sisters and I shall go on our walk now. Will you be so kind as to set some muffins aside for us?"

"In the breakfast parlour, Miss?" asked Sarah. Her colour faded slightly, now that she was on more familiar ground. It never was comfortable to have family members down in the kitchen. Sometimes Miss Elizabeth would pass this way when leaving for her morning walk, in order to snatch up some food, but usually no one lingered.

"I would rather you not, if you please. If you do that, my father will take them. You know how he is. I'd prefer you set them aside until they are called for."

"Of course, Miss," said Sarah. "I'll wrap them up with a hot brick, so they'll be warm still."

"Very good. Thank you." With that, Elizabeth forcefully directed her sisters out the back door.

"Lizzy!" cried Kitty. "You didn't ask her very much! You did not even ask about her whereabouts when Mr. Witting disappeared."

"We do not know what time it was when Mr. Witting went missing. Shall we have every person account for their movements for the twelve hours between when Mr. Darcy dismissed his valet for the evening and the next morning? Most of that time people shall not have anything to say for besides that they were asleep. It is not like the stories where there is only a half hour window in which the crime could have occurred."

"You don't actually think that Mr. Witting is just off visiting some relation, do you?" asked Lydia.

"Of course not," Elizabeth confirmed.

"Then why did you say as much to Sarah?"

"I was hoping to learn if there was an understanding between her and Mr. Witting."

“But personal servants can’t marry,” said Lydia, confused.

“They can if their employers allow it,” said Elizabeth with a shrug. “It is simply that most do not. Pemberley is a large estate, though. I have heard of it on large estates. The various wives and mothers arrange it so they watch out for each other’s children when the others are busy. Then there are a new generation of servants, already trained and used to life in service, when the older servants retire. Besides, Mr. and Mrs. Hill are married.”

“But they are old,” said Lydia.

“They were not always old, dearest,” Elizabeth said with a laugh.

“But they never had children,” said Kitty.

“This is true,” confirmed Elizabeth. Memories of her childhood flooded back, specifically a few months when her mother had comforted Mrs. Hill more often than the other way around. It had struck her as strange at the time, but now she realised what might have caused such behaviour from Mrs. Hill, who had become increasingly involved in caring for baby Lydia shortly afterwards.

Elizabeth did her best to appease her sisters, “Let’s speak to Sarah again another time. We don’t want to overwhelm her.”

“Ah!” cried Lydia. “It reminds me of when Sir Francis was on board the ship and that Countess was murdered. Without interrogating anyone, he discovered the murderer and alibis by conversing and eavesdropping on passengers. The steward’s revelation about the Earl’s drunken state made everything clear. Then Sir Francis...”

Lydia came to an abrupt stop in the middle of her speech, remaining motionless and quiet.

“What is it, Lydie?” asked Kitty. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

Elizabeth, too, was worried, and she shook Lydia’s shoulders gently.

“I am well,” said Lydia, pushing Elizabeth’s hands away. “I just realised something.”

“What?” asked Elizabeth.

“If Mr. Witting is dead — which, pray to the Lord, he is not — we must remember what Sir Francis says.”

“The three most lethal forces in the world are love, money, and fear,” Elizabeth and Lydia said together, while Kitty stared at them.

All three sisters were silent for several minutes, lost in their thoughts — Elizabeth and Lydia about the implications of what they had realised, while Kitty wondered how long they should have to walk before they could return to Longbourn and eat. She was dreadfully hungry.

“You don’t think Sarah had anything to do with it, do you?” Lydia’s voice was barely audible as she spoke.

“Of course not!” Elizabeth’s speech was briefly interrupted as they crossed a small stream. “But... we cannot forget that servants are people. Just like people of our class, they experience love, hate, and fear. Mr. Darcy’s remarks and my observations lead me to believe that Sarah and Mr. Witting were very much in love. It is still possible that someone else, maybe a former lover or someone with unrequited love for Sarah, was jealous of Mr. Witting. They may have believed that his leaving would make their path clear.” Elizabeth was warming to her subject and her voice grew more confident. “Or there might have been a woman who believed herself ill-used by Mr. Witting in some way. Mr. Darcy says he was an honourable man, but just because Mr. Witting might have believed he acted honourably does not mean that a lady would have the same perception.”

While Lydia nodded in understanding, Kitty’s brow furrowed in confusion. Realising that Kitty might be too innocent to understand — and not wishing to corrupt her — Elizabeth did not explain further.

“I will try to speak to Polly and Hannah,” said Lydia. “I will do just as you did. I shall not be interrogative but



comforting.”

“Are you certain you can do so?” asked Elizabeth. “You will not become too excited if one of them says something interesting and give yourself away?”

Lydia assured Elizabeth that she could be discreet and pleaded for a chance to prove it. Reluctantly, Elizabeth agreed. “But we are in this all together. We cannot tell Papa, or let anyone who will tell Papa find out, or he will be angry. I don’t enjoy going around behind his back, but Sir William and Papa are conspicuous. People might say things to us or around us that are useful. But if we are to do this, we cannot hide things from each other. Papa was right when he said that there might be danger. One of us can’t go poking around without letting one of the others know what we are doing or where we are going.”

Her sisters made a solemn vow to adhere to these conditions. Having walked a considerable distance, they veered onto a path that would lead them back to Longbourn. There were only a few carriages and riders passing them as they walked that early in the morning.

“That is not a militia officer,” said Lydia, after a red-coated man passed them on horseback.

Elizabeth looked at her questioningly.

“That officer,” said Lydia, gesturing to the road behind them. There were two riders, one of whom was an officer. “His uniform is that of an officer from the regulars.”

“How do you know that?” asked Elizabeth, surprised that her sister paid such attention.

“I am not so silly as Papa thinks,” said Lydia defensively. “I pay attention to things.”

“I did not say you were silly. I just asked how you know that. Where did you learn what a uniform from the regulars looked like?” asked Elizabeth soothingly.

“In the newspaper,” said Lydia. She did not elaborate further. As they were almost back to Longbourn, Elizabeth could not discuss the matter further. She felt rather like a

rotten sister. She knew that Lydia often asked for the newspaper after her father was finished with it, but she had assumed that Lydia was just reading the gossip pages. As they entered Longbourn, Mrs. Hill greeted them with a smile and asked them if they had enjoyed their walk, before telling them that the rest of the family was all gathered for breakfast. They went thither to join them, after requesting that the basket of muffins set aside would be brought up.



“The impertinence!” exclaimed Miss Bingley. “Imagine such a man as he questioning me as to my whereabouts during and after the ball.”

Her audience comprised all the occupants of Netherfield, including the newly arrived Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lord Barlow. The two brothers listened with scarce attention to her diatribe against the magistrate. She had begun nearly a quarter hour before, ever since the magistrate had departed.

“He questioned everyone in the house,” said Mr. Bingley. Even that typically unflappable gentleman had reached the limits of his patience with his youngest sister. “He asked merely as a matter of course. I cannot imagine he actually suspects you, but he must be seen as impartial.”

“Indeed,” agreed Colonel Fitzwilliam, who had arrived while Sir William was questioning some of the servants. “Although you had nothing to do with the matter, it is always possible that something you noticed could provide a hint as to where Mr. Witting has gone or who might have taken him.”

Miss Bingley was puzzled. She could not disagree with the son of an earl, but she did not want him to think she was the sort to have witnessed anything having to do with a crime. Therefore, she simply flashed him and his noble brother a charming smile and agreed that “Of course, but I did not see anything. I am only concerned that Sir William is wasting time better spent elsewhere in his search.”

Lord Barlow rolled his eyes as soon as Miss Bingley's back was turned. He, as the highest-ranking gentleman at Netherfield, had become her focus. He had only been in the house but mere hours and yet he was ready to return to London. He only came to Hertfordshire because he promised his brother he would help search for Mr. Witting, despite Miss Bingley being there. As it was, he made sure he was never alone, and locked his door in the evenings, lest Miss Bingley end up his viscountess.

While his mind wandered, Miss Bingley's monologue transitioned to the apparently awful neighbours in the vicinity. She complained most about a family called the Bennets, who had five daughters and were, according to her, grasping and sly.

"That is enough, Caroline," said Mr. Bingley sharply. "I will not have you disparage my friends. I thought they were your friends as well, or so you act when Miss Bennet or Miss Elizabeth are about."

"They are not so dreadful as the rest, I will allow," said Miss Bingley, her voice placating. Likely, she knew she had pushed the limits of her brother's tolerance and did not wish to see him angered. Barlow had never known Bingley to become angry, and he thought it might be a rather amusing sight. As she continued to speak, Miss Bingley managed to insult the Bennets even more, skilfully hiding her disdain behind thinly veiled compliments. Mr. Bingley could stand it no longer and left the room. Miss Bingley followed.

"Are they so bad as she says?" Barlow asked his cousin.

Darcy considered for several moments before answering. "Most of the family is not as genteel as they ought to be," he said. "The mother comes from trade and the father has not tried to educate her or their youngest three daughters. The youngest three are all out, despite being too young and with their elder sisters unmarried. They run rather wild, but I see no real harm in them. They are not vicious or unkind, simply ignorant. The eldest two daughters are all that ladies

ought to be, although I have no notion as to where they received such training and manners.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam let out a loud laugh. “That speech was worthy of Lady Catherine herself.”

Darcy frowned. “It is nothing but the truth.”

“I daresay you would find less fault with them if they were of noble birth. Is not Lady Catherine herself quite vulgar? And imagine how Anne would be if she were not ailing, spoilt as she is?” asked Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Remember last time you visited, and Anne demanded that you marry her and locked herself in her room for a fortnight after you refused? Surely, they cannot be so terrible as that.”

Mrs. Hurst, who Darcy had forgot was still there, then piped up and began to detail the faults of the Bennets further, although she was not so vapid as Miss Bingley. Colonel Fitzwilliam had to admit that they seemed vulgar, although harmless, unlike Lady Catherine, who meddled in the lives of others and often caused harm in so doing.

This conclusion having been reached, Mr. Darcy took himself off to the billiard room to avoid any further discussion of the Bennets’ merits and faults.

## Chapter 4

Mr. Witting woke up from an uncomfortable sleep with a deep pain in his neck. His eyes blinked open to find the same ale as before, but this time accompanied by fresh brown bread and a hard-cooked egg instead of the gruel. Once more, the meal arrived without any utensils. Luckily, the egg was cooked enough to eat with his hands.

He forced himself to sit up and unsteadily reached for his mug. He drank the bitter liquid and afterwards sensed an improvement in his condition. He cautiously attempted to stand once more, relieved that this time the room did not sway. Encouraged, he approached the doors and attempted to open them, only to find them locked. He exerted all his strength, thrusting his shoulder against them, but they did not budge. Frustrated, he knelt down and slid his hand under the door, trying to gain leverage and pull it towards him. Try as he might, his fingers were too large for the task. He started to assess his surroundings, feeling the rough, cold walls for any sign of an exit. None of the bricks were loose. He might be able to dig out, but that would take a great deal of time.

He sighed deeply as he sat back on his haunches, thinking about what to do next. He suspected the food or drink had been drugged, as he could feel himself getting sleepy once more. But they had fed him, and the room in which he was held was safe and warm. He didn't know how it was heated, for he saw no stove or fire. He also didn't know if friend or foe held him here or why. Not knowing what further steps to take, at least until his head cleared again, he laid down against the stack of coloured rags, trying to ignore the smell.



An express rider arrived in the late morning, bringing word from Mr. Witting's brother that the man had not gone to see him, nor had he received any news of plans for travel

elsewhere. The brother, displaying proper fraternal concern, requested to be kept informed about the younger Mr. Witting. Thus, having concluded that some harm must have come to Mr. Witting, both Mr. Darcy and Sir William concluded that the idea of a town meeting must come to fruition. Luckily, news of this sort travelled quickly in Meryton, especially when Lady Lucas and Mrs. Bennet were both involved in the telling. By noon, the entire parish gathered in the church, the only place in the town that could hold such a crowd.

Despite their solemn faces, the church was abuzz with gossip as the locals speculated about the true reasons behind Mr. Witting's disappearance. There were diverse and imaginative rumours about Mr. Witting, ranging from him being a French spy to a secret elopement with a pub-keeper's daughter. Despite not believing any of it, Elizabeth listened with interest, hoping she might learn something from all of the whispers.

Over the noise, the Reverend Hadley pleaded for anyone with information on Mr. Witting's whereabouts to step forward, promising a generous financial reward for any tips resulting from their help. Writing materials were provided for those who wished to write letters to their distant friends and family, including instructions on how to reach Mr. Darcy with any information and a detailed description of Mr. Witting.

"What reward might one hope to receive, I wonder, if one were to find the servant?" The youngest Lucas boy asked his next eldest brother as their family left the church.

"Mr. Darcy is very rich, so it is sure to be several pounds at least," said his brother.

"If only I were wealthy," announced the first child, "I would indulge in all manner of sweets and Charlotte would not be able to object!"

"I still could," said Charlotte, "for you would make yourself sick. Now, it is no matter, unless you have accurate information to give. I shall not have you telling lies to Mr. Darcy and giving false leads and wasting everyone's time."

Her brothers protested their innocence, claiming they had no notion of presenting false leads.

The other topic of discussion before and after church had been the two additional gentlemen sitting with the Netherfield party. They both looked to be about thirty and looked very much like Mr. Darcy, although their colouring was fairer. Mrs. Bennet speculated that they must be relations of his. Mr. Collins, wondering if this also meant that they were relations of Lady Catherine, determined to find out. Elizabeth had not known of this determination on his part until he approached her quite breathlessly as she was donning her pelisse to depart.

“Three. Nephews. Lady. Catherine. Quite well. So condescending. The viscount. Colonel,” said Mr. Collins in gasps.

After they were all seated together in the carriage and he had caught his breath, Mr. Collins was able to explain in greater detail. The strangers were Mr. Darcy’s cousins, Lord Barlow and Colonel Fitzwilliam. They were the sons of Lord Melbridge, Lady Catherine’s elder brother. This was not explained so succinctly as this, however, but in a monologue by Mr. Collins expressing how honoured he was to have met the noble gentlemen and what delight he might bring to Lady Catherine when he was able to share word of them with her ladyship upon his return to Hunsford.

Elizabeth paid little mind to her cousin’s discourse. Instead, her thoughts dwelt upon the newest visitors to Netherfield and when she might be introduced to them. Neither were particularly handsome, but so seldom were there new people in the area that such company must be welcome.

Mrs. Bennet’s mind was likewise occupied, although her thoughts about the visiting gentlemen were quite different. She was planning which of her daughters would marry each of them. Of course, Jane was already as good as betrothed to Mr. Bingley. Such a shame, really, that Mr. Bingley couldn’t have liked one of the others better, for Jane was meant to be a viscountess. Elizabeth had already declined one highly suitable marriage proposal from Mr. Collins, thereby making

her unworthy of an earl's son. Mary was far too plain to interest those of such rank. Therefore, before the carriage arrived back at Longbourn, Mrs. Bennet had decided that Colonel Fitzwilliam was for Lydia and Lord Barlow was for Kitty.

Thus, having predetermined the fates of her youngest two daughters, she hurried to arrange with her housekeeper many opportunities for the young people to be put in each other's way.



Lydia burst into Elizabeth's room, with Kitty right behind her. Elizabeth and Jane sat side by side, with Elizabeth reading aloud and Jane embroidering handkerchiefs for their mother's birthday gift.

"I know what happened to Mr. Witting," proclaimed Lydia.

"You do?" asked Elizabeth, interestedly.

"I do." Lydia sounded triumphant.

Elizabeth moved over on her bed to allow her younger sisters enough room to sit.

"Well," Lydia said dramatically once she was settled, "The maids were coming home when we came upon them on the grounds. We walked back with them and talked with them a little, saying that Mr. Witting going missing was a shame and asking if they had been friends with him."

Kitty added, "I asked if they thought Sarah would be well, or if she was very broken up about it."

"They weren't very kind towards Sarah at all!" exclaimed Lydia. "They called her a nasty, freckled girl, and said that they did not know what Mr. Witting saw in her. They claimed that Sarah would be well enough, given that she didn't care a bit for Mr. Witting. They thought she was just pretending to, since Pemberley lets servants marry and it



would be a step up for Sarah. She would probably be made lady's maid when Mr. Darcy takes a wife."

"Then they said that Mr. Witting would do much better with one of them, since they are better at doing hair and would be better lady's maids," said Kitty.

"Yes. And they talked about how Mr. Witting was so handsome, and it would be a shame if he were dead, because he was so handsome that he ought not to die, but they did not seem very upset about it." Lydia couldn't contain her excitement and was practically bouncing with glee.

"But how does this tell you what has happened to Mr. Witting?" asked Elizabeth.

"Don't you see?" exclaimed Lydia. "I believe their sadness is just an act, as they are the ones keeping him captive. Their plan is to make him fall in love with one of them, which he will, of course. They will be kind to him while the other is cruel, which just makes a person fall in love. Once he falls in love and agrees to their plan, he will reappear, and they will leave for Pemberley together."

"Or they tried to poison Sarah and poisoned Mr. Witting accidentally instead," added Kitty. "Lydia says that is how it always happens in the penny papers."

"Oh yes, there might be that," said Lydia.

"But how did two women of Polly and Hannah's size subdue a man of Mr. Witting's size?" Elizabeth kept her composure, but only barely, as she spoke. She did not wish to insult her sisters by laughing at them.

Lydia waved this away. "They might have had help, of course, or if he was dead, they could have cut up the body, so it was easier to carry."

"Without anyone seeing or finding any hint of blood?"

"They are *maids*," said Lydia with exasperation. "They could clean everything. Besides, would anyone ever suspect that one of the maids was up to something if they saw her wearing a bloody apron? No, they would just assume that she had helped slaughter one of the chickens or something."

Elizabeth restrained her laughter by biting the insides of her cheeks. Jane was the one who replied, “While I appreciate your reasoning, Lydia, I beg you not to share it with others. We might mention what the maids told you to Sir William, though.”

Lydia’s face fell. “You don’t think I am right, do you?” she asked.

“We just think there isn’t enough evidence. It could be *possible*,” said Elizabeth, trying to be diplomatic, “but I do not think it likely.”

Lydia huffed and left the room. Kitty looked torn between Jane and Lizzy or Lydia, but ultimately followed after her younger sister.

“They certainly have vivid imaginations,” said Jane.

“That they do. I just wonder if I am making a mistake by including them,” Elizabeth replied.

“I think,” said Jane slowly, “that if you did not, they would be off on their own doing the same thing. They are caring girls, and they wish for Mr. Witting to be found and for Mr. Darcy’s suffering to be over.”

“Only you could turn vice into virtue, Jane,” said Elizabeth with a laugh. “But you are probably right. As long as they work with me, I can steer them towards safer tasks, even if they start suspecting our maids of being murderers. Chopping the body into pieces? Where did Lydia come up with that? Sir Francis’ stories never go into detail about the blood and gore. Usually, people are poisoned and they try to pass it off as natural.”

“I do not know, but perhaps we ought to check on what else they are reading,” said Jane. “They have been walking to town and to the circulating library alone.”

Elizabeth agreed, then swiftly brought the conversation back to what they were discussing before Lydia interrupted.

## Chapter 5

The sound of a cart's wheels startled Witting. His immediate instinct was to stand and attempt to escape, but he was quickly restrained by a pair of strong arms and a hand clamped over his mouth. "I am a friend. You must stay silent and remain where you are. Do not attempt to escape. I am trying to save your life. Do you understand?" asked a man's voice.

Witting nodded his understanding. The man released his grip and disappeared in an instant. Witting only caught a glimpse of dark clothes before the man was gone. The internal conflict raged within Witting as he contemplated whether to comply with the cryptic instructions of the mysterious man. If he followed them, he might lose a chance to escape. But if he did not, and the man was telling the truth, he might risk his life by defying the orders.

The wheels of the cart became noisier until a man's gravelly voice shouted, "far 'nuf". The large chamber then reverberated with the sound of labourers moving about and men's voices. They debated if they ought to run more white paper or if it was time to change to brown for a while. One of the men pointed out that they needed to make more pamphlets, which they couldn't do with white paper. Another said the owner would notice if there was not enough white paper for sending to London. Witting couldn't hear the remainder of the conversation because the men resumed working and other noises drowned out their voices.

A quarter-hour later, the cart was filled and driven away. The large doors closed with a resounding bang that echoed throughout the chamber. Then there was only the sound of a solitary pair of footsteps coming closer. Witting's muscles stiffened as the man drew near, prepared to fight back if he had the chance. When the man finally came into view, he said softly, "Do not be alarmed."

The man was tall and slim, with light red hair that was almost blonde. His canvas attire had a worn and aged appearance, with areas that were bleached lighter than the rest of the garments. Despite his dishevelled appearance, he had a kind expression and gentle eyes.

“I believe I shall judge for myself if I ought to be alarmed once you tell me more,” said Witting, hoping his voice sounded steady.

The man sat down on the ground cross-legged, then said, “Very well. Perhaps it is best if we begin with introductions. My name is Arthur.”

“No surname?” Witting asked.

“I think it best if I do not reveal that for now,” said Arthur, his eyes sparkling with mirth. Witting had no notion of what was so funny.

“Very well, Arthur. I am Mr. Kevin Witting.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Witting, although I do wish it were under better circumstances,” replied Arthur.

“Indeed,” replied the valet.

“I know you have no reason to trust me,” continued Arthur. “But you must. Men seek to harm you, and I cannot allow them to succeed. If you leave here without immediately travelling abroad, I fear for your safety.”

“Why would anyone wish me harm? And why can you not just request that Mr. Darcy, my master, send me to Derbyshire? Surely a distance of over a hundred miles is far enough.”

“I fear it may not be. These men believe you to have information that would send them to the gallows. They would travel that far to save their necks.”

Witting had no notion of what the man was speaking of. The only thing he could remember was eating at the inn with Mr. Hill and a few other servants, then talking to Sarah. The Meryton area had experienced some discontent among the

farm workers due to Mr. Bingley's adoption of the threshing machines during the harvest, but harvest was over.

"But what do they believe I know?" Witting asked

"I cannot tell you. I can just say that your snooping around may have uncovered information that will prove lethal to some people."

"And how are you connected to this?"

"That I will not tell you, either. I shall only say that I have taken you into my care for the time being. In a few days, there is a ship sailing for America that you shall board. Then you will be safe and my life may return to what it was."

"And what if I refuse or if I return to England after I arrive in America?"

"That would be most dangerous for both of us. I am dreadfully sorry about this. It is the only option to save us both."

Witting pondered the man for a moment. His voice was not that of a gentleman, but he had obviously had some sort of education, even if it was just at the knee of a relative. His speech was devoid of the roughness and cant commonly found among the poor. It was much more like that of the merchants and townspeople in Meryton.

"Will you discontinue drugging me if I agree?" Witting asked, hoping to confirm his supposition.

Arthur hesitated. "Only if you promise not to try to escape or shout the place down."

Witting nodded his agreement, although he did not know if he would keep his word that he would not attempt to escape.

"There will be a boy I have to send in here to sort the rags. You must promise that you shall not harm him either."

Witting agreed to this condition as well.

"If you break your word," said Arthur sternly, "we shall both be in great danger."

Witting told the other man that he understood the seriousness of the situation.

“Capital. Now I shall fetch for you some food and drink.”

“Might I have some fresh water as well?”

“For drinking or for washing?”

“For both.”

Arthur frowned. “The water here is not very good. The papermaking, you know. I might be able to get you some for washing, but ale and barley water are better for drinking.”

Witting thanked his captor, who then left him alone for nearly an hour. When he came back, he had a plate of hard brown bread, a small, tough chicken piece, and a small bucket of soapy water with him. Thankful for the ability to wash and a receptacle with which to care for other needs, he bade Arthur farewell. Arthur left, barring the large doors behind him.



“Sarah, will you alter this dress for me? Kitty has outgrown it, but it is far too long for me.” Elizabeth held up the dress in question so her maid could see.

“Of course, Miss.” Sarah set aside her mending and inspected the dress Elizabeth handed her, searching for any signs of wear or discolouration.

“Miss Kitty is growing so quickly,” said Sarah. “This dress looks almost new. She didn’t want to use this fabric for anything else?”

“No. You know how she and Lydia can be. They cannot ever be bothered to save unless forced to do so. Since they are growing so quickly, they get new gowns so often they do not care for the old. The only things they bother to mend or make over are bonnets and gloves.” Elizabeth sighed. “I ought to be glad for their frivolity, for it serves me well, but I cannot be.”

Sarah nodded in understanding. One did not typically speak so freely with the servants, but Sarah had been with the Bennets nearly her whole life and was not a gossip. In Elizabeth's chambers, Sarah assisted her in changing gowns.

"We'll need to let it out a bit at the bosom and take it in around your hips," explained Sarah as she skilfully pinned, folded, and occasionally made markings on the fabric with a pencil. "Do you still have any of that rose lace?"

"I don't. Lydia took it last week to make over her white bonnet." Elizabeth frowned, remembering that her sister had never even asked before taking the lace. "Father made her give me the cost of it to replace it, but I have not got to it yet."

"That is just as well. White lace would look better, anyhow," Sarah said through the pins in her lips.

"I will buy white, then, when next I go to the milliner's shop." Elizabeth lifted her arms to allow Sarah access to the seams there, then asked, "Do you have any siblings, Sarah? I do not remember you ever mentioning any in my hearing."

"Yes, Miss Lizzy," said Sarah. Her speech was clearer now that she no longer spoke around pins. "There were seven of us to begin with, but now there are only four; there's two girls and two boys. I'm the youngest of all. My sister and brothers are all grown and with families of their own."

"You have nieces and nephews, then?" asked Elizabeth cheerfully.

Elizabeth must have moved for Sarah begged her to remain still before answering, "I have three nephews. One just born a month ago, one a year old and one four years old. It's rather difficult on my brothers and their families though, as the little ones need so much care and can't help out yet. Expensive, children are. And with the mill being as it is," Sarah shrugged. "I am finished with pinning now, Miss Lizzy. We can get you back into your regular gown now, if you wish."

Elizabeth and Sarah were careful as they removed the gown so Elizabeth wouldn't get jabbed by pins.

“Is there anything my family can do to assist your brothers and their families?” asked Elizabeth. “Does my father know about this?”

Sarah said that he did know. “He has been very kind. Without his aid, I do not know what my family would do. I am thankful for my position here, with such an excellent family and master. Now, is this dress for tomorrow, or do I have some time before it needs to be ready?”

“Tomorrow?” asked Elizabeth.

“Your mother has a dinner planned. Did you not know?”

“I knew nothing of it.” Elizabeth wondered why she had not been told about the dinner, but it did explain why Hill had looked so tired when Elizabeth had seen her earlier.

“It is just a small party, with a few officers, local families, and the Netherfield party. There are several more parties in the next fortnight as well.”

Elizabeth sighed in exasperation. It was only natural for her mother to organise multiple dinners during the viscount’s stay at Netherfield. Mrs. Bennet probably already had decided which daughter each of the earl’s sons was to marry. Elizabeth thanked Sarah for the news and assured her that there was no need to hurry with finishing the gown for the morrow. It seemed as if there would be plenty of opportunities for Elizabeth to wear the gown in the near future, if the viscount remained long in Hertfordshire.



Unlike the day before, Elizabeth did not have the companionship of her sisters during her walk that day. It seemed their ambition was only acute when they needed to sneak about. Now that Elizabeth had joined their cause, they allowed their morning schedule to revert to its normal state. Sadly for Elizabeth, her father now maintained that she should not walk unaccompanied. A kidnapper or murderer was about and somehow young Michael, the stable hand, would prevent



her being taken by ruffians. Elizabeth thought it was more likely that both she and Michael would be taken, but her father was reassured. She supposed it had taken a violent crime in order for Mr. Bennet to safeguard his family.

When they were about halfway through their walk, Michael pointed out a rider coming towards them. The morning mist and the distance made it difficult to see, but Elizabeth eventually discerned the figure of Mr. Darcy on horseback. After noticing them, Mr. Darcy rode over, dismounted, and bowed to Elizabeth in greeting. Michael took the horse's reins and moved to a discreet distance so he could observe the pair without hearing their conversation.

Elizabeth accepted Mr. Darcy's arm. The heat that radiated from him provided a comforting respite from the chilly November day. They engaged in polite conversation for several minutes about the weather and their common acquaintances. Eventually, she brought up the arrival of Mr. Darcy's relatives and inquired about Colonel Fitzwilliam's progress in hiring a private investigator. Mr. Darcy hesitated to respond, creating an awkward silence between them.

"If I were to share something with you, would you be able to keep it to yourself?" he finally asked.

The unusual question intrigued Elizabeth, and she readily agreed to keep his secret if he shared it with her.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam works for the Home Office," he said. "Upon receiving news of Mr. Witting's disappearance, he made his way hither. Though Mr. Witting had formerly been his servant, his haste was not only out of concern for Witting — though that may have influenced him somewhat — but rather due to his duties with the Home Office."

Elizabeth nodded her understanding and urged Mr. Darcy to continue.

"My cousin had no intention of employing a private investigator. Actually, there were more elements involved that would make doing so imprudent. Witting, apparently, never fully left my cousin's service. My cousin's role at the Home Office is two-fold, you see. Most are aware that he represents

the crown at dinners and meetings with foreign dignitaries, but what is less well-known is his gathering of information for the government. It is not a secret exactly, but he does not advertise this part of his position.”

“By information, you mean... intelligence?” asked Elizabeth.

“I suppose it could be called that, yes,” said Mr. Darcy.

“So, your valet was a spy, and you didn’t know it?” asked Elizabeth.

Mr. Darcy shook his head. “No, not a spy — just someone who listened carefully to conversations amongst the locals and reported back to my cousin anything of interest. Ale can make people more open and willing to share information they normally wouldn’t.”

“So your cousin thinks Witting accidentally discovered important information, leading to his misfortune?” Elizabeth asked.

“Indeed, and thus he doesn’t wish to bring in outsiders until he knows what information Witting learned.”

Elizabeth considered Mr. Darcy out of the corner of her eye. “Would Colonel Fitzwilliam not be disturbed that you have shared this with me? If he will not even trust an investigator, why would he trust me?”

“I asked his permission to tell you and assured him of your discretion. Furthermore, you are a local, and therefore know much more about the area and the people. Such information may be valuable.”

Elizabeth felt honoured by Mr. Darcy’s trust in her, yet she couldn’t resist asking why he hadn’t considered including Sir William instead.

“I do not wish to cause insult as I know the Lucases are friends of yours, but Sir William is far too garrulous for us to entrust such information to him,” was Mr. Darcy’s answer.

Elizabeth had to allow that this was so. “But how can I help you? And how shall I be able to contact you? Unless Miss

Bingley or Mrs. Hurst are informed as well.”

“No, they are not. Mr. Bingley knows a little, but not everything,” said Mr. Darcy. “That is the more troublesome part. Staying in contact, I mean.”

“Mr. Bingley calls rather often on Jane,” said Elizabeth. “You could accompany him, or one of your cousins could. Then we could walk out and let Mr. Bingley and Jane go ahead of us. We shall just have to ensure that it is not always just one of you, though. Otherwise, my mother might think things she ought not.”

Mr. Darcy agreed. He did not wish to raise expectations in Mrs. Bennet’s mind or Elizabeth’s that he did not intend to fulfil. Darcy was then confronted with another problem that had been troubling him since the ball a few days prior.

“I must ask you something indelicate,” he told her.

Elizabeth’s eyebrows rose. “Indeed? What can you have to ask me that is indelicate?”

“Does your sister admire Mr. Bingley? If we are to encourage him to call on her, I must be certain I am not leading him amiss,” Mr. Darcy cautiously explained.

“I cannot interpret all of Jane’s sentiments, as she does not readily communicate them, even to me. However, from what I know of my sister, I do believe she likes him very well.”

“That is well then,” was the only reply Mr. Darcy gave before changing the subject back to their plans for investigation.

## Chapter 6

“Will you keep to your promise that you will not attempt to escape?” asked Arthur.

“Of course,” said Witting, sitting up from where he was reclining against the rags. He had been thinking of ways to try to escape, but none of them seemed very plausible at the moment.

“We have to keep up production, or some of the others will suspect that you are still alive,” his captor explained.

“Why do they want to kill me? What do they believe that I know?” asked Witting.

Arthur shook his head, saying, “I won’t tell you that, in case you don’t know what they think you do.”

Witting sighed in frustration.

“In any case, these rags must be sorted, and Titus here shall attend to them. Should you injure him in any manner, I would feel no remorse from ending you myself, is that understood?” Stepping aside, Arthur made way for a young lad to enter the chamber.

Witting’s heart broke at the sight of the child. The boy appeared extremely thin, and his clothes were so filthy and tattered that they appeared ready to fall apart. His hands were unlike the hands of any child Witting had seen before; they were covered in deep, painful-looking cracks, rough and calloused. Witting had to fight back tears of rage; no child should have to live in such a manner.

“I-I wouldn’t hurt him,” Witting said, his voice cracking.

With a curt nod, Arthur left, leaving Titus and Witting alone. Sorting through a smaller pile of rags, the boy separated the white ones from the coloured ones and added them to the larger piles. All the while, Witting watched in silence —

unable to tear his gaze away from the piteous scene before him. After some time, he decided to take a seat near the boy.

“Can I assist you?” asked Witting.

“Assist?” asked the boy.

“Help. Can I help you sort the rags?”

The boy gave an indifferent shrug. “I ain’t sharin’ the brass.”

“I don’t want your money,” said Witting. “I am bored. There is nothing to do here.”

Titus gave him a sceptical look before gesturing to the unsorted rags as if to say, “Help yourself.” Witting took this as an answer and began to sort the rags as well. They worked in amicable silence until Arthur came bearing food and drink for them both. Titus gobbled up his food in a frenzy, not bothering to taste it. Moved by the sight, Witting extended his hand, offering the child his bread. The boy’s eyes widened in appreciation before wolfing it down hungrily just as he had before.

Once the repast was gone, with Witting only having taken a few bites of bread, a little water and ale, they returned to their work. With two people, it took no great length of time to put the pile of rags in order.

“I shall suppose Arthur will not be back before the time you are normally finished,” Witting remarked, speaking mostly to himself.

Titus shook his head. “Aunuvver cart will come soo’. ‘im and me load up mo’ rags.”

Another cart arrived about an hour later, just as the boy predicted. Witting hid while Arthur and Titus worked to load the cart with rags. When all was clear, another small mountain of unsorted rags was left behind. Witting and the child sat down to their work.



“Sir William, how kind of you to call,” said Mr. Bingley, rising from his seat and bowing. Mr. Darcy followed suit.

“I apologise for intruding on your afternoon, gentlemen,” said Sir William, “but I am here in an official capacity.”

“Of course, sir,” said Mr. Bingley. “Whatever it is that you need, we are at your disposal.”

Mr. Darcy nodded in agreement, his expression solemn.

“At present, sirs, I must ask for a private interview with Mr. Darcy,” said Sir William. “Is there somewhere we can converse without interruption?”

“Aye,” responded Mr. Bingley quickly after receiving a nod from Mr. Darcy. “You may take my study.”

Consequently, the two men made their way to the room and comfortably took their seats, after providing themselves with a glass of port each.

“I will not take much of your time, Mr. Darcy,” Sir William began. “I am here solely to pose a few inquiries regarding a recent incident involving your family that may have impacted your valet as well.”

Mr. Darcy’s eyes widened in surprise, his face tense as he cautiously responded, “I will make every effort to answer any questions you might have.”

With a deep breath, Sir William swirled his drink in his glass as he gathered his nerve. He was not often at a loss for words, but that was because he did not often have to speak of such unpleasant things with a person of Mr. Darcy’s position in society. “I have learned, sir, of your sister’s near elopement with Mr. Wickham. It was the man himself who informed me about the incident, feeling it was crucial for me to know. He said your valet was also present when they were found out.”

Mr. Darcy’s face paled as Sir William spoke. In an effort to recover, the younger man had a sip of port and silently counted to ten. Once it was finished, he stared intently

at Sir William and asked, "Are you aware if Wickham disclosed this to anyone else?"

"I do not believe that he has," said Sir William. "I shall not tell anyone either, unless it becomes necessary to my duties as magistrate. What concerns me more is the motive that Mr. Witting's knowledge of this event implies. Did Mr. Witting ever ask for money to ensure his silence on this subject?"

"No, no - he would never do something as immoral as to victimise my sister! He always was very loyal to our family."

"You must be certain of this, Mr. Darcy!" Sir William demanded with a furrowed brow. "Perhaps someone else in your family has been threatened? Your sister, perhaps? Or Colonel Fitzwilliam?"

"I know Mr. Witting, sir!" said Mr. Darcy with certainty. "He would not do such a thing. He was a man of honour. What Mr. Wickham says about the elopement is true, but he says it only to blacken my name. He holds resentment towards me, for he believes I have done him wrong in some way, even though he has received everything that my father promised him and more.

"Very good, sir," said Sir William.

Darcy suspected that the gentleman would continue investigating his family, as his face showed no signs of being convinced. Although Darcy wanted to say more, he recognised he was unable to master himself and his emotions. He needed to calm down and provide Sir William with the complete account of his dealings with Mr. Wickham at a later time. He asked Sir William if he might give him a written account of the matter the following day, which Sir William readily agreed to.

"If I am to understand correctly," enquired Sir William as he rose from his seat, "Colonel Fitzwilliam acts as Miss Darcy's other guardian, is that correct?"

"That is correct, sir," said Mr. Darcy.

“I would like his account of the matter as well,” said Sir William.

“Very well. I cannot speak for my cousin, but I do not doubt that he should be willing to give it.”

Sir William expressed his gratitude to Mr. Darcy and departed. Mr. Darcy sank into a chair, covering his face with his hands.

“Darcy, are you quite well?” Mr. Bingley exclaimed as he returned from seeing Sir William off.

Darcy vigorously shook his head to clear his mind.

“Do you wish for solitude, or would some company be welcome? Or we could play billiards, if you wish?” suggested Bingley.

“Billiards,” said Darcy. “I should like to hit something with a stick, and a billiard ball seems the most gentlemanly option available to me.”

Bingley let out a loud laugh and led his best friend out of the room.



“Oh, what a tragedy that Mr. Wickham is ill and cannot attend! What terrible luck!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed.

“Yes, my love, I am sure it must be ill luck, in much the same way he was called away to London before the Netherfield ball. It is strange, don’t you think how he always is unable to be in the company of Mr. Darcy?” said Mr. Bennet with a sardonic grin.

“Well, one cannot blame him!” Mrs. Bennet cried. “After what Mr. Darcy did, you would be bitter too in his place! Why, if Mr. Wickham had been given his due, he would have made our Lizzy an offer by now.”

“If Mr. Wickham had been given ‘his due’ as you call it, he would be in a vicarage in Derbyshire and he never would



have met Lizzy or any other person in Hertfordshire,” said Mr. Bennet.

Instead of responding, Mrs. Bennet began to fuss over the decorations, occasionally scolding her husband for not allowing her to send to London for fresh flowers. “A viscount, Mr. Bennet! A viscount! And no flowers!” she said several times.

Elizabeth, who had thus far been ignored by her parents, said, “I’m confident Lord Barlow won’t mind if there are no flowers, as long as the food is delicious and plentiful.”

Mr. Collins, presently returned from making calls, remarked upon the good fortune of the Bennet family in having Lady Catherine’s nephews as their guests. But Mrs. Bennet wouldn’t let him finish; rather, she scolded him for not being dressed for dinner. Chastised, he rushed to prepare himself, joining the rest of the family moments before their guests began to arrive. If he was sweet-smelling and well turned-out or not, that is for the reader to imagine.

When the party sat down for dinner, Elizabeth found herself between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Collins. Something seemed amiss with Mr. Darcy, more than just his valet going missing, that is. The usually reticent gentleman was particularly subdued, lost in contemplation. She didn’t dare ask what had happened, especially in that company, and it wasn’t likely to be her concern, anyway. Still, she was curious.

“... sold his commission,” said Captain Sanderson.

“Who sold his commission?” Elizabeth asked. “I was wool-gathering.”

“Mr. Wickham. He made the arrangement earlier today. He’ll be gone within a se’nnight, I imagine,” answered the captain.

“I do hope he pays his debts before he goes,” said Mr. Denny. “He owes me five pounds.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam let out a derisive snort. “I would not hold my breath if I were you. Mr. Wickham leaves debts everywhere he goes. Usually, it is Mr. Darcy who pays them

— not out of any love for Wickham, mind, but so the people Wickham swindles don't lose their livelihoods.”

This bit of information left everyone quite perplexed as they had previously judged Mr. Darcy to be rather miserly with his wealth, having deprived Mr. Wickham of his living, as well as other expectations due him. When Captain Carter sought clarification, Lord Barlow and Colonel Fitzwilliam offered additional particulars. They explained that Mr. Darcy had previously given Mr. Wickham the equivalent of the living and had been requested to do the same again at a later date, but then had refused. Mr. Wickham was angry, and thenceforward had blackened the Darcy name at every turn. Mr. Darcy remained silent until directly asked by Elizabeth if all this was so. He confirmed that his cousins were correct in their assertions.

“Besides all of that, Mr. Darcy holds at least three hundred pounds of Mr. Wickham's debt, yet remarkably enough, Wickham is not in debtor's prison,” added Colonel Fitzwilliam.

The officers exchanged a glance, their expressions growing stern as they grasped the seriousness of Mr. Wickham's situation.

Colonel Forster flexed his jaw before speaking. “I cannot allow such a man to sully our name more than it already has been since arriving here. I cannot be seen as tolerating such behaviour among my ranks, especially given that we shall remain here until the brewing conflict at Halling is resolved. He will pay his debts.”

“Unrest at Halling?” asked Mr. Bennet.

Conversation then turned to local politics. Halling, which was less than ten miles from Meryton, was one of the towns that had started to adopt modern technology. The unrest was focused on the paper mill and brewery, which had both recently installed machines to boost production and minimise labour costs. Other mills, printeries, breweries, and other local businesses had done likewise, but only in Halling was there actual unrest.

“They are just talk here in Meryton,” said Colonel Forster. “With the militia so close at hand, they know that we will enforce the law. We don’t go arresting everyone who violates the Combination Acts, because talking isn’t hurting anyone unless it becomes planning,” said Elizabeth.

“No, but there’s enough militia about that they wouldn’t dare,” said Colonel Forster.

Elizabeth was sceptical, considering most of the militia did little more than parade about looking dashing in their uniforms; however, she would not disrespect her family’s guest by raising further objections.

Perhaps it was the exalted company, but Elizabeth was impressed by her family that evening. Mary chose a fitting piece to perform on the pianoforte and abstained from singing; Lydia and Kitty flirted with the officers yet refrained from overindulging in claret; Collins praised Lady Catherine’s nephews, but Charlotte quickly intervened to prevent any major indiscretions; Mrs. Bennet was an exemplary hostess; and Mr. Bennet did not fail to make sardonic remarks yet stayed within polite constraints.

As the last of the guests departed, Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief. Her family had conducted themselves as decorously as could be expected, thus freeing them from censure.

## Chapter 7

Once Titus left and the banging of the paper mill stopped, Witting began to plan. He approached the wall where the windows were placed and stretched his neck to see upwards. Roughly estimating, he assumed them to be about twenty feet off the ground. Too high to jump, even if he somehow convinced Arthur to bring him a chair.

He looked over at the two piles of rags. The pile of white rags was mostly diminished after much of their bulk had been loaded into carts throughout the day. He wondered how long it might take to move the stack of rags over to the wall and if Arthur would notice, even if he moved it back. He had to try. He had no reason to actually trust Arthur, other than his word. He did not see why he could not return to Derbyshire immediately after escaping, for surely whatever happened in Hertfordshire would not follow him that far north.

Given the ample time he had, he decided to try and started moving armfuls of rags against the wall. The work was dull and time-consuming, but it wasn't very difficult. After moving all the rags, Witting stood back to admire his work. It still was well short of the window, unfortunately.

With nightfall imminent, he decided to ascend the tower of rags before it became more dangerous to do so. Imitating the posture of runners in drawings, he crouched near the distant wall with his hands on the ground in front of him. He took a deep breath, and he ran towards the rags, slowing a little as his feet sank into the soft pile. As he ascended, the rags slid beneath his feet, impeding his progress.

Thinking to amend his strategy, he decided that he must make the stack of rags wider and shorter. It might be more difficult to scale the distance between the top and the window, but the tall narrow tower did not work at all. He spent the next half-hour picking up the rags that had been dislodged and reassembling the stack. He decided not to run this time,

instead climbing carefully and trying not to kick down the rags.

Reaching the peak, his whole body shook as he stood. He suddenly realised how precarious his position was when the pile of rags beneath him shifted and threatened to give way. His eyes followed the wall up to the window as he estimated the distance he'd have to jump to reach it. Although it was almost two feet above his fingers, he knew he couldn't give up. He had come this far, already. He imitated the frogs from his childhood, crouching low and leaping up with wild abandon.

The jarring impact of his body slamming into the wall caused his vision to blur for a moment. His fingers strained to hold on to the edge, slipping little by little with every passing moment. His muscles gave way, and he crashed to the ground, the world swirling around him. The rags offered some protection, but the impact sent him tumbling down the stack, his head smacking against the wall twice during the descent.

He remained conscious on the ground but was in excruciating pain. The mere thought of moving sent further waves of pain through him. He gave in to sleep, hoping he'd wake up again.



Staring out her window into the dark distance, Elizabeth's attention was captured by the glow of a lantern held by a lady leaving Longbourn. Frowning, and desperately hoping it was not one of her sisters doing something foolish, she decided to follow. She quickly put on a pelisse, hat, and gloves, and when she stepped out of the house, the light in the distance was still visible. While following the woman, she maintained her distance, only to realise it was Sarah, not one of her sisters, when the light revealed the woman's profile.

It was unusual for Sarah to go visiting in the evening, and if she had to visit a sick relative, Mr. Bennet would have allowed her to use a cart instead of walking alone in the dark.

To visit a relation was where Elizabeth assumed Sarah was going, for they were following the path towards where Sarah's family lived.

Throughout the previous day, Elizabeth had managed to learn a little more about most of the servants in the area — assuming that if there was a personal motive behind Mr. Witting's disappearance, knowing a little about his friends could not hurt. Sarah's family, the Rowlands, lived in Mill Hill — an aptly named hamlet comprising mostly mill workers and their families. It was a little over two miles away from Longbourn, but in the opposite direction from Meryton. Sarah's siblings, along with their spouses and children, lived in a small house owned by the mill, with rent deducted from their wages. Given the recent reduction of labour at the mill, it took most of their income to pay for the rent, leaving little for anything else.

To avoid being seen, Elizabeth allowed Sarah to outpace her by some distance once she was certain of the maid's destination. The moon would be full the following night, so there was no need of a lantern. The moonlit walk on a brisk November evening was a popular idea among the creatures of the area, as evidenced by the sounds of scampering and rustling leaves coming from the trees alongside the path.

The diversion was pleasant, and it lifted Elizabeth's spirits. By the time they reached Mill Hill, she was almost distracted from her original purpose. Dodging behind a nearby tree, Elizabeth narrowly escaped being seen by the man who emerged from a house to welcome Sarah. The man was tall and looked rather like her, but his hair was a brighter red. Sarah gave the man a basket, and they walked together back to the house. As soon as the door closed, Elizabeth followed.

She noticed a light shining from one of the windows, so she headed towards it, hoping to hear some conversation. She crouched below it, wishing this all was happening in the summer so the window would be left open. She strained to hear the low voices but could only make out a few words here and there.

“Pamphlets...caught...pay...she...,” said the man.

“Foolishness... gaol... hurt... might... little...,” said Sarah.

“...paper...never...family...more...,” said the man.

“Just tell him you cannot!” Sarah yelled. Elizabeth heard that as clear as day.

“It isn’t that simple. I can’t get out of it now!” yelled the man.

“You could get transported or killed! What is poor Beth to do if that happens? Can you tell me that, Attie? Can you?” Sarah spat back.

There was a quiet response from a woman, likely the Beth that Sarah spoke of. “... children,” was all that Elizabeth could hear.

The voices were lowered then, too low for Elizabeth to hear anything. She made out a few more words when the argument became once more heated, but “rags”, “boys”, and “minister” did not tell her anything.

Elizabeth was on the verge of falling asleep when the sound of a door slamming jolted her awake. Sarah marched down the path with a scowl, muttering to herself in frustration about foolish men. Elizabeth was about to stand up and follow Sarah, but she quickly shrank back as the door opened and the same man appeared in the doorway. A woman’s voice called him back, and he entered inside again with a sigh. Elizabeth waited for a while longer before she felt comfortable enough to return home, certain that the man was not about to come out and catch her.



Elizabeth paced back and forth, wishing that Mr. Darcy would appear. While he had made no promises to call daily or walk in the morning, she still hoped to see him that morning to speak about what she had heard.

“Are you in love with one of them?” Lydia’s voice came from nearby, startling Elizabeth.

“What?”

“Are you in love with one of the Netherfield gentlemen? You keep muttering about their needing to call and pacing back and forth in this room. I can only think that you must be in love with one of them.”

“No. I am not. I just have something that I need to tell them.”

Lydia narrowed her eyes at her sister. “Why did you not tell them whatever it was yesterday evening?”

“I did not know then what I know now,” said Elizabeth with exasperation.

Elizabeth was forced to explain the events of the previous evening to Lydia, whose curiosity had been sparked and was not known for her ability to let matters be.

“You think there is going to be unrest here too!” exclaimed Lydia. “You nearly said as much to Colonel Forster. He was not best pleased with you, you know. He thinks his men’s presence is enough to repel any unpleasantness.” Lydia stopped, tilting her head to one side in contemplation. “Why do you wish to tell this to the Netherfield gentlemen? Why do you not tell Colonel Forster? Surely this is much more his business than theirs?”

Elizabeth internally groaned, wondering how long it would be before she had to tell Lydia all. For one that she had only recently considered quite silly, her youngest sister was becoming remarkably quick.

Thankfully, Kitty came into the room then, saving her from answering. She insisted that Lydia accompany her to Meryton, for she had several things she needed to buy and was frightened of going alone. Lydia refused, as they might soon have callers and she wished to know what was said.

Had they walked together to town, Lydia and Kitty would have come upon the gentlemen. Not more than ten minutes later, Lord Barlow, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Darcy,



and Mr. Bingley all sat drinking tea and listening to Mr. Collins's praises. He was due to depart on that day to attend to Lady Catherine, but he was happy to report to her about the well-being of several of her nephews. Elizabeth hoped that her cousin might depart sooner rather than later, as Mr. Darcy looked about to burst from some strong emotion — which she did not know. Thankfully, she was able to suggest that Mr. Collins ought to take leave of the neighbourhood rather than drink tea with them.

This was seconded by Lord Barlow, who said, "Indeed. It is most ill-mannered not to take leave of all of your new acquaintances upon leaving an area in which you have remained for some time. Lady Catherine would be displeased if you, her parson, were to represent her so poorly."

Such words moved Mr. Collins to action immediately. If he wanted to reach home before nightfall, he had a limited time to make calls. Mrs. Bennet offered the use of the carriage, eager to have him out of the way so her daughters might be better attended by the more prominent gentlemen. To this purpose, she suggested the young people walk in the garden. All agreed, except Mary who had much rather practice the pianoforte. Mrs. Bennet tried to insist but given that there were four gentlemen and four ladies willing to walk, she had little ground on which to stand.

Upon their exiting the house, immediately Mr. Bingley ensured that he and Miss Bennet outpaced the others, evidently wishing to speak to her alone. Elizabeth, having an inkling of the master of Netherfield's plans, smiled at their retreating forms. When she looked over at Mr. Darcy, her walking companion, she found that he was smiling as well.

"You are pleased for your friend?" she asked.

"Why should I not be?" he returned, a look in his eye that Elizabeth could not interrupt. "He has found someone to love and — assuming you read your sister correctly — who loves him as well. She is an acceptable match, as a gentleman's daughter, and is of a temperament to serve him well in his ambitions."

“How romantic of you,” said Elizabeth with a laugh.

“Gentlemen do wish for love as well. It is not only the purview of ladies.”

Elizabeth was struck by the gentleness in Mr. Darcy’s voice. She still could not judge his emotions, and she wished that he were easier to read. She was beginning to believe that he hid a great deal behind his deftly schooled countenance.

“Of course,” she replied. “I have long believed that men feel just as strongly as women, or perhaps more strongly in some cases. It is just less acceptable for them to show their feelings.”

When Elizabeth looked up at him, Darcy saw a question in her fine eyes that he dared not answer. He knew the answer that he wished to give, and it was wholly unacceptable with Miss Kitty and Andy only a few yards away.

Elizabeth’s sudden cough shattered the enchantment she had over him. “I wished to tell you of what I heard last night, from Sarah, my maid.”

“Indeed? She spoke again with you?” he asked, gaining mastery of himself.

“Not exactly.”

Elizabeth recounted every detail of the previous evening to him, not omitting a single word of what she had overheard. His face hardened as she spoke.

“I thought as much, once I heard Colonel Forster’s account of the unrest in Halling,” he replied when she had completed her tale. “I wonder if we ought to be on our guard, especially for the next few nights.”

“I don’t follow,” said Elizabeth. “Why the next few nights? I doubt anything will be resolved so quickly as that.”

“After hearing what Colonel Forster had to say at dinner, Colonel Fitzwilliam decided that he ought to learn what the less genteel populace had to say. He dressed as a labourer and went out to a public house for some ale.”

“What happened?” she asked, her eyes fixed on Mr. Darcy, urging him to go on.

“He pretended to be a cousin of one of Netherfield’s tenants, and they did not question it. Why should they? The gentry do not go out so late in the evening, unless it is to a ball or card party. His fortune improved even more when the tenant he selected became sick, justifying the need for a relative to visit. He listened as they discussed a collective strategy for those affected by the advent of machinery into the area. He could not get any specifics — he was not yet vouched for, after all. But they spoke of some goings on in the North, where some people are organising all of the labourers together, breaking machines and tormenting the factory owners. The Luddites, they call themselves. Well, here in the south, there hasn’t been any breaking of machines yet, just refusal to work. That might change soon, if the people in the tavern were not all talk, as Colonel Forster supposes.”

“And Sarah’s family is caught up in it,” said Elizabeth.

“Most likely, based on what you heard.”

“But how does that affect us?” came a voice from behind them.

“Lydia,” said Elizabeth with a sigh. “Were you eavesdropping?”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam was as well,” she said, gesturing to the gentleman beside her.

“I heard my name and was curious about what was being said of me,” the colonel admitted. “In any case, we suspect that these Luddites, or their imitators, might be linked to Mr. Witting’s disappearance. If he heard something and they believed he would report it to the authorities, they would have been motivated to silence him. Machine breaking isn’t a capital crime as yet, but it can get you transported. And if there is any violence besides the breaking of machines, it could be a hanging offence.”

“But what are we to do about this? How can we help Mr. Witting?” asked Lydia. “That is, if he is not beyond help

already.”

## Chapter 8

Witting sat in the bustling inn, nursing his second ale. He was savouring a rare night off, courtesy of Mr. Darcy, who had let him go around six o'clock. The area was alive with activity as shopkeepers extended their hours to serve the many servants who were off duty while their masters were at the ball. Mr. Hill and Chuck, a farm hand were dining with him, although there had been little in the way of conversation between them. This was as they all preferred it, all tired from their labours.

*Nearby, several farm hands from Netherfield were complaining that their wages from the harvest had not been as great as in previous years. Mr. Bingley had brought in threshers, which limited the amount of work needed to bring in the harvest. With so many people in the area relying on the estates for their livelihoods, the situation caused widespread concern. Machines had even been installed in the mill and brewery, making the situation worse, as those men could not rely on earning wages elsewhere. Witting was thankful that no machine could replace his position just yet.*

*"Halling has the right idea," said one farm hand. "We oughtn't just let them starve us this way."*

*Mr. Hill glanced at the man's plate, containing two potatoes and a sizable chicken piece, and raised an eyebrow. Witting had to hold back a laugh.*

*"They ain't done nothing of worth yet," said another. "Marching back and forth, throwing dung at the mill owner. It doesn't stop it. They just wash it off and continue."*

*The others murmured their agreement with his statement before their voices dissolved into whispers, though Witting could still make out bits of the conversation - something about the new machines at the mill in Halling.*

*"Thank goodness Mr. Bennet hasn't got machines yet," said Chuck.*

*“He’s always been years behind everyone else,” confirmed Mr. Hill. “Your jobs should be secure for now...it’ll be at least ten years before he saves enough money to even entertain the thought of buying a machine.”*

*Mr. Witting let out a sigh as he thought about Miss Bennet and Mr. Bingley. If they were to marry, Chuck’s position as a farm hand very well could be in danger. Mr. Bingley would no doubt introduce his father-in-law to the new machines. But he wouldn’t bring this up with his friend; there was no need to distress him over something that might not come to pass.*

*After bidding farewell to his companions at the inn, Witting left the inn, thinking to start back for Netherfield before it got too late. As he did that, he almost stumbled into a petite woman who was standing in front of the inn. He quickly steadied them both, apologising as he did so.*

*“I thank you, Mr. Witting,” said the woman, peering up at him with wide eyes and a grateful smile. Witting’s heart flipped when he saw Sarah Rowland, who recognised him and smiled gently. The closeness of their bodies made him very much wish they were anywhere else but there, standing in the public eye; his desire for her rose unbidden within him and all he wanted was to pull her close and kiss her like he’d longed to do ever since their first meeting.*

*He had heard from the Pemberley butler that there was talk of retirement and replacing him with a new man; if Witting were to fill the role, stability—and the chance to finally take Sarah as his wife—were within reach.*

*“Mr. Witting?” Sarah’s gentle voice pulled him from his thoughts, and he looked up, feeling heat rise to his face in embarrassment. “My apologies—pray, what did you say?”*

*Her smile widened and sent a thrill through him. There was a moment where he thought she could see the longing in his heart, but she motioned towards a paper on the inn door. “I said that Mr. Trantor is using his cart tonight to transport servants between the larger estates around here. There’s a time schedule here,” she repeated.*

*“I had not known. Thank you.” He tried to keep his voice steady despite the chaos of emotion stirring in him. “Though I think I shall walk—it is not yet late, and I must be off soon.”*

*Sarah’s shoulders slumped slightly, and Witting had an immediate pang of regret.*

*“If you are leaving for Longbourn soon, I would be happy to walk with you thither,” he replied.*

*Her face lit up a bit upon hearing this, but she declined by shaking her head. “I have to wait for Polly. She will be some time yet. She is at the cobbler, as she needed new boots.”*

*It was Witting’s turn to be disappointed. He knew he couldn’t delay his return to Netherfield any longer, as there was much to be done on his extra evening off. A few of his own garments needed mending, and he had not had time to see to them with all the preparations for the ball. He debated putting the chore off again, but he had only one pristine set of clothes currently. He sighed and told Sarah that he could not delay until Mr. Trantor’s cart returned, which would not be for over an hour.*

*“I wonder,” he said, a pleasant idea coming to mind, “if you might tell me on which day is usually your half day. Mr. Darcy allows me some freedom of choice in mine, assuming he has no pressing engagements that evening.”*

*Sarah’s cheeks turned pink as she explained that she had Saturday afternoons off. If they had an engagement and needed her services, she had either Friday or Monday as her half day.*

*“Ride out?” she asked with astonishment. “You mean like the ladies and gentlemen do?”*

*“Indeed. Mr. Darcy trusts me with his carriage, and he does not mind if I use it to exercise the horses instead of the grooms. If he does not have need of it, I shall send a note around before Saturday afternoon, if that is agreeable.”*

*“That would be wonderful, Mr. Witting,” she replied.*

*“I shall look forward to it, Miss Rowland,” he said.*

*Sarah heard a cheerful greeting from a young maid from Lucas Lodge, and she nodded in response. "I should go attend to my errands," she said with a sigh.*

*"Good evening, Miss Rowland," said Witting with a bow over her hand.*

*She giggled and curtsied. "Good evening, Mr. Witting."*

*"Look out for my note!" he called after her as she turned to go.*

*She called over her shoulder, "I will, sir!" as she went to meet up with her friend.*



Elizabeth glanced at Mr. Darcy before addressing the others, "We need to speak with Sarah. That much is certain, if nothing else is."

"We might wish to speak with the magistrate as well," said Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Darcy shook his head sagely. "He suspects me. He won't tell us anything."

Lydia gasped, incredulous. "He suspects you, Mr. Darcy? But you are a gentleman!"

"He thinks my valet might have learned something about my family that I wouldn't want known widely," he answered.

Lord Barlow raised a brow. "Has he been talking with Wickham, listening to his tales of woe?"

Mr. Darcy's lips pressed into a line. "He has been speaking with Wickham. Unfortunately, for once in his life, what Wickham said was true. At least the part that Sir William told me. Let us not speak further about it in the open, however. It doesn't really matter anyhow. All that matters is Sir William believes we have motive to do away with Mr. Witting."



Jane and Mr. Bingley rejoined their party, quite out of breath with excitement, and for once in her life, Jane showed all the emotions she felt.

“We are then to wish you happy?” asked Mr. Darcy.

“Yes, indeed,” Mr. Bingley replied with a broad smile. “Although, I cannot imagine ever being anything but deliriously happy with Jane at my side.”

Mr. Darcy congratulated his friend with a firm pat on the shoulder. Jane hugged each of her sisters, eager to share her happiness with them before anyone else. “If only I could see all of you so very happy as I!” she said as she embraced Elizabeth. “I would know nothing but joy then.”

With a sincerity, warmth, and delight that could not be put into words, Elizabeth congratulated the couple. Jane’s happiness grew with every sentence of kindness that her sister spoke to her.

Lydia could not help some jealousy welling up within her at her eldest sister’s engagement. It had been her secret ambition since she was young to usurp them all and marry first. She had always found it amusing to think on, especially since their mother believed gentlemen preferred Jane over the rest of them. It seemed her mother was right, after all.

Kitty only congratulated the couple and asked when the wedding was to be, a question that could not be answered when the engagement was only minutes old.

“We ought to go straight away to Longbourn,” Mr. Bingley said. “I cannot wait to ask your father for his blessing.”

Jane agreed. Elizabeth wished to tell her sister to wait, for the gentlemen ought to be spared her mother’s excesses, but held her tongue. Mr. Darcy seemed to read her mind, for as they were walking back, he whispered, “It shall be well. Mr. Bingley will grin as he endures the joy and exclamations. He assured me last evening that he does not mind at all.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at him. “You are very bold to speak so.”

“Do you deny that your mother will be very vocal in her pleasure at your sister’s marriage to Mr. Bingley? I assumed that was the cause of your disquietude.”

“I cannot deny it, but I would expect a gentleman to not dare bring it up in conversation,” she responded indignantly.

“I abhor deceit, and I wished only to reassure you. Surely you know that the lack of decorum shown at times by your family must factor into any man’s thoughts when he considers marrying you or your sisters,” Mr. Darcy replied tersely. “It would be folly if he did not. Any indiscretions will affect him as well.”

“Despite their boisterous nature, my family would never do anything to damage Mr. Bingley’s reputation.” Elizabeth experienced a twinge of pain as she spoke, unsure if she was telling Mr. Darcy the truth. Had she not long feared that one of her younger sisters would do something to disgrace the family?

“Let us hope that is true,” Mr. Darcy replied coldly.

Elizabeth did not reply, preferring to walk the rest of the way back to Longbourn in silence, rather than speak to Mr. Darcy.



Elizabeth sat quietly by the fire, Jane having gone up to their mother and Mr. Bingley to Mr. Bennet. While Kitty and Lydia conversed with Lord Barlow and Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Darcy stood silently at the window, lost in thought as he surveyed the desolate winter fields. The barrenness of the land and grey skies made Hertfordshire melancholy. The snow-covered fields and peaks in Derbyshire created a serene and peaceful atmosphere. He longed for such tranquillity.

In a few minutes, Elizabeth was joined by Bingley, whose conference with her father had been short and to the purpose.

“Where is your sister?” Bingley asked, his voice full of anticipation.

Elizabeth gestured toward the stairs. “With my mother. She’ll be down momentarily.”

Bingley sank into the chair next to her, an expectant look on his face. When he spoke again, his words were full of love and emotion as he claimed her for his sister.

“I give my well-wishes entirely,” Elizabeth said in response, her heart swelling with a joy so intense it threatened to overwhelm her. “I am only too delighted to call you my brother.”

Kitty and Lydia joined them at last, and Bingley greeted them warmly. He offered up every detail of his great happiness with Jane, his voice thick with adoration and admiration for her countless perfections. The man’s love for Jane made him biased, but Elizabeth still believed that his expectations of a happy life for her sister were logical, given the strong bond between Jane and him due to their similar disposition and tastes.

It was a day of no common delight to them all. Upon entering and seeing her beloved, Miss Bennet’s face lit up with a sweet animation, a glow of pure satisfaction that made her look more beautiful than ever. Lydia simpered and smiled and hoped her turn was coming soon. Mrs. Bennet could not give her consent or speak her approbation in terms warm enough to satisfy her feelings, though she talked to Bingley of nothing else for half an hour. Even Mr. Bennet couldn’t hide his joyous spirit, his voice exuding elated contentment.

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy appeared to be the only ones not fully entranced by the momentous occasion. After they retired to their chambers, Jane asked Elizabeth if she wasn’t pleased with the union.

“Of course, I am!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “Have I not told you so many times?”

“Something is causing you pain. If you do not tell me what it is, I fear my imagination shall run wild. Do you dislike

Mr. Bingley?” asked Jane, her brows drawn together in worry.

“I could never find any fault in Mr. Bingley,” Elizabeth reassured her sister with a gentle smile.

“Then what else could it be? Unless you tell me, I fear I cannot rest.”

Elizabeth knew her dear sister was telling the truth. She was far too generous for her own good, taking other people’s burdens as her own without question. Despite everything, she was tempted to tell her sister everything, if only to keep her from worrying more.

“I believe he was only trying to reassure you, dear sister,” said Jane soothingly, though Elizabeth could still feel the sting of insult from Mr. Darcy’s words.

“Regardless of his intentions, he insulted our family.”

Jane shook her head softly. “I do not think he meant it that way. He was trying to comfort you, given your distress.”

Elizabeth couldn’t get rid of the feeling of being insulted by Mr. Darcy, even though she knew her sister was right.

“Pray, try to forgive him,” implored Jane gently. “Have you not recently said that you judged him too harshly from the beginning? Is your pride again clouding your judgement?”

Elizabeth could not refute her sister’s sensible words. She silently hated that he viewed her beloved family as vulgar and ill-mannered, even if her own opinion mirrored his.

“But it cannot be helped,” Jane continued. “If anyone wants to marry into this family, they shall have to accept us for who we are.”

Elizabeth gave a reluctant nod in agreement before turning away from her sister and heading towards her bedroom.

## Chapter 9

As Mr. Witting walked back towards Netherfield, he could not help but replay the conversation with Sarah in his mind. She had agreed. By God, she had agreed. Now he had only to hope that the carriage would be available on Saturday, or whenever she had her next half day.

*He deviated from the main path, in search of solitude to indulge in his pleasant daydreams and followed the winding footpath through the woods. Despite the encroaching darkness, he had a lantern. Even had he forgot it, he wasn't afraid of the woodland creatures. They were all much more frightened of him than the reverse. Even though the path was damp from days of rain, the pleasant evening air made it a pleasant walk, nonetheless.*

*His attention was caught by the sound of an owl calling out, its voice echoing through the night. The sound of scampering filled the air as smaller creatures sought refuge in their nests and burrows, escaping from the predator. Another hoot broke the silence, but it was a weak imitation of an owl's cry. Witting's heart raced as he heard another man's hoot coming from nearby, unsure of what was happening.*

*The sound of approaching footsteps made him step off the path and into the trees. He put out his lantern a second later, realising in hindsight that the light would give him away. He breathed heavily, relieved that he had acted just in time—the men were closer than he thought. Despite the warm fall night, three people walked together, with scarves covering their faces up to their noses. Their dark garments made them practically invisible among the forest's shadows. Once they had passed, he followed at a distance, curious about what they were after.*

*He ducked into the trees twice more to avoid detection, as even more men joined the group. Just like the others, their faces were hidden, and they were all wearing dark clothing.*

*His curiosity and caution grew with each new arrival. These people were more than just poachers.*

*He carried on following the last group he had seen, being aware of every noise caused by his steps. The people he followed soon arrived at a clearing in the woods and joined several dozen of their fellows. A nearby thicket nearby offered a hiding place for Witting. Though his jacket had torn while concealing himself in the thicket, he considered it a small sacrifice for the chance to learn something important.*

*He watched them speak amongst themselves, then one broke free and began addressing the others.*

*“My friends, I address you as such because we are united in heart and purpose. We have sat back and watched others fight for long enough. It is time for us to rise up and prove ourselves men. We must take back what is ours by force. The wealthy have seized control and manipulated the power that rightfully belongs to the masses. Our wages have been unfairly diminished, leaving us unable to ensure our children are fed. Now lifeless workers have replaced us, even taking away the little we had.”*

*“We will not allow it! We have seen what the Luddites have done in other parts of England. They fought back and wrecked the machines that were stealing their livings. We have seen what has happened in France first hand, where the people have risen up against the rich and have created for themselves a government to serve the people. We shall follow where they have led. We shall rise up! We must band together with our brothers throughout the country. We will go to London and entreat those in power to rectify their wrongs. We intend to go to the most powerful person in the country, the Prime Minister, and if he refuses to represent the common man, we will replace him with someone who will.”*

*A general murmuring of agreement broke out, and several men asked questions. An argument arose about what day ought to be chosen for the protest, but there were so many people talking at once that Witting could make out very little. Eventually, a decision must have been reached, or perhaps the men merely were tired, because the crowd began to disperse.*

*As they began to depart, Witting stayed as still as possible, hoping the thicket would keep him hidden. Without warning, a man emerged from the trees and forcefully snatched him out of hiding, slamming him hard onto the ground. His vision blurred as he slipped into unconsciousness.*



When the gentlemen returned to Netherfield, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were in the drawing-room, sitting quietly and embroidering. Mrs. Hurst was creating a mental list of the tasks that needed to be done before the improvements she had planned on Hurst House could begin. Miss Bingley was weighing the benefits of a rich gentleman compared to a slightly less rich viscount. She had been struggling with this problem for some time, but she was certain she needed to focus her efforts if she was going to catch one of them as her husband.

Mr. Bingley, exuding joy, burst into the room and happily announced his engagement to Miss Bennet. It was a moment of shock for both sisters. For several seconds, they stared at their brother with blank, uncomprehending expressions.

“Good heavens!” cried Miss Bingley, her eyes widening with surprise and dismay. “What can you be about, frightening me like that? For surely this cannot be the truth! You would not align yourself with someone with such low connections.”

Mr. Bingley’s smile melted at his sisters’ reactions. “I care not for her connections. I care for Jane and she for me.”

“You are certain that she truly cares for you, Charles?” asked Louisa. “Her family’s situation is not one to be envied. It would be understandable if she accepted you only for your wealth, so her family might have a sense of security.”

Bingley understood his elder sister’s concerns and took her hands in his. “I know I have been sought by fortune hunters aplenty before, dear sister, but Jane is not one of them.

She cares nought for my wealth, except that it is enough for us to live comfortably. If she were a fortune hunter, would she not have sought Darcy or Barlow instead of me?"

Louisa remained uncertain, but she allowed a smile to grace her features. "If she truly does love you, Charles, then I am glad for you and shall wish you every happiness."

"Thank you, Louisa," he replied, allowing his spirits to lift once again. "Caroline, will you not also congratulate me?"

Miss Bingley glowered at her brother. "I will not. Have you gone mad? You're forsaking your future and standing in society, all because of a lady with no connections!"

"I have no notion of what you speak, Caroline," said Bingley. "Jane is a gentleman's daughter while we are not yet members of the gentry. She is above us and therefore my marriage to her advances our standing in society."

Miss Bingley scoffed. "She might be a gentleman's daughter, but her only claim to that title is an entailed estate, with no dowry or prospects. She has relations in trade, one even being the local attorney. Shall we connect ourselves to such people?"

Bingley's expression grew stern. "You forget yourself, Caroline. Even if Jane were not a gentleman's daughter, her worth does not rely merely on her status and connections. She is a kind, intelligent, and beautiful woman, and we are in love. That is all that matters to me."

"I see you are blinded by love and nothing I say to you will have any effect," said Miss Bingley, throwing herself into a wingback chair with a huff. "I suppose you at least had enough sense to select the least objectionable Bennet. Jane is a sweet girl, even if I do not wish her as a sister."

"I am glad you have resigned yourself," said Mr. Bingley. "Now I suggest you go talk to cook, since the eldest two Miss Bennets shall join us for dinner tonight."

Miss Bingley responded with a noise somewhere between a scream and a gasp.



Bingley had decided that he would not let his sister's dislike of the Bennets bother him. If Caroline did not wish to associate with them, she could go live with Louisa at Hurst House or set up her own establishment. "You should feel fortunate that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have already engaged themselves to dine elsewhere, otherwise the entire Bennet family would be dining with us. Speaking of which, given your displeasure at my match, I will warn you now that no insults or snide remarks shall pass your lips tonight. I shall not have my future wife disparaged."

Miss Bingley pressed her lips together but nodded her agreement.



The sun had just begun to set when Jane and Elizabeth arrived at Netherfield. Mr. Bingley greeted their carriage, eager to see his future bride, even though it had been mere hours since they had last met. He extended his arm to each lady and guided them into the house, to the drawing room where the rest were anticipating the announcement of dinner.

Upon their arrival in said drawing room, the reactions of the occupants were varied. Mrs. Hurst immediately gave her felicitations to Miss Bennet, and swiftly urged her husband to offer his also. He, who had not been paying a great deal of attention, had to be told what he was offering felicitations for before he could do so. Mr. Darcy was first captivated by the sight of the other Bennet sister, looking radiant in her dinner gown with flushed cheeks from the cold November air. A cough from Elizabeth brought him back to the moment, and he quickly reiterated his joy for Miss Bennet and Mr. Bingley, as he had earlier in the day.

Miss Bingley, however, sat with pursed lips, saying nothing at all.

"Will you not wish my betrothed and me happy, Caroline?" asked her brother.

With ill-grace, Miss Bingley stood and made her way to the couple - for Elizabeth had already moved to sit next to Mrs.. Hurst - and coolly she said, "Of course. I wish you both very happy, I'm sure."

Mr. Bingley frowned at his sister but said nothing.

A moment later, dinner was announced. Mr. Bingley went in with Jane. Mr. Darcy offered his arm to Elizabeth. This caused both of Mr. Bingley's sisters to be escorted by Mr. Hurst, greatly upsetting the younger of the two.

For much of dinner, Jane and Mr. Bingley were so deeply absorbed in their affection for each other that it rendered them oblivious to their surroundings, except when directly questioned. Mr. Hurst, too, did not contribute overly much, except to comment on the wine and the cut of the meat that was served. Even if this had not been his typical wont, it would have been understandable for Mr. Hurst to not take part in the conversation, for most of it centred on arrangements for the wedding.

For the first half of dinner, Miss Bingley spoke more than anyone else, suggesting outlandish and expensive plans that were completely at odds with what Elizabeth knew Jane to prefer. Yet, the rapidity of Miss Bingley's speech offered little room for others to contribute. Not until — when Miss Bingley was taking a sip of wine — Mr. Darcy said that he would find such elaborate proceedings rather out of place at a country wedding, did Miss Bingley relent whatsoever.

With the wedding plans being scaled down into a simpler affair held in four weeks with banns called instead of a grand affair by common licence, Elizabeth decided to forgive Mr. Darcy for his previous insults. So long as he held his tongue in the future, that is.

Just as the ladies were about to retire to the drawing-room so that the men could enjoy their port, there was a resounding knock on the door. Mrs. Nicholls proceeded to answer it and returned, looking flustered. "There is a gentleman here to see you, Mr. Darcy," she said. "He says it is urgent."

Mr. Darcy rose promptly, his voice full of worry. “Who is it?”

“He did not give his name, sir,” Mrs. Nicholls replied. “But he said he has information about Mr. Witting’s whereabouts.”

Elizabeth and Jane exchanged concerned looks as Mr. Darcy exited the room. Elizabeth’s heart raced as they followed Mr. Darcy through the tall doors of the foyer. Inside, a tall, wiry man with rough clothes stood waiting, his eyes darting nervously around the room.

“Who are you?” Mr. Darcy demanded.

## Chapter 10

The man hesitated before saying, “I came here to ask for help, sir.”

Mr. Darcy frowned. “First, let me hear what you have to tell me of Mr. Witting.”

“I will tell you, sir,” said the man. “But the people searching for him are also searching for me because I disobeyed their order to kill him. I require your protection. I will show you where he is, if you promise to shelter me and provide protection.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Darcy, although he remained wary. “If it is as you say, I will provide you what protection I can. Does Witting require a doctor?”

“Aye, sir. My sister attended to his wound best she could, but I fear what he needs is more than I can provide.”

The man proceeded to introduce himself as Arthur Rowland, and to explain the nature of Witting’s wounds. He had not the time to explain what all had happened in the days that Witting had been gone, but his explanation was enough for them to gather the supplies that were needed and to load them onto a cart. Elizabeth and Jane brought a carriage since they both knew how to bandage wounds and there would not be sufficient room on the cart for so many. A footman had been sent for the doctor and another for the apothecary but fetching them could take some time if they were out seeing to the ailing.

The carriage ride was brief, given the dilapidated cottage Mr. Rowland guided them to was on Netherfield’s property. Cottage might have been too kind a term for the building, in fact. The small house was more of a ruin, with only three and a half walls remaining. A fallen tree had demolished the other half of the east side and much of the roof, leaving a gaping hole in the building.

Elizabeth was taken aback by the sight before her when she entered the cottage. On a mound of worn-out blankets, Mr. Witting lay motionless, his gaunt and pale face reflecting his immense suffering. Tears streamed down Sarah's cheeks as she knelt beside the injured man, her hands trembling as she tried to stem the bleeding from his forehead. He remained completely still and silent, his unconsciousness a blessing as the pain from his wound would have been unbearable if he had been awake. Mr. Darcy rushed to Mr. Witting and knelt down, searching for any injuries beyond those immediately apparent.

“Sarah,” said Elizabeth softly. “How come you to be here?”

A sob choked any reply Sarah might have given as Mr. Darcy softly pressed on Mr. Witting's collarbone and the man cried out in pain.

“Sarah, let us go out to the carriage,” said Elizabeth. She looked over to where her sister stood, adding water to a small pot on the fire. Jane met her eyes and nodded. Jane would make do until the doctor came. As the eldest two sisters, they had sewn up many cut knees and bandaged many scrapes, even if they were not so severe as what Mr. Witting had suffered.

Elizabeth's gentle guidance out of the cottage only caused Sarah's sobbing to grow louder and more pronounced. Once they were outside, Sarah put her head in her hands and wept for several minutes. Elizabeth tried to comfort her, but words failed her. She gently rubbed Sarah's back, hoping to bring her comfort.

When Sarah's sobs had subsided to sniffles, Elizabeth asked, “What happened, Sarah? Why are you here with Mr. Witting and Mr. Rowland.”

“How could I not go with Arthur once he told me all?” asked Sarah.

“Mr. Rowland is your brother,” Elizabeth stated, rather than asked, but Sarah still nodded in confirmation.

“Aye,” was her answer. Elizabeth waited for the girl to say more, but she only sniffled into her handkerchief.

“And what did Arthur tell you?” asked Elizabeth, her voice soft.

“He told me everything,” said Sarah, the tears starting to fill her eyes again. “That he was given an order to kill Mr. Witting, but he couldn’t do it. That he decided he had to get him to safety instead, but that Mr. Witting had tried to escape and had injured himself. That Mr. Witting needed my help. So, I accompanied him and persuaded Arthur that it was necessary to bring Mr. Witting here.”

Elizabeth listened to Sarah’s story and nearly wept herself. She knew that the world was not as kind as it seemed, but often she forgot the harsh reality it held, especially for people like Sarah and Mr. Witting. With a reassuring arm around Sarah’s shoulder, she spoke gently, “Sarah, you did the right thing. Mr. Witting needs all the help he can get right now.”

“But what if they come after us?” Sarah asked. “What if I have put him in more danger by bringing him here?”

“We will protect you,” Elizabeth said firmly. “We will not let anything bad happen to you or Mr. Witting.” Even as she spoke, however, she wondered if her words were true.

Several moments later, a carriage arrived, carrying both Mr. Jones and Mr. Reed, the local surgeon. The physician could not be found, but the apothecary and surgeon would have to do.

Elizabeth stood and led the newly arrived men into the small cottage, wherein she found that Mr. Witting was awake.

“Sarah,” the injured man whispered, upon catching sight of the maid.

Sarah went to his side and firmly grasped his hand. “I’m here, Mr. Witting.”

Witting opened his mouth to say something more, but Mr. Reed stopped him. “Do not speak,” the surgeon warned Mr. Witting, approaching with his medical bag. “Let me take a

look at your wound.” He began to assess the severity of Mr. Witting’s wound. “It’s a clean wound, but we need to be diligent in treating it to prevent infection,” he advised, with probing it to remove bits of dirt and debris.

Elizabeth watched anxiously as Mr. Reed worked on Mr. Witting’s injury, Sarah never straying from his side. She could see the relief in Sarah’s eyes as Mr. Reed applied a clean bandage to the wound and approved his removal to Netherfield. Mr. Jones began to prepare the carriage with the help of two servants, cushioning the seat in such a manner as to ensure Mr. Witting would be jostled about as little as possible. He ordered also a pallet cushioned with blankets, on which Mr. Witting was carried by Mr. Darcy and one of the stronger footmen. Mr. Bingley began to direct another footman, ensuring that all would be ready upon the return to Netherfield.

Elizabeth couldn’t shake the feeling of unease as they made their way back to Netherfield. What else were the Rowlands not telling them? Was Mr. Witting truly safe, even at Netherfield? And the most pressing concern of all was who had given the order to have him killed?

She looked over at Mr. Darcy, who sat across from her in the carriage and could tell that his mind had travelled a similar path to her own. Jane also must have been thinking something similar, for she spoke aloud, “I wonder what Mr. Rowland will have to say. That poor man! What he must have endured to ensure Mr. Witting’s safety!”

Upon arriving at Netherfield, Mr. Bingley assisted Mr. Witting onto the pallet and, with the aid of a footman, carried him inside. Mr. Reed closely followed, carrying his medical bag. Elizabeth, Jane, Mr. Darcy, and Sarah were not far behind.

Immediately, Mr. Jones hurried to the kitchens, beginning to make up a salve that ought to help prevent infection. Meanwhile, Mrs. Nicholls took charge all other arrangements, including ordering tea to be made for the guests and for Sarah to be brought downstairs and put to bed. Sarah

resisted, saying she would have much rather worked for Mr. Witting's comfort, but Mrs. Nicholls would hear nothing of it.

"Others can do those chores, dear," she said. "You look worn-out. To bed with you."

Mrs. Nicholls' words were sound, as it was quite late by the time that they all returned and had Mr. Witting settled. The Hursts and Miss Bingley had long since retired, unwilling to stay up out of concern for a mere servant, but the others had much they wished to learn from Mr. Rowland.

They settled into Netherfield's parlour with tea and cakes, but Mr. Darcy did not wait for everyone to be served before speaking. "Who injured Witting?" he asked Mr. Rowland.

A moment of silence passed as Mr. Rowland stared into his tea. "The most recent injury was from his attempt at escape from where I had confined him."

Mr. Darcy's mien darkened. "Confined him? What do you mean, Mr. Rowland?"

"It was a necessary precaution. The Luddites, they might have killed him if I had not! But he tried to escape after I left last evening. I did not find him until the morning, and then could not move him until it began to get dark, lest someone notice."

"I understand that you believe that you acted out of concern for Mr. Witting's safety," Elizabeth said firmly. "Yet, it was very wrong for you to confine him against his will."

"I had no choice!" Mr. Rowland exclaimed.

Mr. Darcy did not seem satisfied and demanded further explanation, which Mr. Rowland thereby related.

"The Luddites... they have some grievances against the manufacturers in the north and feel they must take matters into their own hands. I was an unwilling participant at first — I only wanted to help my family financially." Mr. Rowland bowed his head slightly, as if in disgrace.



Arthur's story unfolded slowly as he recounted the details of how he became entangled with the Luddites. It all began with a loan from a friend when the machines were first introduced to the mill and as a result, there was less need for labour. Everyone felt the loss of wages keenly, but especially those who had multiple family members working at the mill, as the Rowlands did. In turn, Mr. Rowland failed to fulfil his commitment to repay his companion in a timely fashion, consequently immersing him in an unceasing cycle of indebtedness and unhappiness. It seemed there was no way out, until his friend approached him with a proposition: work for his cause and all of the debts would be forgiven. It was a tempting offer, a chance for redemption. At first, the group seemed harmless enough. They wrote letters to tradesmen and mill owners asking them to introduce the machines slowly, instead of all at once, or to augment the loss of labour by assisting the men with finding other work so their families would not suffer. Most of the recipients of the letters never responded or refused.

“They became frustrated and joined forces with a larger Luddite faction. I wished to have nothing to do with the Luddites, but as my debt had not yet been fully repaid with my labour, I had little choice but to continue,” Mr. Rowland went on. “As time went on, it became clear to me that the Luddites were devising more radical ideas. The more I contemplated their intentions, the stronger the urge grew to disentangle myself from their group, but they intimidated me with debtor's prison. I am ashamed to admit that I gave in, although I knew machine breaking and other such violence to be wrong. I justified it, saying they never harmed people, and the rich owners of the businesses could afford the loss of the machines.”

Mr. Darcy's eyes were fixed on Mr. Rowland, his face serious as he weighed all that had been said. “And how did Mr. Witting become involved in all of this?” he asked.

“I don't know all the particulars. As I was leaving a Luddite gathering, I came upon a brawl — or so I supposed it to be — with Mr. Witting at the centre, being beat by several of the head men in the group. Mr. Witting was unconscious,

and the men believed him to be dead. They, knowing my circumstances, ordered me to take my cart and dispose of his body. Given their violence towards Mr. Witting, I dared not refuse them. We loaded him onto the cart and covered him with blankets. As I went along, however, I heard him begin to moan and I realised he was still alive. There is a room at the mill where the rags are kept that few enter. Only I and some small boys, whose silence is easily bought with food. I hid Witting there, and cared for him the best I could. I planned to buy him passage to America — though I could ill-afford it — for I later learned that Mr. Witting had been spying on the meeting and therefore would likely be a threat to all in attendance at the meeting, if he were to tell what he heard. The only place I thought he would be safe was abroad.” As he shared his story, Mr. Rowland’s eyes revealed the conflict, shame, and guilt he harboured.

Elizabeth’s heart grew heavy as she listened with rapt attention to the unfolding secrets. The man’s predicament, from which he had thought he could not break free, elicited her sympathy.

“Thank you for sharing your story, Mr. Rowland. It does not justify what you did, but it gives a more complete understanding of the situation,” Mr. Darcy said once Mr. Rowland was finished speaking.

“I wish that was all,” said Mr. Rowland, raking a hand through his red hair. “I fear the plans laid out at the meeting that Mr. Witting heard are quite damning and I have lived under the weight of them for too long. The leader of the group, Mr. Fields, has been planning to bring some of his people to London and accost members of Parliament. I know not exactly what he plans, but I fear the worst.”

The significance of Mr. Rowland’s story was evident to everyone in the room. The possibility of a violent assault on members of Parliament, even as a misguided effort to bring about change, was deeply unsettling.

“What can we do?” Mr. Bingley asked. “Is there a way that we can get word to London in time? When is the attack planned for?”

“I do not know for certain, but it shall be soon. Mr. Fields is an impatient man and will not wait much longer to make his move.”

“We cannot wait for word to reach London,” said Mr. Darcy. “We must tell my cousin. He is in Halling now, which is much closer. Should he have any available men, their position would be more advantageous than any of us or a servant in preventing such an incident.”

## Chapter 11

**D**espite making the suggestion that his cousins be told, Mr. Darcy was not willing to make any of the servants put themselves in such danger. If he were to be wholly truthful, he had a certain level of mistrust towards the servants, particularly due to the fact that one of Longbourn's servants had family members employed at the mill; it would not be astonishing if others had similar associations. Such an important message as this could be trusted to no other but himself. Yet, he could not march into Halling dressed as a gentleman.

The solution to this conundrum came when Mr. Rowland entered the room, bathed and dressed in the livery of a footman. Elizabeth gasped aloud as an idea struck her.

“We can dress in Mr. Rowland's clothes and that of the servants!” she exclaimed.

Mr. Darcy looked at her as if she were fit for Bedlam. “We?” he asked. “Surely you do not mean that you intend to come along?”

Elizabeth stood firm. “Yes, Mr. Darcy, I do. This is far too important to leave to chance, and surely two men travelling together would attract much more attention than if you have a lady with you as well.”

Mr. Darcy shook his head. “It is too dangerous. I cannot put you in such danger.”

“But Mr. Darcy,” she implored, “I cannot sit by and wait for tragedy to strike any more than you can. We must act quickly, sir.”

Mr. Darcy knew that Elizabeth was not one to back down from a challenge, and he normally admired that quality in her. At this moment, however, it was a nuisance.

“Elizabeth, I understand your wish to help, but the danger is too great. I cannot allow you to come with us,” he said firmly.

Elizabeth looked at him, her eyes filled with determination. “But I can’t just sit here while you face this danger alone,” she pleaded.

He sighed, his expression softening. He was torn between his desire to protect her and his recognition of her capabilities. “I appreciate your bravery, but the danger we’re dealing with is greater than you can imagine. I will not be able to guarantee your safety.”

Elizabeth’s countenance grew steely. “I’m not asking you to guarantee my safety. I am asking you to let me decide for myself when I wish to risk my own safety for a just reason.”

He saw determination and courage shining in her fine eyes. After a moment of silence, he gave a reluctant nod. “Fine — but promise me you’ll follow my lead and prioritise your safety above all else. I can’t prevent you from coming, but I won’t allow you to take unnecessary risks.”

Elizabeth eagerly agreed. “I promise, I’ll do whatever it takes to stay safe and support you in finding your cousins and relaying the information to them.”

“Very well,” Mr. Bingley agreed, having been silent while watching the interplay between the pair. “But we cannot go now. It is far too late and too dark to be abroad, even with information of such urgency. We shall leave at first light.” He looked at his watch. “That should be but a few hours. We ought to prepare.”

While the group scattered to make their preparations, Elizabeth’s unease began to crawl up her spine. Agreeing to the dangerous mission in the heat of the moment was one thing, but facing the reality of it was another. She made her way to her room and swiftly packed a small bag with essentials and changed into a maid’s uniform.

Once she was ready, she went to find Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley to discuss their plan. They would need a horse and cart to reach Halling, and Mr. Bingley had already made arrangements for one to be brought to Netherfield before dawn. Mr. Darcy had acquired a map and charted the route

they would take. Jane, who was responsible for informing the others and aiding in Mr. Witting's care while they were gone, reluctantly went to bed after her sister's repeated pleas. Mr. Rowland also would remain at Netherfield, lest he be recognised by his former colleagues. Sarah, however, was not well-known to the men from the mill, and she was willing to take the risk and accompany the party.

While waiting for dawn, the group attempted to rest, but could not. Thoughts of what could happen on their journey were racing through Elizabeth's mind. She eventually relinquished the attempt and made her way to see the men in the library. There, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley were discussing their plan in low voices, poring over the map and pointing out potential obstacles.

Elizabeth stood in the doorway and watched them with a combination of fear and admiration. She admired Mr. Darcy's desire to protect others, and deep down, she found his gallantry towards her flattering.

"Is there something you need, Miss Elizabeth?" Mr. Darcy asked when he looked up and saw her.

"No, I just couldn't sleep. I wanted to confirm that everything is in order," she responded.

"As much as it can be, without knowing exactly what we are facing."

Elizabeth nodded. "Is there anything I can do to assist?"

Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley exchanged a look, but neither knew of anything else that could be done. All they were waiting for was the sun. Elizabeth sat down in a leather armchair and took up a book. The gentlemen eventually did likewise, deciding that there was a limit to the number of times they could go over the same plan.



The next thing Elizabeth knew, she was being shaken by the arm and a soft male voice was saying her name. She groaned and tried to roll over away from the person, but she couldn't. She opened her eyes, and found herself in the library at Netherfield, Mr. Darcy before her.

“Miss Elizabeth, it is time to wake,” he said softly. His expression was gentle, but there was a look of stress about him.

Elizabeth sat up and blinked away the sleep from her eyes. She couldn't remember when she'd fallen asleep, but she knew she hadn't slept long, as dawn was only beginning to break.

Mr. Bingley entered the room, ready in his disguise as a labourer. It was slightly odd to see the two fine gentlemen dressed in such common clothing. “The horse and cart are waiting outside. We must go before anyone sees us,” he said.

Elizabeth gathered her things and joined the men outside. She was surprised to see that the cart was, in fact, an old, rickety wagon pulled by a solitary horse. She glanced at Mr. Darcy, who looked apologetic.

“It is more inconspicuous,” he explained.

Elizabeth nodded in understanding and accepted Mr. Darcy's offer of a hand into the wagon. Sarah was inside, already rearranging bags of flour and oats to create seats for them. After Mr. Darcy settled next to him, Mr. Bingley took hold of the reins and urged the horse forward. As they set off, Elizabeth looked around at the countryside, taking in the beauty of the early morning light. An unsettling feeling gnawed at her gut, but she ignored it the best that she could.

When they came near to their destination, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley drove them to where their horse and the wagon would be stabled, two miles outside of Halling at a small inn. Despite having to walk the remaining distance, it was better to be unencumbered when the unknown lay ahead.

A heavy silence descended upon the group as they walked towards Halling, their footsteps echoing ominously

throughout the silent countryside. This eerie quiet was shattered as they entered Halling. The aftermath of the previous night's riots was everywhere. Smoke choked the air, making it stale and acrid. Broken glass and rubble littered the streets. Shouts echoed in the air, their meaning lost in the distance between them and the source. More than anything else, their unease was caused by a subtle undercurrent of tension.

Rounding a corner, Mr. Darcy's heart froze as a group of militia officers appeared before them, their weapons poised to shoot. Amongst them was his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam.

The party stood still, surrounded by the silence, broken only by the soft rustle of the wind through the trees, as the militiamen and Colonel Fitzwilliam aimed their guns. The Colonel demanded, "Who are you? What do you do here?"

The party remained silent, rendered mute by fear. With narrowed eyes, the Colonel advanced, and his men closely followed. Suddenly, one of the figures removed their hood, and he recognised the face immediately.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam," said Mr. Darcy, stepping forward, "we mean no harm."

The Colonel, with a bewildered expression, gazed at Darcy in astonishment, taken aback by his friend's peculiar appearance. "Darcy, what on God's green earth?"

"Indeed, it is us," affirmed Bingley, as he pulled back his own hood, a sheepish smile appearing on his lips.

"We humbly request your forgiveness for our current appearance, Colonel," Elizabeth added, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she revealed herself alongside her loyal maid, Sarah. "We had our reasons."

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet," Colonel Fitzwilliam responded, raising an eyebrow. "I trust you have come to collect your sisters, then?"

Elizabeth's stomach dropped as she asked, "What about my sisters?"



Colonel Fitzwilliam's face turned serious. "Perhaps you're unaware," he began grimly, "but Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia arrived in Halling sometime during the night, searching for Darcy's missing servant amidst the uprising."

Elizabeth's heart pounded. "What did you say? Are they all right? Please tell me they haven't been hurt!"

"They're well, Miss Elizabeth, although a bit shaken up."

Exhaling deeply, Elizabeth's fear began to dissipate. "Thank goodness. I warned them against leaving without informing anyone of their destination. But, as usual, they didn't listen. I'll have to have a word with them about that."

"My brother found them before they came to any harm," the Colonel assured them. "I shall take you to them."

Led by the Colonel, the group cautiously made their way through the town, their senses heightened by an uneasy feeling and distant echoes of unrest. The entire town seemed poised for destruction, teetering on the edge of a table about to fall.

As they walked on, Sarah's fear swelled, causing her to cling tightly to Elizabeth's arm, her body trembling. Elizabeth's fear was less evident, but she still searched for signs of danger and was grateful to have a dozen armed men about them.

Eventually, the group arrived at a small inn, and Colonel Fitzwilliam brought them to a halt. "Come," said he, beckoning them forward with a smile, "This has become our headquarters. The only women around are the innkeeper's wife and cook, so your sisters are in the kitchens with them. My brother did not think it would be beneficial to their reputations if they were known to be in an inn full of soldiers."

"Indeed," said Elizabeth grimly, shaking her head in disbelief. "Of course, my sisters thought nothing of their reputations when they went off."

Mr. Darcy could see the frustration and worry reflected in the lines on Elizabeth's face. He placed a comforting hand

on her arm and said, “Let us not dwell on their mistakes, but focus on bringing them home safely.”

The group followed Colonel Fitzwilliam to the kitchens. When they walked in, they were greeted by Lydia and Kitty, whose ashen faces and wide eyes revealed their fear. Upon closer scrutiny, they noticed that both girls appeared to have tears in their eyes. Lord Barlow, seated beside them, spoke softly and soothingly. His leg was propped up on a barstool, supported by a long, thick stick wrapped in layers of bandages. He managed to hide his pain behind a composed facade, although his eyes betrayed occasional glimpses of agony.

Elizabeth disregarded the viscount and rushed forward to offer her sisters a comforting embrace. She held them close, feeling Kitty’s body quivering and shaking with sobs. She spoke quietly, stroking her sisters’ hair, telling them that they were loved and safe.

Lord Barlow whispered to the others, recounting what had occurred. While returning to the inn from the mill, he unexpectedly encountered Lydia and Kitty being accosted by a group of drunken men. A man had Kitty firmly by the arm, pressing her against the wall of a building, while he described the awful things he planned to do to her. Lydia was flailing her arms in a desperate attempt to fend off the men, but Kitty was frozen in fear.

Lord Barlow had rushed to them, bellowing a battle cry that would have made his brother proud. The combined surprise and blows he delivered to the men allowed the youngest Bennets to get away. Once the element of surprise was gone, however, he was only one man, and they were many. The beating he received from his assailants lasted for almost a half-hour. It was only the approach of militia officers that caused their retreat and his release. Despite the militia approaching and trying to help him up, he remained in a heap on the ground for several minutes, unable to support his own weight. He then refused to be carried back to the inn until the young ladies had been found, and a search ensued.

It took them some time, but they eventually found them. The ladies had discovered a dilapidated church where they took shelter. After their frightening ordeal, he was greatly relieved to find them hale, but they were initially hesitant to go with him. It was only when he disclosed his name and his connection to Mr. Darcy that they finally trusted him and accepted his help, as well as that of the men accompanying him. They all returned to the inn, and the young ladies had since been unwilling to leave his side for long. He was their saviour and protector, and they would not be without him. Even when he assured them that they would be safe on a journey home with several armed guards, they refused.

“Oh, my dears,” said Elizabeth. “How scared you must have been! We must take you home at once.”

Lydia and Kitty nodded, still shaken and pale. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley exchanged glances, both relieved that the girls were found and safe, but also worried about the potential repercussions on the young ladies’ reputations.

“But why have you come here if you did not know about the Miss Bennets?” the colonel asked his cousin.

Darcy related all that had happened since Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lord Barlow had left Netherfield the previous evening, and the fears that they had for the Prime Minister and other members of Parliament.

The group listened attentively, their expressions becoming increasingly solemn. The room fell silent as Mr. Darcy finished recounting the events of the night, burdened by the seriousness of the situation. Even those who had been present for Mr. Rowland’s telling of the tale were struck anew by the full extent of the danger they and the country were in.

The silence hung heavy in the air, and Elizabeth couldn’t help but study each person in the room, her eyes finally settling on Mr. Darcy. In his gaze, she witnessed the weight of responsibility he carried for his dependants and now for his country. She felt fear for him, fear for them all, but also a strong sense of pride and admiration for the man beside her.

“We can’t just sit here and wait,” she said, breaking the silence. “What can we do?”

Colonel Fitzwilliam shook his head. “I will say one thing for your family, Miss Elizabeth. None of you are cowed by a challenge. In this case, however, I must insist that you take your sisters and return home. My brother shall accompany you, as he must have proper care by a surgeon. I shall go immediately to London with some of my most trusted men.”

Elizabeth, although wishing that she could do more, agreed. Her sisters needed to be returned to Longbourn, and Lord Barlow needed medical attention. Certainly, trained military officers would better take care of this dangerous task than a country miss might, regardless of what she read in stories.

As they were leaving the inn, Elizabeth caught Mr. Darcy’s eye, and he gave her a tired smile. She realised he hadn’t slept the previous night. After enduring physical activity and emotional turmoil for the past day and a half, he must be utterly exhausted. She acted on impulse and reached out to clasp his hand in hers. Amid the chaos and uncertainty, Mr. Darcy appreciated the comforting gesture. He gently squeezed her hand, his touch conveying unspoken gratitude for her act of kindness.

Kitty and Lydia were lured to sleep by the wagon’s rhythmic wheels on the long and silent journey home. As Elizabeth sat next to her sleeping sisters, replayed the recent events in her mind, feeling guilty about the entire situation. If her sisters hadn’t gone off on their own, none of this would have happened. And maybe, they wouldn’t have ventured out alone if she and Jane had come back home the night before. She vowed to keep a closer eye on them in the future.

## Chapter 12

It was midday by the time they arrived back at Netherfield, visibly exhausted and in need of a hearty meal. Before the wheels on their conveyance had stopped turning, Jane rushed out of the house with an uncharacteristic display of feeling. Elizabeth had hardly stepped down before being swept up into her sister's embrace.

"I was so worried," whispered Jane, her eyes shining with emotion.

"We are all quite well," Elizabeth replied reassuringly.

"Mother and Father called this morning," said Jane. Before she could further elaborate, the next person alighted from the carriage. Jane ran towards Lydia with open arms, embracing her tightly in an instant, and repeated the same affectionate gesture for Kitty when she stepped down.

"You are well?" she asked, looking her sisters over. "We have all been so very worried for you!"

Lydia allowed herself the comfort of her eldest sister's embrace, weeping in relief to be safe and in familiar surroundings.

"It was so dreadful, Jane," Lydia sobbed. "I was so foolish, and if it weren't for his lordship, surely we would have been killed!"

"Hush, child," said Jane. "Let us get you into the house and into fresh clothes before we hear anything more of your trials."

As they made their way into Netherfield, Jane caught Mr. Bingley's eye. He gave her a soft smile, his brown eyes twinkling.

"Why do you look at me in such a manner?" she asked.

“You are delightful, dear Jane. Already you act as a perfect mistress of the house, despite the fact that you have not yet come into that role.”

Jane worried her lower lip, and glanced at Miss Bingley, who was ordering servants about so they might all have baths and tea. “Your sister...” she began, but hesitated.

“I know you would never wish cause upset, dearest, but you shall be mistress here. My sister shall have to become used to it, or else she can set up an establishment of her own.” Mr. Bingley looked at his sister as he spoke, grimacing as Miss Bingley scolded a maid for not moving fast enough.

Mrs. Hurst came near and asked about her brother’s well-being, her eyes searching for any indication of harm. When she was satisfied that he was well, she asked after also the others, and declared herself relieved that no one, save Lord Barlow, had suffered much harm.

The injured viscount was seen to by Mr. Reed in another room. If one had not known that the doctor was setting the gentleman’s leg, the screams emanating from down the corridor would have been disturbing. Even knowing the cause, Elizabeth could not help but wince and hope that the doctor would give his lordship some laudanum for the pain.

After having bathed and changed into more suitable clothing, all but Lord Barlow gathered in the drawing-room for tea. Mrs. Hurst was most interested in hearing an account of the night’s events and the others obliged.

“I wonder that you do not scold your sisters more harshly, Miss Eliza,” said Miss Bingley, once the tale was concluded. “They acted very foolishly, endangering their lives and, worse, their reputations.”

“There is no need to scold them, Miss Bingley,” said Elizabeth. “They have learned their lesson and are quite contrite. They shall not act so foolishly again.”

Lydia and Kitty promised solemnly that they should not, as they were overwhelmed with a sense of horror about Lord Barlow’s injury and the consequences of their actions.

As the conversation progressed, Miss Bingley's attention became solely focused on Mr. Darcy. Yet, that gentleman had no illusions about her. Ever since Lord Barlow had arrived, her attention had been almost entirely on him, and it had only now shifted because his lordship was laid abed and could not hear her flattery. She exclaimed over the danger that they had all been in, how brave Mr. Darcy had been to take on the task of delivering the news to his cousins, and how dreadful it must have been to have to dress in the clothing of servants. The insincerity of her words was entirely transparent.

Mr. Darcy, concerned for Mr. Witting and Lord Barlow, wished only for Mr. Reed to come downstairs and give reassurance that all would be well. His feelings were not openly expressed like Miss Bingley's, but they were far more profound. As Elizabeth watched him, she could see his eyes constantly glancing towards the stairs, hoping for word. His love for his friends and deep concern made her heart swell with affection for him.

The doctor came down a few minutes later with the news that both ailing men were resting comfortably. He insisted on looking over all who had gone to Halling that morning in case there was some injury that had been overlooked. Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, being the gentlemen that they were, insisted that the ladies be examined first. Kitty and Lydia, having been the most affected by the events of the night, went first. Miss Bingley fawned over Mr. Darcy's selflessness, praising his actions far beyond what they deserved.

"Miss Bingley," Mr. Darcy said sharply, as he was entirely fed up with her praise and concern. "I beg you to desist. I am quite well. I need nothing from you. I have done nothing more or less than what your brother also has done, yet none of your praise or concern is directed toward him. It is quite inappropriate."

Miss Bingley was taken aback by his directness, but she quickly composed herself. "I did not mean to offend you, sir. I am worried, of course, about all of my guests and my relations."

Mr. Bingley, who was always quick to forgive, tried to lighten the mood in the room. “Well, Caroline,” he said with a smile. “I suppose you assumed my dear Jane would see to my needs well enough. Already she is quite the wife.”

Jane, who was sitting beside him and embroidering a gift for her mother’s birthday, blushed prettily.

Mr. Reed soon interrupted, entering the room with Lydia and Kitty. The doctor looked at the two girls and then informed them that Lydia was in a state of shock due to the events of the night. He would need to observe her overnight, at least, to make sure of her well-being. Kitty had fared better, but also would do well to rest and remain under the eye of the doctor.

When the doctor examined the others, only bruises were found. Despite this, Elizabeth and Jane obtained their parents’ permission to remain at Netherfield, in order to look after their younger sisters.



A pounding on her chambers’ door awakened Elizabeth. She might not have heard the pounding over the storm outside, but the person on the other side of the door was persistent. She rose and wrapped herself in a shawl before opening the door. Miss Bingley was positioned on the opposite side, her face pale and her hair untidily concealed under a cap. She wore the previous day’s gown, but without the elegance of a leisurely dressing routine.

“What is the matter?” asked Elizabeth, alarmed at the sight of the normally stylish woman in such a state.

“One of the stables has been hit by lightning and is on fire!” exclaimed Miss Bingley. Miss Bingley continued to give further explanation, but Elizabeth saw no need. As soon as the first sentence had left Miss Bingley’s lips, Elizabeth had begun to search for her shoes and gown to go out and assist.

“You mean to go out and work with the men?” asked Miss Bingley in surprise, when Elizabeth asked a maid to get



her a pelisse and that as many buckets as possible be brought out. The maid said that Mr. Darcy had already ordered for any and all buckets be sent, but that she would fetch the pelisse.

“Of course,” said Elizabeth. She had assumed that was why Miss Bingley had awakened her in the first place. She had not the time to think on that, however. Before a mere few minutes had elapsed, she dashed outside, racing towards the raging fire, as the wind howled and the rain pelted her face.

When she arrived, she found the three gentlemen on the house at work throwing buckets of water onto the fire as servants tried to keep the horses calm. One horse, in particular, refused to be soothed, and the small stable boy who held his reins looked frightened of the bucking animal. Elizabeth was no great lover of horses herself, but she at least took hold of the reins from the boy and urged him to see to the other animals.

Miss Bingley rushed up to Elizabeth just as she had managed to calm the horse. Elizabeth’s attempts to calm the gelding were in vain as it responded to Miss Bingley’s approach by shying and rearing. Frustration washed over Elizabeth as she desperately tried to grasp the bridle or reins, preparing herself for the worst. The world seemed to slow as she saw the hoof coming towards her and was unable to move fast enough to escape her fate.

But the expected pain never came. Just it seemed she was going to be kicked by the panicked animal, Mr. Darcy suddenly appeared from behind them both and grabbed hold of the bridle with both hands, pulling the horse’s head down and to the side.

She took a step back, allowing Mr. Darcy room to soothe the horse by gently rubbing its neck and whispering comforting words. Miss Bingley also watched from a safe distance, her hands clasped nervously in front of her. A moment later, the stable boy again appeared, and took the reins from Mr. Darcy, apologising profusely for what had happened.

Mr. Darcy simply nodded at the boy, telling him to bring the horse to one of the tenants’ houses for stabling. The

boy rushed off, holding the horse's reins, to do that as he was told.

"The fire is nearly out now," Mr. Darcy told Elizabeth. "Thankfully, only one wall of the stable was affected, and it was by the carriages, not the animals. All the animals seem well, but we will see in the coming days if the smoke caused any harm."

Elizabeth was struck with a pang in her heart for the poor animals. How scared they must have been! Miss Bingley fretted only about the carriage that had been damaged in the fire, as it was her favourite. Mr. Darcy looked at her askance.

"We had best get you ladies inside the house and ask the maids to warm water for baths, lest you take ill," said Mr. Darcy a moment later. "Allow me to escort you inside."

"Surely the others should bathe first — those covered in soot and ash from the fire," said Elizabeth.

"Of course, sir. You are most kind," said Miss Bingley, at the same time.

"They shall all have baths. Do not worry yourself, Miss Elizabeth. And they shall have warm fires and hot tea as well," Mr. Darcy said, his gaze warm as he spoke. "You are ladies, however, and need not remain to put out the last embers. I am sure Mr. Bingley appreciates your efforts on his horses' behalf."

Elizabeth agreed, not wanting to seem contrary on such a small matter. Mr. Darcy offered them each an arm and walked them back to the house. Elizabeth, after the excitement of a few moments earlier, was glad for his steady presence. She couldn't help but feel thankful for Mr. Darcy's swift handling of the horse. She now realised her folly in thinking she could handle the situation on her own. Even the strongest women occasionally require assistance, despite her pride in her independence.

An hour later, Elizabeth was again in her bed, but was unable to sleep. She could not help seeing the horse's hooves

flying towards her again and again when she closed her eyes and feeling grateful for the man who had saved her life.

## Chapter 13

Elizabeth yawned and sat up in bed, at first confused where she was, before recalling that she had remained the night at Netherfield. As she rose, she stretched, her joints cracking from yesterday's exertion. She made her way to the washstand and refreshed herself by splashing the cool water from the basin onto her face. She wiped away the droplets that fell on the floor with a cloth, not wanting to ruin Netherfield's lovely floors.

Sarah entered, looking twice as exhausted as Elizabeth did. She had a firm, determined expression with a tightly set jaw, and her eyes were red as though she had been crying.

"Dear Sarah!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "What can be the matter? Is Mr. Witting worse?"

Sarah nodded, her composure cracking. "He had a fit, miss, in the night. The doctor is with him, but he doesn't know what caused it yet. Says there's no explanation he can see." A tear rolled down Sarah's cheek. The maid promptly brushed it away and offered a small smile, as servants were not supposed to display their emotions openly. Elizabeth had always thought this a foolish rule, especially when it came to those like Sarah, who Elizabeth had known for years.

Elizabeth approached and took Sarah's hand in her own. "I am sure he shall be well. Mr. Reed is a fine doctor."

Sarah nodded, then turned and went to the wardrobe. She selected two gowns for Elizabeth to choose from. Heeding the maid's wishes to speak no more on the subject, Elizabeth allowed the maid to go about her normal duties of attendance on the Bennets. Elizabeth asked after her sisters, both of whom seemed much more themselves in Sarah's opinion.

As Elizabeth exited her chambers a quarter hour later, she heard a giggle, and nearly ran into her sister, Jane, coming from the wrong direction. Elizabeth stepped back, her heart racing as she looked at her sister, blinking rapidly, convinced

the sight before her might rearrange itself upon further examination. Wearing a white nightdress trimmed with delicate lace, her sister had a glow about her that Elizabeth had not before seen. Her mouth going dry, Elizabeth tried to make sense of the situation. Why would Jane have been in the family wing wearing such clothing?

As Elizabeth grappled with her confusion, her sister Jane's bright and cheery voice interrupted her. "Good morning, Lizzy! Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, I did. Thank you for asking," Elizabeth replied with a smile.

"If you would not mind allowing me into your rooms, Mother sent trunks, but my gowns were put in with yours."

Elizabeth smiled, glad that she had been foolish in judging her sister. "Oh, of course. Come in."

She opened the door to her chambers, and they both stepped inside. As expected, under Elizabeth's gowns were two of Jane's. While Jane got dressed, she and Elizabeth engaged in idle conversation as usual, but Elizabeth detected a difference in Jane's demeanour. There was no particular word she could think of to describe it, but her sister was not as she always was before.

Once they were ready, they moved together to the breakfast room. As soon as they entered, Elizabeth's attention was immediately drawn to the radiant smile that lit Mr. Bingley's features at the sight of Jane. Jane blushed, feeling embarrassed by the lingering gaze of her betrothed, but could not suppress her smile in response.

"Good morning, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth," said Mr. Darcy. His friend echoed him.

"Good morning, Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy," replied Elizabeth.

Jane greeted the gentlemen as well, but her eyes never left Mr. Bingley's. As the tea and food were served, the servants bustling around the room, the couple seemed unable to take their eyes off each other, completely oblivious to

everything and everyone else. Even the most basic of courtesies were completely forgotten as they were enraptured in each other's gaze, their newly betrothed state bringing out a new warmth, a new love, that was impossible to contain. As the servants made their way out of the room, the couple continued to bask in each other's presence, their own little world created out of love and understanding. A feeling of jealousy overcame Elizabeth, not due to Mr. Bingley's affection, but due to Jane's reciprocated love.

There was a faraway look in Mr. Darcy's eyes, Elizabeth noted when she turned to him. She examined him, trying to determine his thoughts, but could not. She touched his arm, smiling warmly. He seemed to relax a little at her gesture, and gave a small smile in response, but it did not reach his eyes.

"Are you well this morning, sir?" she finally asked, unable to contain her worry.

"Yes, thank you, Miss Elizabeth," he replied. "I am just a little preoccupied with Mr. Witting's condition. He had a fit during the night."

"Sarah told me of the fit, sir. That is truly unfortunate," she said sympathetically. "Does Mr. Reed think he will recover?"

Mr. Darcy let out a sigh. "It is difficult to say. The doctor is with him now, trying to determine the extent of his injuries. But I fear the worst. He was alone during his fit due to the fire, and if he had not been, he might have been less affected, or so Mr. Reed thinks."

"Alone? Was there not a maid to attend him? All hands were not out of doors for the fire." Elizabeth was baffled. Surely the one maid who ought not to have left Netherfield was the one attending to the sick rooms. A person's life far outweighed that of animals or carriages.

"The maid was the one who noticed the fire out the window. She was certainly not at fault, but regardless, the result is the same. Witting was forgotten in the disruption, and now he has suffered."

“I am sure everything will turn out for the best. Mr. Witting is in capable hands with Mr. Reed,” said Elizabeth, placing her own hand on Mr. Darcy’s forearm for a moment.

Mr. Darcy gave her a grateful smile, and the two of them lapsed into a comfortable silence, lost in their own thoughts, while Jane and Mr. Bingley chatted happily about their upcoming wedding plans. Elizabeth couldn’t help but smile at the blissful couple. She was thrilled for her sister’s happiness and knew that Mr. Bingley was a good match for her.

Glancing over at Mr. Darcy, she realised he was watching her, not the couple. Their eyes met and Mr. Darcy smiled at her. A blush crept up into her cheeks, despite her attempts to will it away.

As they finished their meal, Jane and Mr. Bingley excused themselves and made their way to the music room. Elizabeth remained seated, sipping her tea, when Mr. Darcy spoke up. “Miss Elizabeth, would you care to join me for a walk in the gardens?”

“It is rather cold, and I am quite tired from yesterday’s excursion, Mr. Darcy, but I would be delighted to join you in the library,” she answered truthfully.

Mr. Darcy agreed with alacrity to the altered plan. Elizabeth felt a mix of excitement and trepidation as they headed to the library. She was reminded of her last stay at Netherfield; the time before she understood and appreciated Mr. Darcy. Her sentiments since that period had undergone so material a change that she scarcely could believe her own feelings. Was her heart so fanciful as this? Such a change in so short a time was more befitting Lydia than Elizabeth.

Yet, if she were to be honest with herself, had she not since the first found his person appealing, even if his insult had soured her opinion of him? Indeed, was not that the reason such an insult had cut so deeply? She had felt drawn to him by some indescribable force, despite her initial desire to escape his gravity. No more could she now deny her attraction to him than an apple could stop itself falling when dropped. She now

yearned to know his feelings, to have a real connection with him, to know what he was thinking and be privy to the version of himself he dared not reveal, except to those closest.

“...seven hundred from Hodgson’s, the book auctioneers,” Mr. Darcy was saying.

Elizabeth then realised that Mr. Darcy had been speaking to her, and she had not been paying attention. She felt a flush of embarrassment as she realised her thoughts had drifted, grateful for his patient understanding. Thankfully, the evidence of what he had said was before her, for they had arrived at the library and the shelves were quite full, a sharp contrast to the nearly bare shelves of her previous visit. Elizabeth was struck by the beauty of the library, the rows of books with their gilded spines shimmering in the light of the oil lamps, and how Mr. Darcy’s presence seemed to add a warmth to the room that made her want to stay. A sudden warmth spread through her body as she became acutely aware of Mr. Darcy’s proximity. She tried to ignore the feeling, but it was impossible. As they walked through the library, Elizabeth couldn’t help but steal glances at Mr. Darcy. It was a moment of clarity, as she noticed the way his sparkling eyes met hers and how his coat draped over his broad frame.

The unspoken emotions between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were palpable as he leaned closer, their eyes locked in a silent exchange. A strange sensation ran through her arm when he touched her. His gaze bore into her soul, causing her to feel both embarrassed and desirous. The intensity of his nearness was not lost on her, nor was his silent plea for something more.

Breaking the tension, he stepped away from her and loudly cleared his throat. He gestured towards the shelves of books again. “I shall show you the catalogue, if you wish,” he said, stepping carefully past her. “Otherwise, I organised the books by genre, so if you tell me what you wish to read, I can lead you thither.”

Elizabeth felt her heart slow down as he moved away, and she urged herself to speak. “Thank you, Mr. Darcy,” she



said, her voice a whisper. “I would love to peruse the catalogue with you, sir.”

Her response seemed to please him, and he led her over to the stand where the catalogue was open. She began flipping through the pages, lightly skimming a few and carefully studying others. At intervals, she stopped and focused closely on a certain entry before proceeding to the next. After what seemed like ages of searching, she finally found something that she wished to read. With excitement shining in her eyes, she eagerly noted the book’s location. With the signs on the shelves, she quickly found the volume, returning to Mr. Darcy with the book in hand. They settled into comfortable armchairs, lost in their own worlds as they read together in a companionable silence.



The peaceful attitude in the library was shattered before long, when Mr. Reed was finished with Mr. Witting’s examination. Mr. Witting wished to speak with Mr. Darcy, and the gentleman was not unwilling to meet with him.

“I need to learn if he remembers anything of the fit, sir,” said Mr. Reed as they mounted the stairs. “It is difficult for him to remember, but I think if you were to request it of him, he might more readily comply.”

Mr. Darcy agreed. When they entered the room, he saw his valet lying in the bed, looking small and weak.

“Witting,” said Mr. Darcy softly. “I need to ask you to try to remember last night, before you had the fit. Do you remember anything?”

With some difficulty, Mr. Witting opened his eyes and tried to speak. “I... I don’t remember much. I woke up to the sensation of someone touching my wound. I thought it was the maid, changing the bandage, then I had the fit. I have tried to remember more, but I cannot.” Mr. Witting seemed upset by his inability to recall the details of the event.

“Do you recall at all what the person looked like or what clothing he wore?” asked Mr. Darcy, alarmed but keeping his voice steady. “Did you think it was a maid because it was a woman, perhaps?”

Mr. Witting had no notion of who it might have been. After speaking several more minutes with Mr. Witting and giving their best wishes for a rapid return to health, they summoned a maid. When the servant arrived, Mr. Darcy left the room with Mr. Reed, returning to the library so they might speak in privacy. Elizabeth was still within, but that was all the better.

“From his symptoms, it seems that his wound has become infected. I know not what caused the infection, but someone touching his wound could not assist matters.”

“Could someone purposefully introduce infection into his wound? Or a poison, perhaps?” asked Elizabeth. “If the people after him have found out he is here, they might have wished him dead.”

“Why would they not simply use a knife or gun?” asked Mr. Darcy.

“So they do not hang,” said Elizabeth. “A clear murder would mean an investigation. A man dying of infection... while the Luddites who are caught will not escape prison, no one person can likely be held entirely responsible for Mr. Witting’s injuries. Therefore, they would likely escape the noose if he dies.”

Mr. Reed nodded. “That is what I believe as well. Someone observed our movements or was told that Mr. Witting was here.”

Darcy groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose in disquiet.

“Mr. Reed?” Elizabeth asked quietly.

“Yes, Miss Elizabeth?” the doctor answered.

“Is it at all possible to move Mr. Witting elsewhere? I fear he is not safe here.”

After thinking for a moment, Mr. Reed spoke. “That would be a possibility, but it would not be at all easy. We must try to keep Mr. Witting as still as possible, to stave off more infection. However, I do agree that he is not safe here. We might be able to send him in a carriage elsewhere, but I cannot imagine where you could take him, where he would be more secure.”

“I shall find somewhere,” said Mr. Darcy.

“Very well. Let me know when I am needed, and I can help to supervise the transportation,” said Mr. Reed. “I must check on my other patients, if you do not mind. I think your sisters shall be able to return to your home today.” With this, he bid them a pleasant day, bowed, pivoted, and opened the door, leaving it ajar for propriety.

Elizabeth nodded, understanding the need for Mr. Witting to attend to his other patient. She turned back to Mr. Darcy, who had lines of deep concern etched into his forehead.

“I know where we might bring them,” said she.

“We cannot bring them to Longbourn,” he replied. “It would be just as dangerous as Netherfield. We must get them away from Meryton.”

“I agree. I was not thinking of Longbourn. However, we also must consider that they cannot travel a great distance, so we cannot whisk them off to Derbyshire.” Elizabeth paused for a moment before continuing, “I was thinking of Gracechurch Street. My aunt and uncle have a spacious house there. I am certain that they would offer aid to the men, given the circumstances. No one would suspect that they are there, and we could ensure their safety.”

“But the riots in London are ongoing,” he protested. “It is not safe to bring them there.”

Elizabeth replied urgently, “I understand that, Mr. Darcy, but we cannot leave Mr. Witting and Mr. Rowland in danger any longer. We must act at once. I know that we can make whatever arrangements are necessary to get them to Gracechurch Street. My family often goes to London, or

sometimes the Gardiners come to Longbourn for the holidays. It will not be unusual for us to go thither in December. All we need to do is make sure that we are not followed and that no one has any suspicions that we have extra people with us.”

Mr. Darcy thought about it but knew he would have to trust Elizabeth’s judgement. “Very well. We will contact your family first, so we can begin our planning.”

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief to know that Darcy agreed to the plan. They only had limited time and needed to make haste in order to assure Mr. Witting and Mr. Rowland’s safety.

## Chapter 14

Elizabeth laid back on the settee, allowing herself a moment to soak in the quiet. They had arrived only the previous day in Gracechurch Street, but still had spent the entire day moving from one shop to another, gathering silks, muslins, and all manner of ribbons, buttons, and thread for Jane's wedding clothes. Not even the cobbler had been spared a visit, although the boots and slippers that their Aunt Gardiner had insisted Jane have were quite lovely.

"Lizzy, Lizzy!" Elizabeth's young cousin Minnie whined. "Please, will you play with us? Mother and Cousin Jane will not!"

"Minnie, I'm afraid Cousin Lizzy won't be able to join you for a game," Mrs. Gardiner said apologetically. "She's got to get ready for the ball tonight."

Minnie began to complain, and Elizabeth couldn't help but experience some annoyance herself. Typically, she adored dancing and eagerly anticipated any ball, but tonight was an exception. She was completely exhausted, and the mere idea of preparing for the occasion seemed overwhelming. The event itself offered little allure, for she knew that the one man who she wished to dance with would not be there.

Nevertheless, Elizabeth was aware that she had to be present. They must all act as normal as possible, keeping up the pretence that they were only in London to shop for wedding clothes and amuse themselves. If anyone guessed at the other purpose, all of the secrecy would be for naught, and the two men currently upstairs would again be in danger.

Gathering her strength, she ascended the stairs to her room, where her gown was ready. Despite her exhaustion, as she slipped into the light green gown, she couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. As she examined the gown, a smile crossed her face, knowing it fit her perfectly and flattered her complexion. She requested Sarah's aid in tending to her hair, which the maid artfully fashioned into an elegant chignon,

with ringlets loosely framing her face. Elizabeth's heart started beating faster as Sarah placed a necklace — borrowed from Mrs. Gardiner — around her neck. It was almost time to depart. Indeed, even as she gathered her slippers, she could hear the bustle of her aunt and sister descending the stairs. Hastily finishing her preparations, she accompanied them to the foyer, where they patiently waited for the carriage.

As they departed Gracechurch Street and made their way toward the home of Lord de Clare, their host for the evening. Lord de Clare was reported to be an eccentric and very wealthy man. He had bought his title, or so it was rumoured, although he liked to say that it was bestowed on him due to the grave injustice that was done his family when their earldom was taken from them 300 years before. Mr. Gardiner liked him, mainly because his lordship did not judge men based on class or origins, but their usefulness. As Mr. Gardiner was a very useful man, and they got along well indeed.

When the carriage wheels rolled to a stop and they alighted, Elizabeth was stunned into silence by what she beheld. The mansion was grand, with sprawling gardens and a fountain in the centre. Upon their entrance, her awe was not lessened. The ballroom was expansive and featured high ceilings adorned with intricately carved mouldings. The walls were a light brown, with wainscoting of a richer colour. Countless candles illuminated the room, their flickering flames casting a warm and inviting glow. The ballroom's wide windows were adorned with draperies made of rich fabrics, casting a magical glow as the moonlight streamed in. The air was filled with the scent of flowers and a myriad of perfumes, creating an overwhelming sweetness.

Elizabeth followed her aunt and uncle, holding onto Jane's arm as they walked. As the ballroom grew more crowded, the sisters struggled to spot their relations amidst the sea of elegant attire and towering ostrich feathers. Thankfully, Mr. Gardiner's superior height allowed him to keep track of his nieces, even when once the ladies thought they surely had been separated.

Lord de Clare soon made a grand entrance, effortlessly navigating through the crowd of guests in the bustling ballroom. He was a tall man with a fair complexion and a commanding presence that drew people's attention. He greeted his guests with a short speech, thanking them for attending and inviting them to enjoy the music and dancing that was about to begin. As the musicians began to play the first strains of a minuet, people began to join the dance. Lord de Clare, lacking a countess, partnered with his niece, Miss Flint, for the first set.

Elizabeth had to be satisfied with watching the dancers and taking in her surroundings, as she lacked a partner for the set. Occasionally, an acquaintance of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner's would approach and she would be introduced, but Jane was always the focus of attention as the betrothed lady. Between this status and her beauty, it was not long before Jane had a partner for the dance.

Reflecting on another, less grand occasion when she had been left without a partner for a dance, her thoughts wandered to Mr. Darcy. How much her thoughts and feelings towards him had changed! Every now and then, amidst the crowd, she would see a man who bore a resemblance to Mr. Darcy. Her heart fluttered at the idea, but she knew it to be folly. He would not be in London now. As she continued to muse about her beloved and wonder what he might be doing and if all was well in Hertfordshire, the room about her seemed to fade. No ball could compare to thoughts of Mr. Darcy and the danger that he and her family might be in.

Her reverie was broken by the approach of a handsome gentleman of about five-and-twenty. His face was surrounded by a neatly styled dark mane of hair, with captivating dark blue eyes. Had he not been tall, well-built, and somewhat imposing in figure, his clothes might have made some think him a dandy, so fine they were. Yet, that was not the impression Elizabeth had. It was more that of a man who did not mind what he wore, so he wore what his valet selected.

Mrs. Gardiner moved forward with a smile to greet the gentleman, and Elizabeth could see the genuine warmth in her

aunt's eyes as they engaged in conversation. The gentleman, who Elizabeth learned was called Mr. Mallory, was polite and charming. Elizabeth was reminded of Mr. Bingley, if one only compared the affable manners that both exuded. Elizabeth found herself fascinated by the gentleman whom her aunt seemed to know so well.

“And how is your mother now?” Mrs. Gardiner asked, genuine concern evident in her voice.

“She is recovering well, thank you for asking,” Mr. Mallory replied, his face brightening at the inquiry.

“I am glad to hear it,” Mrs. Gardiner said with a smile, and then seemed to notice Elizabeth, who was standing nearby. “Oh, I do apologise. Mr. Mallory. I have been terribly impolite. Might I introduce you to my niece, Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

Mr. Mallory politely nodded and replied, “It would be an honour, madam.”

Mrs. Gardiner gladly obliged and introduced Elizabeth to Mr. Mallory.

“I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Mallory said as he bowed over her hand.

“I thank you, sir. I am glad to meet you as well,” Elizabeth replied.

“My other niece, Elizabeth's elder sister, is dancing with Sir Hugh now. If you wish, I can introduce you after this set is over,” offered Mrs. Gardiner.

“Of course. Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner,” replied Mr. Mallory with a charming smile before turning to Elizabeth. “Perhaps, as this dance has only just begun, you might wish to dance it with me, Miss Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth accepted, thankful that she would not have to stand on the side for the entire ball.

The music started to swell, and they began the steps of the dance. He was a fine dancer, gracefully gliding across the floor with unwavering confidence. Elizabeth found Mr.



Mallory a proficient dance partner, but she could not help but find the gentleman peculiar. He scanned the room with a restless gaze, causing her to wonder who or what he was looking for. As she danced, she tried to focus on the rhythm and steps, but his strange conduct kept pulling her out of the moment. As the dance ended, Mr. Mallory bowed and thanked her for the dance, and returned her to her uncle before disappearing to find his next partner.

Elizabeth appreciated the respite, as it allowed her to gather her breath and her thoughts. While surveying the dimly lit room, her attention was abruptly caught by the sound of footsteps drawing near. She turned toward their source and discovered Lord de Clare standing nearby. He begged an introduction from Mrs. Gardiner, who complied. The gentleman declared himself entirely delighted that both Miss Elizabeth and her sister could attend the event. Then he asked, “Miss Bennet, I could not help but notice your elegant dancing earlier. Would you care to join me for the next?”

Elizabeth gave her acceptance and took his proffered arm as he led her into the set. Lord de Clare demonstrated his skill as a dance partner and conversational partner, guiding her through the steps and speaking easily with her about her plans for her time in London. He congratulated her family on her sister’s betrothal, sympathising when Elizabeth expressed some sadness at the idea that her sister should no longer reside in the family home.

“It is the way of life, my dear child,” said his lordship. “Things shall always be changing and moving forward. We can do nothing to stop this progress, so we must find a way to turn the progress to our purpose. Shall you be able to visit your sister?”

Elizabeth was overwhelmed with a feeling of silliness as she informed Lord de Clare that her sister’s residence would be just three miles from Longbourn.

“Three miles can seem a great distance when compared to a few feet. It shall be different, but you shall become used to it. Even now, as I tell you this, I still have not entirely adjusted to my elder niece’s marriage. I daresay it is good she lives in

the next county, or else Miss Flint and I should constantly be at her door.”

Lord de Clare paused a moment, suddenly uneasy.

“What is the matter, my lord?” Elizabeth asked.

His lordship dismissed the inquiry, assuring his partner that nothing was amiss, but that he had only thought of some unpleasant task he had to complete the next day. Mr. Mallory was watching the dance when Elizabeth turned and could see where Lord de Clare had been looking when his uneasy came upon him.

Elizabeth danced for the majority of the night, but her eyes kept wandering in search of Mr. Mallory. She had a sensation of being watched but could not catch sight of him when she looked about. Elizabeth couldn’t shake the feeling, and her skin tingled whenever she thought about it.

As the night drew to a close and they made their way back to Gracechurch Street, Elizabeth could not help but reflect on the events of the evening. Despite the beauty of the ballroom and the guests’ elegance, her thoughts returned to the handsome Mr. Mallory’s strange behaviour.



“How did you all enjoy the ball last night?” Mrs. Gardiner asked her nieces the next morning at breakfast. She moved a platter of scrambled eggs away from her youngest child as she spoke, anticipating that the child might over-set it.

“I enjoyed it greatly,” Jane replied with a smile. “Although I must admit that I shall enjoy the balls and parties more in a few days once our friends and family are here.”

“By which,” teased Elizabeth, “you mean that it was not so pleasant without Bingley there.”

“If she feels so, it is right that she should,” said Mrs. Gardiner. “What of you, Lizzy? Did you enjoy the ball?”

Elizabeth nodded and smiled, admitting that it was indeed a lovely evening. But when her aunt probed deeper and asked if she had enjoyed dancing with any particular gentlemen, Elizabeth simply shrugged and said no one stood out.

“You mustn’t be so picky, my dear,” Mrs. Gardiner said kindly. “You may miss out on a chance to meet someone truly special.”

Elizabeth just smiled and continued to eat her breakfast. She appreciated her aunt’s intentions, but the possibility of a future with the special person she had found was uncertain, so she kept her thoughts to herself.

“What about Mr. Mallory?” asked Jane. “He asked me many questions about you when he and I danced.”

“He was pleasant and handsome, but that was all,” Elizabeth replied.

Jane scrutinised her sister carefully, trying to decipher her true thoughts and emotions regarding the attractive man. She could see the slight blush on her sister’s cheeks, and the glint in her eyes — but was it admiration or embarrassment?

“He has excellent prospects,” said Mrs. Gardiner. “He is a second son, but he already has an estate of his own and more than enough money to ensure a comfortable life. As his father was a Member of Parliament, it looks likely that Mr. Mallory will someday follow in his footsteps and join the House of Commons himself.”

Jane smiled at this news. “Yes, he certainly has good prospects,” she said. “But what of his character? Is he a kind and honourable man?”

Elizabeth replied, “This is all very interesting, though I must admit that I found his behaviour slightly odd. He was always looking around, as if he were searching for someone or something.”

Mr. Gardiner raised an eyebrow at this. “That does seem a bit peculiar. Did he indicate why he was so watchful?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, he didn’t say anything.”

“Perhaps he already is spoken for, but the lady was not present,” said her aunt thoughtfully.

Elizabeth nodded, considering the possibility. She supposed that her mind had gone to the worst possible scenario. Such was not to be wondered at, given the last several weeks.

“But let us not dwell on Mr. Mallory,” said Jane, interjecting into the conversation. “The ball itself was wonderful. I thought the music was especially good.”

Elizabeth agreed, adding, “And the food was delicious. I had never tasted such exotic dishes before.”

Mrs. Gardiner smiled at her niece. “You must remember that London is a different world from Hertfordshire. Everything is bigger and more grand in London because people feel the need to impress all their acquaintance.”

Elizabeth’s mind began to wander as Jane and Mrs. Gardiner began to discuss the plans for the day and what was yet needed for the wedding breakfast. She thought of Mr. Darcy yet again, wondering how much time he spent in London and what his townhouse was like. If she were to be his wife, would she be expected to plan such elaborate events to impress all those Mr. Darcy knew?

She shook her head to clear it. She should not be thinking such thoughts. Mr. Darcy had never spoken of any intentions towards her. She turned her attention back to her aunt and sister, adding to their discussion of guests that ought to be invited and who could be excluded without insult.

## Chapter 15

“My goodness!” exclaimed Lydia, looking at the burnt side of the stables. “Will anything be able to be salvaged or shall the whole building need to be pulled down?”

Mr. Bennet, who stood beside her, gazed in wonderment at his youngest child. That she had wished to accompany him to Netherfield had caused him astonishment, but now that she stood, talking to two single gentlemen, not flirting and asking intelligent questions, it was beyond imagining.

Lord Barlow, now able to move around with the help of a crutch, answered her. “It is just this wall that was damaged. The carpenter said it shall be a difficult task, though. The wall bears much of the load for the rest of the building. You can see the supports they are building so the roof doesn’t collapse.”

Indeed, several men were already at work. They looked to be in a great hurry to Lydia’s eyes, eager to ensure the entire building did not come crashing down atop them. How much of a risk was it for them, she wondered.

“Your horses and carriages can remain at Longbourn for as long as you need them to,” said Mr. Bennet to Mr. Bingley and his friends. “Is there any other service I can render to any of you?”

Mr. Bingley shook his head. “I cannot imagine what else could be done. It was a mere stroke of bad luck that the lightning struck where it did. All is being rebuilt now, and I am deeply indebted to you for your assistance.”

“You shall be my son, Bingley,” said Mr. Bennet. “I would be a poor father indeed if I did not offer you my assistance at such a time.”

A twinge of guilt touched Mr. Bennet, for he knew in years past that he likely would not have come himself to

speak with the gentlemen. If Mr. Bingley was not likely to be the saving of his family, Mr. Bennet, even now, might have sent a servant to see to the task. How indolent he felt, how irresponsible, that he had to rely on the relief of a daughter well-married to secure the rest of his family after his demise.

“Miss Lydia, pray, come away from there!” cried Mr. Darcy. “You could do yourself an injury!”

Lydia, having caught sight of a piece of paper amongst the rubble, had gone to retrieve it. At Mr. Darcy’s outcry, she petulantly returned to her father’s side. “It would take but a moment. I wished to fetch that piece of paper. Perhaps it is a clue!”

Mr. Darcy internally cursed the writer of the Sir Francis Wagner stories. How much trouble he had caused! “Jenson!” Mr. Darcy called to a worker. “Fetch the piece of paper from the ground a dozen feet to your left and bring it hither.”

The man, Jenson, covered in soot and ash, glanced around before his eyes landed on the scrap of paper, which he then brought to Mr. Darcy. Mr. Darcy looked over the message contained on the paper, then offered it to Lydia. An inventory of linen, in coarse and modern characters, seemed all that was before her! If the evidence of sight might be trusted, she held a washing-bill in her hand. When she looked up, she met Lord Barlow’s eyes. They were soft with pity.

Feeling foolish, Lydia crumpled the paper that she had thought might be a clue to something more exciting. She did not wish for anyone’s pity. She shoved the paper into her pocket and raised her chin high. Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, and her father began to speak of the repairs, but Lord Barlow’s eyes remained on Lydia. His scrutiny discomfited her.

As they returned to Netherfield for nuncheon, Lord Barlow walked beside Lydia, his crutch crunching the fallen leaves. She could feel his gaze on her, considering her. She had always been aware of her charms and how to use them to her advantage, but Lord Barlow’s consideration was not that

which she usually attracted. He was not considering her person as such, but her whole being.

“You are a brave lady, Miss Lydia,” he said finally. “I know many men who have not your courage.”

“What you call courage, my lord, I am certain most would call folly,” she said, not looking in his direction. She did not wish him to see her high colour.

Lord Barlow chuckled. “You are too modest, Miss Lydia. I know few ladies who would have dared go near a burnt stable as you did. You were right to wish to collect the paper. If it had been a note from the person responsible for setting the stables ablaze, you might have solved all for us with your keen eyes.”

“You are of my way of thinking then!” Lydia exclaimed. “My father believes that the lightning caused the fire and the one who did injury to Mr. Witting had simply been waiting for an opportunity to strike. I think a person lit the fire, a person one and the same as who tried to hurt Mr. Witting twice over.”

“Either he or one in his employ,” agreed Lord Barlow. As the ground became rougher, Lord Barlow had to cling to Lydia’s arm to stay upright. The touch made her heart race.

“I cannot help but admire your spirit, Miss Lydia,” he said, his voice low and smooth as he righted himself and placed his weight again on his crutch.

His words made Lydia’s cheeks flush with pleasure. She stole a glance in his direction, taking in his noble bearing and strong features. He did not wear a red coat, but she found him much more attractive than any officer she had before met.

When the party was later sitting down to nuncheon at Netherfield, Lord Barlow broached the topic of the fire again. “I believe the timing too convenient,” said he. “Did anyone see the lightning strike the tree or was it only assumed that it caused the fire?”

“If one was to commit arson, why would they do so in the pouring rain?” asked Mr. Bennet.

“To make it more convincing and to have the excuse of lightning,” said Lord Barlow. “I cannot be easy, regardless of the cause. Someone was in the house, harming Mr. Witting, and we have no notion of who it was.”

“I am not entirely convinced that Mr. Witting did not dream it,” said Mr. Bingley. “Perhaps the extreme pain he was in caused him to imagine someone touching his wound. Particularly right before a fit, would that not be a possibility?”

“I suppose that is a possibility,” said Mr. Darcy. “Still, we would do well to be vigilant. From what Colonel Fitzwilliam has written, only men of Mr. Rowland’s ilk have been caught. None know much of the hierarchy of the Luddite organisation, or if they do, they are saying naught of it.”

The others agreed. As they finished their nuncheon, Lydia’s attention was much drawn to Lord Barlow. While he wasn’t deliberately ignoring her, his mind seemed preoccupied with indulging in the flavourful dishes and engaging in the animated discussions taking place at the table. She wondered, for possibly the first time in her life, about her relative unimportance in the world. Could a single gentleman of true value, such as those seated at the table with her, ever find her worth their notice?



Afternoon light streamed into the parlour, illuminating Jane’s face as she wrote a letter to their sisters.

“Did Lydia truly write the entire letter in code?” asked Elizabeth.

“She said that she would before we departed. It is not a very complex code. She just moved the entire alphabet nine characters to the left. She thinks that the stable fire was lit by someone attempting to gain access to Mr. Witting, as a diversion.”

“I must admit,” said Elizabeth, “the idea did cross my mind as well.”



Jane looked up from her letter, her eyes meeting Elizabeth's. "It is a worrisome thought," she said. "I do not like to think that there are people in the world so wicked as that."

"Unfortunately, dear Jane, not everyone has your goodness." Elizabeth embraced her sister. When she did so, she glimpsed the letter Jane was writing. "Are you replying in code as well?" Elizabeth's voice was incredulous.

"I thought to humour Lydia."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes but said nothing. The idea that any code they could come up with might keep their letters from being read by those who wished to cause trouble was laughable. Yet, if it made Lydia feel better, she supposed Jane could do as she wished.

"I was surprised that Lydia wrote at all, to be honest," said Jane. "Typically, she will not, when there is so short a separation. Perhaps codes have motivated her to write in the same way that the penny papers motivated her to read."

Elizabeth hoped this to be true. Lydia never had been a good pupil and therefore had often been idle or engaged in frivolities when she would have been better served attending to her education. Their father did not insist they sit at their studies for a predetermined duration each day, so Elizabeth and Jane had been given no ability to insist that their sisters do so.

A knock at the door interrupted her musing, and Mr. Mallory emerged from the foyer a moment later. He caught sight of the ladies, his eyes filled with amusement and a small smile appeared on his lips. The tall and well-dressed gentleman executed a bow upon entering, his eyes affixed on Elizabeth.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said. "I hope I am not interrupting."

"You are not," Elizabeth said, rising. "We were just having tea. Won't you join us, Mr. Mallory?"

“Thank you, very much. I will,” he said, moving further into the room.

Elizabeth waved for him to take a seat, and he eagerly obliged, sinking into the grand armchair near the blazing fire.

“This is a most impressive parlour you have here,” he praised, admiring the room. “It’s positively delightful.”

Jane smiled demurely. “Thank you, sir. Although we can hardly take credit given that this is our aunt and uncle’s home.”

He turned back to Elizabeth and Jane with an inviting grin. “Now, what was I so rudely interrupting? What topic of conversation had your attention?”

Jane glanced at Elizabeth before responding. “Nothing of consequence, sir. We were simply passing the time and having tea.”

Mr. Mallory seated himself in the chair opposite them and displayed his charming smile. “Well then, let us carry on as if I had not interrupted your tête-à-tête at all!”

Mrs. Gardiner rushed into the room, having been alerted by a servant of Mr. Mallory’s entrance. “Francis! How lovely of you to visit!” said the lady in greeting. “I do beg your pardon; I know I ought not to call you that any longer.”

The tall gentleman bowed slightly and smiled at her, his blue eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Mr. Mallory,” Mrs. Gardiner began again. “How lovely to see you. I hope my nieces have been attending to you properly?”

“Certainly, Mrs. Gardiner,” responded Mr. Mallory. “Your nieces are the epitome of grace and kindness. I am delighted to be in their company.”

Elizabeth felt a slight blush creep up on her cheeks at the compliment. Mr. Mallory persisted in his banter and conversation with them, always mindful of propriety, prompting her to reevaluate her initial assessment. He was perhaps just uncomfortable with so many people about him at

a ball. It was not the first time that she would have misjudged someone based on their discomfort in a crowd.

As Mrs. Gardiner poured more tea for everyone, a small figure rushed into the room, her blond hair untamed and dishevelled. She wore a bright yellow dress covered in daisies with white socks and black shiny shoes. Her cheeks were tinged with a rosy hue of excitement as she slammed the door shut and dashed toward Mr. Mallory.

Mrs. Gardiner caught her young daughter before she could accost the gentleman. "I am so sorry, sir," she said to Mr. Mallory. "Minnie must have escaped her nurse."

Mr. Mallory stood and bowed his head in acknowledgement of the young girl. "Good day, Miss Minnie," he said with a kind smile. "It is very nice to make your acquaintance."

Minnie smiled, completely enamoured by the handsome gentleman before her.

Elizabeth suppressed a giggle at her cousin's reaction to Mr. Mallory; it was clear that Minnie had taken quite a fancy to him!

The nurse appeared soon after, but Mr. Mallory asked that the child be allowed to join them for tea. Feeling very important, Minnie eagerly took a seat next to Elizabeth and chatted away to Mr. Mallory. Elizabeth couldn't help but notice how patient and kind he was with the young girl, and the way he listened intently to everything she had to say. It was a trait she found very endearing in a man.

"I must go, sir. Samantha needs me," Minnie suddenly announced, getting up from her seat and curtsying before leaving the room.

"Samantha is her doll," explained Jane with a laugh.

"I ought to depart as well. I have terrible manners and have well exceeded my allotted half-hour." Mr. Mallory smiled warmly at the sisters. "It was lovely to see you again, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth. Do give my regards to Miss

Minnie and Miss Smanatha. I hope to see you both at the next ball. Mrs. Gardiner, thank you for your hospitality.”

Elizabeth felt a pang of regret as he bid them farewell and was surprised by how much she was beginning to enjoy his company.

As Jane and Mrs. Gardiner animatedly talked about the visit and the gentleman’s family, Elizabeth looked off into the distance, lost in contemplation. She blushed when she noticed Aunt Gardiner’s knowing gaze upon her, trying to discern why Elizabeth seemed so forlorn all of a sudden. She was not about to confess her momentary attraction to Mr. Mallory, not when her heart still belonged to Mr. Darcy.

“Mr. Mallory seems like a very pleasant gentleman,” Mrs. Gardiner said kindly. “He appears to have taken quite a liking to you and your sister.”

Elizabeth nodded in agreement, her silence protecting her from revealing any more than she should.

Mrs. Gardiner continued, “I am sure he would make a wonderful addition to your circle of acquaintances.” She shot Elizabeth a knowing look and added, “It doesn’t hurt that he is also quite handsome.”

Elizabeth felt herself blushing again and quickly changed the subject before her aunt could see through her facade of indifference and suspect that there may be an attraction growing between the two of them. She asked Jane about the latest news from Longbourn and if any parties or balls were planned in the near future.

As Jane detailed their plans, Elizabeth could not help but think about what her aunt had said about Mr. Mallory. She had to admit that he was indeed handsome with his piercing blue eyes. And he was kind and witty too, always making her laugh with his clever remarks. But Elizabeth knew that those were not enough for her. She required more than good looks and pleasant manners to trust someone.

She had learned that the hard way with Mr. Wickham, who had charmed her with his amiable manners and flattery

but ultimately proved to be a deceitful scoundrel. No, Elizabeth desired someone who would challenge her intellectually, who would respect her opinions and values, and who would love her for who she was, faults and all.

And that someone was Mr. Darcy.

Despite the tumultuous beginning of their story, Elizabeth could not deny the exquisite intensity of her feelings for him. He was unlike any man she had ever encountered; proud and strong, yet also fragile and loyal. She knew he must feel something for her as well; that moment in the Netherfield library was something beyond what she had ever experienced before.

Yet even as she revelled in these feelings, Elizabeth knew that a match between them would be incomprehensible in the eyes of society. She was but a country gentlewoman, the daughter of a minor landowner, while he was an affluent gentleman connected to some of the most renowned families of England. Elizabeth tried to push these thoughts out of her mind as she continued to listen to Jane's plans. But they kept creeping back, nagging at her consciousness like an itch she couldn't scratch.

"Miss Darcy as well," said Jane.

The name caught Elizabeth's attention immediately. "Miss Darcy?" Elizabeth asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Did you not hear me? She will accompany her brother next week. She is on her way from Derbyshire now. Mr. Darcy does not feel comfortable having her so far away, what with everything going on."

Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat. Mr. Darcy would come to London with Mr. Bingley. She had hoped for as much, but there had not been time to make exact plans.

"I see," Elizabeth said, trying to sound nonchalant. "I look forward to meeting her."

## Chapter 16

So delighted was Lord de Clare by the Miss Bennets that he invited them two days hence to a dinner at his home. Despite the description of the event as a mere dinner, when the Gardiners and their nieces arrived, they found themselves to be among nearly sixty people. Most of the people were not known to any of their party. Although some Elizabeth recognised from the ball, she had not been introduced to them. Lord de Clare did his duty by his guests and introduced them to many, leaving the Miss Bennets comfortably in the company of his niece and her friends while he led continued on with the Gardiners.

Miss Flint was a prettyish girl, although not handsome. She had a frailness about her that Elizabeth was uncertain was affectation. Perhaps the lady had been ill of late? The gentlemen all seemed to delight in her charming manners and fair looks. By the extension of Miss Flint's popularity, Elizabeth also was deemed pleasant company by the gentlemen. Most, however, when they learned her uncle was in trade, turned aside and ignored her for the rest of the evening.

After dinner, Elizabeth found herself alone in conversation with Miss Flint. Their conversation was light and trivial. Each time a new topic was introduced, it lost momentum shortly after, as often occurs between people who are unfamiliar with each other. After several awkward beginnings, Elizabeth asked, "Is your uncle often busy, now that Parliament is in session?"

"Oh, yes," said Miss Flint. "He is constantly away or working in his study. We do take breakfast every morning together, or else I would miss him altogether for days."

"That must be terribly lonely, especially now with your sister wed." Elizabeth could not help but think about how she might feel had she only one sister.

"It is not so terrible," said Miss Flint. "Miss Loche lives but a few houses away. I see much of her. I cannot fault

my uncle for it. He must be seen as very active and have the right connections if he is to reach his aim of becoming Prime Minister someday.”

“Prime Minister?” asked Elizabeth. “A lofty ambition indeed!”

“He is fit for it,” said Miss Flint, misunderstanding Elizabeth. “He is a fine MP and I am sure the Prince Regent must see that.”

“I did not mean to imply otherwise,” said Elizabeth. “I just was surprised that I could know anyone with such aspirations. I do wish him luck in his aims.”

“Oh, I thank you. I am on my guard constantly, for some think him foolish for believing he can reach such a goal.”

“It does you credit that you speak so in defence of your uncle,” said Elizabeth.

“Miss Flint,” said a gentleman from nearby. The man bowed in greeting and begged an introduction to Elizabeth. Mr. Franklin York then bowed over Elizabeth’s hand and declared himself charmed when they were introduced.

“Is not your shadow with you this evening?” asked Miss Flint of Mr. York.

“My shadow?” the gentleman echoed in confusion.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam. I do not think I ever see you two at a ball without you being together. It is shocking, really, that he is not in attendance with you.”

“Our lodgings are in the same building,” Mr. York explained to Elizabeth. “We often take the same carriage when we attend such functions in town. Miss Flint knows as much, for I have told it to her before, but she will vex me so.”

“What are good friends for if not to vex us?” laughed Elizabeth. “I am surprised to hear that gentleman’s name. I am acquainted with Colonel Fitzwilliam, for he stayed at the home of my soon-to-be brother, Mr. Bingley, in Hertfordshire.”

“Ah,” said Mr. York in understanding. “Your elder sister is then the one to whom Mr. Bingley is betrothed. I had heard he was to marry a Miss Bennet and part of my intention in coming to meet you was to uncover which lovely sister he had claimed.”

“Indeed. And are you acquainted with Mr. Bingley as well?” Elizabeth asked.

“I am, but only slightly. Perhaps I must become closer acquainted with him if such loveliness is everywhere to be found in Hertfordshire.” Mr. York bowed to Elizabeth.

“I daresay I cannot speak on such a subject, but we would be glad for you to visit the area. There is always a great shortage of gentlemen to act as dance partners at assemblies in Hertfordshire.”

“Then I shall have to visit and beg your hand for a dance when I do,” said Mr. York.

“Ah! There is your shadow!” said Miss Flint suddenly.

Elizabeth turned to where Miss Flint was looking and saw that her new acquaintance was correct. Colonel Fitzwilliam, dressed in evening kit, approached with a bow and greeted them all warmly.

“I knew you could not be far when I saw Mr. York was in attendance,” teased Miss Flint.

Elizabeth was beginning to feel that she could like Miss Flint. She seemed the sort of lady that loved to laugh and tease, without being cruel in her manner.

“Mr. York and I did not arrive together this evening,” explained Colonel Fitzwilliam. “I had business first to attend to.”

“Yes, I had heard of your heroics of late, capturing the men who intended to do men like my uncle an injury. We are deeply in debt to you for your bravery,” said Miss Flint.

“I fear it was nothing so gallant as that. Simply a matter of signing a few documents and arranging where men were to go on their assignments,” the colonel explained.



“Every day cannot be exciting or else it would become tedium,” said Elizabeth. “I am glad to see you, Colonel. All is peaceful again?”

“I am glad to see you as well, Miss Elizabeth. I saw your sister a moment ago and was glad to find you both in good health. It is again peaceful. It did not take long to subdue those who meant to storm Parliament. They were not the most intelligent of men. Frustrated workers, mainly. Now I am back to attending parties and making myself agreeable to young ladies. Miss Elizabeth, may I ask after your family and Mr. Bingley’s health?”

“All are quite well. You shall see them possibly in just a few days. Mr. Bingley is to come to town with my family to celebrate Christmas together with the Gardiners.” As she spoke, Elizabeth noticed that Colonel Fitzwilliam seemed distracted. “Are you quite well, sir?” she asked.

“I am. It is only that I was told by a friend that he would be here, yet I do not see him. I do hope nothing has befallen him,” the colonel said, scanning the room.

“Oh dear. I hope your friend is well. Perhaps I have seen him, if he is known to me. Who is it you look for?” asked Miss Flint.

The colonel shook his head. “I am sure he only changed his mind and decided to go to his club instead.”

They continued speaking for some time until they discovered that the pianoforte had been opened, and a spinster offered to play for the party so they could dance. Mr. York begged Elizabeth’s hand for a dance, while the Colonel partnered Miss Flint. For the second set, the partners were switched.

As Colonel Fitzwilliam led Elizabeth through the steps of the country dance, they spoke of little of consequence. It was not until the dance ended and they promenaded about the room that Colonel Fitzwilliam spoke again. “Miss Elizabeth, may I be so bold as to ask you a question?”

“You may ask what you wish, but I may choose not to answer,” was her reply as she looked at him quizzically.

“How well do your relations know Lord de Clare?” he asked.

Elizabeth felt slightly disappointed. She did not know what she had hoped he would ask. Something about Mr. Darcy, perhaps?

“Mr. Gardiner knows him as a business acquaintance. I think also my aunt and uncle dine with him occasionally, but I would not say they are intimates. Why do you ask?” Elizabeth responded.

“I am glad they are not so close that you should be often in his lordship’s company. He is a rogue, Miss Elizabeth. I could never forgive myself if I did not warn you of him. You may have heard rumours that he is looking for a wife, but I assure you that he will not marry an untitled lady, regardless of who he keeps as his friends,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam in a low whisper.

“I heard no such rumours, sir, nor do I have any interest in the man except in that he has a pleasant niece,” Elizabeth said with a frown.

“I am glad to hear it, Miss Elizabeth,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“May I say, Colonel Fitzwilliam, that rumours are not always kind, even to those undeserving of society’s censure. You are called a rake by some. Shall I stop associating with you as well?”

“There is a vast difference between a rake and a rogue, Miss Elizabeth,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam seriously. “I am neither, but my position at the Home Office requires me to charm ladies on occasion. Still, even were I a rake, you would be safe in my company. A rake never takes that which is not offered. A rogue, however, will not be swayed by disinterest.”

Elizabeth cast her eyes downward as she took in his words. “Would a man act so when he has two nieces of his own that he has raised for many years?” she whispered.

“Unfortunately, yes. I know not how he justifies it to himself, but he must somehow,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Another gentleman approached Elizabeth to solicit her hand for the next dance and Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped aside with a bow. She danced no more after that set, preferring to sit near her aunt and pretend to attend to the conversation of the ladies, while watching all those in attendance dance and promenade. Lord de Clare seemed so much like Sir William Lucas that Elizabeth had immediately trusted him. She wondered if she should tell her uncle of what Colonel Fitzwilliam had said. Could Uncle Gardiner truly be associated with a man so vile as the Colonel implied?

## Chapter 17

Despite Elizabeth's distraction the next day, she allowed herself to be dragged from shop to shop as her sister completed her wedding shopping. Elizabeth's mind was on anything but the colour of beads that would decorate the trim on Jane's gown. Regardless of if Jane picked pale blue or white, she would look radiant. No, Elizabeth was wondering if she would ever trust her own judgement when it came to people again. How often of late she had been wrong!

"And Elizabeth must then wear the blue gown if you have the blue beads," said Mrs. Gardiner.

"I wonder if Mr. Darcy has a blue waistcoat he might wear. I know that Mr. Bingley intends to wear his," mused Jane. "If he does not, it does not matter, but it would look very well if he did."

"He does have one. It is a rather dark blue, however," Elizabeth said, adding to the conversation for the first time in several minutes.

Mrs. Gardiner and Jane both looked at Elizabeth quizzically.

"He wore it to the Netherfield ball. I danced with him," she explained. She did not know why she remembered this detail, given that she had disliked Mr. Darcy at the time. In actuality, she remembered every moment of their dance at the Netherfield ball as if it had happened only moments ago. How she had not realised it then, she did not know, but she had been attracted to Mr. Darcy from the beginning.

"I see," said Jane, considering her. "Thank you, Lizzy."

"Is that Mr. Mallory?" asked Mrs. Gardiner, spotting a man who looked very like him out the shop window.

Jane and Elizabeth looked out at the street as well and saw Mr. Mallory buying a newspaper from a young boy. When Mr. Mallory turned, he spotted them in the shop and nodded.

A moment later, they heard the bell at the top of the shop's door chime and found him before them.

“How pleasant to encounter friends when about my errands!” he exclaimed. “How do you do, Mrs. Gardiner, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth?” He bowed to each in turn.

“We are all very well,” answered Mrs. Gardiner with a sly smile for Elizabeth. “Indeed, this is a pleasant surprise.”

“I am only disappointed that I have not the pleasure of Miss Minnie's company as well,” said the gentleman.

Elizabeth smiled, for Minnie spoke of little else but Mr. Mallory for the past several days.

“You know that our doors are always open to you, sir,” said Mrs. Gardiner. “Should you wish for my daughter's company, you are welcome to join us for dinner. We should be just our family circle and thus the children shall join us.”

“I could not impose on you in such a manner,” protested Mr. Mallory. “Besides, I mustn't leave my mother to dine alone this evening. That would make me a very wicked child.”

“Your mother might come as well, that is, if her health permits it. Certainly, you are both very welcome, I'm sure,” said Mrs. Gardiner. “You must enliven our dinner table, sir. I fear my nieces would otherwise grow quite dull, waiting for their beaux from Hertfordshire to arrive in town.”

“You have convinced me, Mrs. Gardiner. I shall tell my mother of the invitation, but I cannot accept until I know her wishes.”

“Of course, sir. Do send a note around when you know her answer,” said Mrs. Gardiner.

“Now that is settled, may I ask what other errands you ladies must attend to today? I have many of my own and mayhap we might walk together to accomplish them all in fine company.”

Their itineraries were reviewed and, having several overlapping errands, Mr. Mallory was glad to accompany them

for much of the day. While the ladies patronised the milliner, Mr. Mallory found a boy to take a note to his mother, extending the invitation from the Gardiners. Before the sun was low in the sky, they received Mrs. Mallory's acceptance.

Elizabeth found herself vexed at the outcome. It was not that she found Mr. Mallory unpleasant, for he was a fine gentleman of good manners, but she had hoped for a family dinner without guests that evening. She needed to be able to speak to her aunt and uncle of what she had learned about Lord de Clare, and she could not do so in front of a guest.

Mr. Mallory and his mother arrived at Gracechurch Street for dinner just before the clock struck six, dressed in fine evening clothes. Elizabeth was unsure of the ailment that had affected the woman, but her thinning hair and dull skin made her appear older than her years. Minnie must have thought so as well, for she cowered at the sight of Mrs. Mallory, unwilling to draw near.

It took Mr. Mallory's coaxing to gain the child's compliance in the matter of Mrs. Mallory. A moment later, a sweet appeared in Mrs. Mallory's hand and was offered to the child, and from there the sickly woman was not deemed so dreadful.

During dinner, Mr. Mallory entertained them with tales of his travels on the continent. While her ears heard, Elizabeth's mind was elsewhere, consumed by thoughts of Lord de Clare and how his roguishness must affect her family. Throughout the evening, she experienced the watchful gaze of the Mallorys upon her, as if she was being assessed for a role. She did not like to think what role Mr. Mallory was considering her for. He might be a pleasant gentleman, but she held no finer feelings for him. She knew also that he was a man who was used to getting what he wanted, and she did not wish any hopes he might hold.

After a lengthy evening of cards and conversation, Elizabeth was relieved when the Mallorys finally departed. Exhausted from shopping and the mental exertion of the evening, she retired to her rooms without delay. Not long after, Jane entered and slumped into the chair at Elizabeth's dressing

table, groaning. “Goodness, I ate far too much.” She clutched her corset strings, trying her best to loosen the garment. “Help me get this off. I think I am stuck in it.”

Elizabeth stifled a laugh and proceeded to aid her sister. “I told you not to indulge in those pastries, Jane. But as always, you did not listen to me.”

Jane sighed in defeat. “Yes, yes. I know. But they were simply too delicious to resist.”

As Elizabeth helped Jane take off her dress, she couldn’t help but drift away in thoughts of Mr. Darcy. Her heart ached with longing as his image flashed across her mind’s eye.

“Is everything well, Lizzy?” Jane asked, glancing up at her sister’s distant expression.

Elizabeth shook her head to clear her thoughts and looked away from Jane’s gaze, embarrassed that she had been caught in such an intimate moment of contemplation.

“It is nothing,” she said, attempting to brush off the inquiry. “I was just lost in thought.”

But Jane wasn’t so easily fooled - she knew something else was troubling Elizabeth... something only she would understand.

Leaning forward in her chair and placing a comforting hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder, Jane whispered softly: “Come now, Lizzy... I know there’s something on your mind. Out with it.”

Elizabeth considered telling her sister of her concerns about Lord de Clare and passing that off as the reason for her distraction, but determined first that she must speak with the Gardiners. Mayhap Colonel Fitzwilliam was somehow misinformed. How hasty she had previously been in believing a confidence and judging someone based solely upon it!

“Elizabeth Madeline Bennet!” exclaimed Jane in mock outrage. “You will tell me what troubles you or else I will write to Mother of Mr. Mallory and you shall have no peace.

Unless, of course, it is he of whom you think! You have liked many a stupider fellow than he.”

Elizabeth groaned. Although she didn't want to confide in Jane yet, her older sister always saw through her. Jane must suspect that Elizabeth had feelings for someone but couldn't determine for whom.

After taking a few steadying breaths, Elizabeth spoke the words that felt like a confession more than anything else: “It's Mr. Darcy.” she said reluctantly. “... I'm in love with him.”

Jane's eyes widened in astonishment, but then softened into a gentle smile at her sister's confession. “Oh, Lizzy,” she said kindly. “But why do you seem so troubled? Do you not think he feels the same way about you?”

Elizabeth sighed, her heart heavy with emotion. “I do not think him indifferent to me,” she began, uncertain of how to put all that passed between herself and Mr. Darcy into words. “He has never said anything to give me hope, but there have been moments, gazes...” She paused, blinking back the wetness that threatened tears. “A man of his station, however... Surely he must wish for a wife more accomplished and well-positioned in the world. Regardless of what tenderness I might see in his looks, that counts for nothing if he means to do nothing to further such feelings.”

“Surely, Lizzy, if you have discerned such tenderness, he must be in love with you!” said Jane with great feeling. “And if a man of his reserve shows his emotions to you, he cannot mean to do nothing about them. If he were such a rogue, surely Mr. Bingley would have nothing to do with him!”

“I appreciate your optimism, Jane,” Elizabeth sighed, trying to keep her voice level despite her inner turmoil, “but our social standings might be too far apart for even love to conquer.”

Jane's expression softened into one of sympathy. “Love does not depend on social standing or wealth,” she said.



“If Mr. Darcy truly loves you, he will marry you - no matter what society or his family may think.”

“I suppose I shall simply have to wait and see what happens.” Elizabeth laid back on her bed to stare up at the ceiling.

“I could speak to Mr. Bingley,” offered Jane.

“Never! Promise me you will do nothing of the sort,” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“I will not, since you do not wish it.” Jane assured her, before moving the conversation onto safer subjects. Their family was to arrive in but two days, and there should have to be arrangements made.

As the sisters continued to speak, neither knew how thin the walls were in the Gardiners’ home. In the room next to theirs, Mr. Witting lay wakeful, wondering what he ought to do about all that he had heard.

## Chapter 18

Sleeping late into the morning was not a habit of successful individuals like Mr. Gardiner, even if the previous night had ended very late. Therefore, Elizabeth rose earlier than she might have liked, and met her uncle at the breakfast table, much to his surprise. Although his niece rose earlier than her sisters, the sun was not yet up and she could have had no more than five hours of sleep.

“To what may I attribute the honour of your company this morning, dear Lizzy,” Mr. Gardiner asked.

“I beg that I might speak with you, sir,” said she in answer. “On a matter of importance.”

“Pray, tell me what has so troubled you, Lizzy,” said Mr. Gardiner, focusing all his attention on the troubled young lady before him. Never before had he seen her in such a state.

Elizabeth did as she was bid, telling all that Colonel Fitzwilliam had said and her suspicion that Colonel Fitzwilliam’s warning was not meant only for her, but her uncle as well.

“If the man is a rogue when it comes to ladies, Colonel Fitzwilliam may have more accurate information than I. I have only known the man as a partner in trade and as a loving uncle to his niece. I know nothing of his personal dealings,” admitted her uncle. “I would, therefore, advise you to heed his warning. It cannot serve you ill to be cautious in this matter. However, in matters of business, I have dealt with his lordship some seven years. I have never heard of any dishonesty or unpaid debts on his part. I must conclude that you have interpreted Colonel Fitzwilliam’s warning beyond its intent.”

Elizabeth tried several times more to convince her uncle, but he refused to be swayed. “However,” he conceded, “I will not be foolish. Should anything seem at all unusual in my dealings with him, now or in future, I shall be cautious. Thank Colonel Fitzwilliam when next you speak with him. If

we do speak with him soon, I might enquire if he meant his warning generally or only for young ladies with a mind to their reputations.”

With this, Elizabeth had to be satisfied. She shared her warning also with Jane, but Jane could not but be sceptical that Lord de Clare could be so wicked when he showed such care for his niece. Such was her nature, but Elizabeth did not worry. Jane was to be wed, and Mr. Bingley surely would not permit any man to get away with any impropriety when it came to his betrothed. Except himself, she supposed, if her supposition about what she had seen at Netherfield was correct.

Later in the day, Gracechurch Street was once again graced by the presence of Mr. Mallory. Upon his being announced, Mrs.. Gardiner shot Elizabeth a coy look, which was ignored by the recipient. Mr. Mallory entered, bearing a large bouquet of hot-house flowers for Mrs.. Gardiner.

“My mother and I wish to thank you for your hospitality last evening,” he explained as he handed the yellow flowers to her. “It was very kind of you to include us, particularly on such short notice.”

Mrs.. Gardiner, however, was under no delusions about the flowers. They may have been presented to her, but she was not the one for whom they were truly intended. She left the room to seek out a servant instead of pulling the bell, allowing the young people a moment alone. When she returned from this, she found her nieces and the gentleman in conversation about the arrival of the rest of the Bennets.

She sat herself in the corner, as far away as she might take herself while remaining within the room and set about her sewing. Occasionally she would be asked a question, as Mr. Mallory tried to put himself forward to include her in the conversation. This was of no surprise to her, but of greater significance was the discomfort she felt radiating from Elizabeth’s person and how often Elizabeth looked to her or Jane to answer the questions Mr. Mallory asked.

Mr. Mallory appeared unaware of Elizabeth’s attempts to discourage him. Perhaps he thought her only demur in her

regard, not knowing the lady well enough to know she was not one to be demur. Before Mrs.. Gardiner could imagine how she might convey to the man her niece's disinterest, Mr. Mallory took his leave.

So palpable was Elizabeth's relief at his going that her aunt felt the need to comment upon it.

"It is not that I dislike him," said Elizabeth in answer to her aunt. "It is only that I do not like him so well as he wishes me to. In truth, I hardly know Mr. Mallory."

"But my dear," said Mrs.. Gardiner. "He is attempting to court you. That is how one comes to know one of the opposite sex, that you might learn if you would suit."

"I already have decided that we should not suit, dear aunt," said Elizabeth. "I simply do not know how to convey as much without being quite uncivil."

"I am sure you shall manage it," said Mrs.. Gardiner, with a smile. "You can be tactful when you wish it. Think of his feelings and seek not to do him an injury beyond what is avoidable. It is a difficult thing, I know, to discourage unwanted suitors."

Mrs.. Gardiner, to brighten the mood, began to share stories of her unwanted suitors before she met Edward Gardiner, and her initial impressions of her now-husband. "He was a silent lover," said Mrs.. Gardiner. "I knew nothing at all of his regard until he proposed to me for the first time. I rejected him soundly. Only then did he realise that one had to court a lady before asking for her hand. I resisted his attempts, thinking that he wished only for a connection to the gentry, but he proved himself worthy with time and convinced me of his love."

"It takes a rare sort of man to persist so," said Jane. "How long was it before he addressed you for a second time?"

"Two years. I think he was frightened of being rejected again. In the end, I had to tell him to propose."

Mrs.. Gardiner's nieces were all astonishment at their aunt's boldness and begged her to share the tale with them.

The telling consumed the majority of the morning, leaving Mr. Gardiner confused by the grinning faces of his nieces and wife when he returned home from his warehouses.



A burst of light invaded Elizabeth's dreams the next morning. As she opened her eyes and squinted against the morning sun, she saw Jane pulling the bell to call for a maid.

"Elizabeth! Wake up, dearest sister! We have callers," Jane announced, her voice more like Lydia's than her own, so excited was the tone.

"At this hour?" Elizabeth groaned, looking at the clock on the mantle. It was still quite early for morning calls. Normally she would have been awake and dressed by now, but she had been kept awake long into the night with her worries about the three men who now occupied so many of the thoughts – Mr. Darcy, Mr. Mallory, and Lord de Clare.

"Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy have arrived," Jane responded, her face filled with joy. "I know it is early, but they have only just arrived in London last night, and Mr. Bingley said he could wait no longer to see me. Is that not wonderful?"

"Wonderful, indeed," Elizabeth said, her voice conveying little excitement. "Since you are forward of me, why do you not entertain the gentlemen a while? I shall be down directly."

Sarah entered as Elizabeth spoke. Elizabeth knew that regardless of what efforts the maid put forth, nothing would be able to hide the exhaustion she felt, much of it being Mr. Darcy's doing.

When she was completely dressed and coiffed, she rushed down the staircase and through the corridor, to the door to the drawing-room. She pushed open the door and saw Mr. Bingley and Jane sitting together on the settee, while Mr. Darcy stood by the hearth, gazing into the fire.

“Ah, Miss Elizabeth!” Mr. Bingley exclaimed joyfully upon seeing the lady who would become his sister. “We apologise for the early hour of our visit, but we couldn’t resist calling upon you as soon as could be after our arrival in London.”

“Indeed,” said Mr. Darcy, as he came to join their conversation. His eyes met hers as he bowed in greeting. She blushed at the intensity of his gaze, looking down to avoid it.

“I am sure we are quite flattered by your eagerness, gentlemen,” Elizabeth replied, her voice steady despite the rapid rhythm of her heart.

The four sat down to take breakfast together. Mrs. Gardiner was yet attending the children and Mr. Gardiner was already departed for his warehouses. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were left to each other’s conversation, so lost were Jane and Mr. Bingley in each other that they could hardly be made to notice anyone else. Elizabeth cast about for a topic of conversation to fill the void between them.

“I hope your journey was fine,” she said inanely.

“It was. The roads are quite dry and there has been so little snow and ice that we had little trouble,” he answered.

“I am glad for it, sir,” she answered.

Thankfully, a servant soon arrived with the coffee that Mr. Darcy had requested. The clattering of dishes and cutlery and the silence of eating meant they could forego conversation for some time. Only when Mrs. Gardiner came downstairs did the conversation pick up, and her presence made the interaction much smoother. After leaving the breakfast room, they started talking about wedding plans and their plans for their stay in London.

“Are you to attend the ball at Lady Amelia Youman’s home tomorrow evening?” asked Mr. Darcy of Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner.

“We have received and accepted her kind invitation, even though we are amazed to be included. None of us have been introduced to the Youmans,” said Elizabeth.

Mr. Darcy grimaced and shifted in his seat. "It was at Bingley's intervention that your party had been invited. He is friends with the Youmans and requested your inclusion. He could not bear, after such a length of separation, to spend another evening apart from your sister."

A soft smile graced Elizabeth's lips as she glanced over at her sister and Mr. Bingley. "How considerate of him."

"It was pure selfishness on my part," said Mr. Bingley, who had heard his name and began attending to their conversation. "Do not bestow upon me virtues I do not possess."

Elizabeth laughed and accepted his words. "Regardless of your motivation, I do love to dance and therefore must thank you for gaining us the invitation."

Mr. Bingley nodded in acceptance of her thanks. "And while we are on the subject, I must beg Miss Bennet for the first set and the supper set. Mrs.. Gardiner, Miss Elizabeth, I must, of course, dance with you both as well."

Jane did not hesitate in accepting her betrothed's request. Elizabeth and Mrs.. Gardiner also granted Mr. Bingley a dance each.

"I must claim dances as well," said Mr. Darcy after a moment. "Miss Elizabeth, would you do me the honour of dancing the first set with me?"

Elizabeth was taken aback by the request but happily accepted. Mr. Darcy asked also for dances from Miss Bennet and Mrs.. Gardiner. All was settled, and as conversation flowed on, the party became quite comfortable.

It is, however, the nature of books, that whenever the hero and heroine seem to be going about their romance quite smoothly, that there must be a disruption. Such was the case here, when they were all happily discussing the merits of blue waistcoats at the wedding, Mr. Mallory was announced.

He, upon entering the room, looked about him and bowed to those present. He, much to Elizabeth's surprise, was already acquainted with both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley. Mr.

Darcy seemed to know him only a little, and for all that he did not seem to like the man overly much, if his manner was any indication.

As Mrs.. Gardiner poured tea for Mr. Mallory, she inquired about the health of Mrs.. Mallory.

“She does very well, madam,” was his answer. “I am glad to say that she has not relapsed since our return to town. Yet, even so, Ramsgate agreed with her so well that we are to return there as soon as the weather is warm enough for sunbathing.”

Mr. Darcy stiffened at the name of the pleasure town and Elizabeth could not help but find this curious. As he relaxed once the conversation continued, she thought little more of it.

“I dined last night at the home of Lord Pembroke and his daughters, Lady Amelia Youman and Lady Violet Youman,” said Mr. Mallory to the room. “We spoke of their upcoming ball, and I was delighted that all in this room are to be in attendance.”

“I believe that to be the case,” said Mrs.. Gardiner. “We had just been speaking of the same ball before your arrival.”

“As your nieces are such beauties, Mrs.. Gardiner, I have come to solicit their hands for what dances they might grant me. If I were to wait for the ball itself, surely I should be too late and their cards would be filled completely,” he said.

“Indeed, they are lovely ladies,” said Mrs.. Gardiner with pride. “You had better ask them, however, not me. I do not speak for them.”

“Of course,” said Mr. Mallory with a nod, before turning to Elizabeth. “Might I solicit your hand for the first and second sets?”

“Unfortunately, the first and second have been already claimed by Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley, but I may save you the third, if you so wish.”



With an unfriendly expression, Mr. Mallory directed his gaze towards Mr. Darcy. "I see," he said, before turning back to Elizabeth. He pasted a smile onto his face, however false it might have been, and requested the third. From Jane, he requested another, and then took his leave, seemingly eager for an escape.

Given the privileges granted to the betrothed of a resident and those accompanying him, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley stayed much longer than the typical half-hour of a morning call. While Jane and Mr. Bingley were much involved with each other's company, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth retreated to visit Mr. Witting in his sickroom. Sarah accompanied them for propriety, although such was hardly necessary given their destination. Sarah was glad for the excuse to see the valet, however, and neither Elizabeth nor Mr. Darcy protested.

Mr. Darcy was glad to find, upon his entering the room, that Mr. Witting was sitting in a chair and taking a bit of buttered bread and tea. An open book sat on the table next to his bed, for Sarah often would sit with him and read. Mr. Witting declared himself pleased by Mr. Darcy's visit, and that all of Mr. Reed's attentions had served him remarkably well. More than anything else, the inducement of marrying Sarah must heal him, for he had begged for her hand only the previous day.

Felicitations were given, which the happy couple readily accepted.

"I understand, Mr. Darcy, that I assume much by asking to remain in your service after all that passed and to bring a wife as well. I do understand if I can no longer serve in your household, or if I must take a lesser role due to my soon-to-be wedded state," the valet said to his employer.

Mr. Darcy looked at him in puzzlement. "Will your wedded state prevent you from helping me with my boots, Witting?"

"I do not believe so," said Mr. Witting, "But is it not irregular for personal servants to be wed?"

“Irregular, perhaps,” said Mr. Darcy with a nod, “but that matters little to me. I cannot promise that your wife will have the same position she is used to, as my sister has a maid she likes already, but I am certain we can find a place for her in the household. So long as your behaviour is proper, as always, I see no difficulty.”

“Are you quite certain, sir?” asked Mr. Witting.

“I have already gone to some trouble to keep you, Witting,” said Mr. Darcy with a slight smile. “I believe it is quite obvious that your decision to marry would not lead to your separation from my employ.”

Mr. Witting and Sarah thanked Mr. Darcy sincerely. Glancing between Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth, Mr. Witting waited, hoping perhaps that similar news might be forthcoming, but nothing was said.

As Mr. Witting’s three visitors walked through the corridors back to the main rooms, Mr. Darcy spoke a question he had been meaning to ask for several days, “Miss Elizabeth, there is also one other person in my household,” he continued after a pause, “who more particularly wishes to be known to you. Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to introduce my sister to your acquaintance?”

“Of course, sir,” she said. “I should be honoured to meet Miss Darcy.”

“Would I presume too much in requesting we be allowed to call on the morrow? She is not out, you see, so she shall not be at the ball,” he explained.

Elizabeth hesitated. “My parents and the rest of my sisters are to arrive here today. If you call with Miss Darcy here, she shall be introduced to the whole. If you would prefer her not to be overwhelmed by so many Bennets, another time or place would be preferable.”

“I see nothing objectionable in my sister meeting the whole of your family,” he answered. “She is a reserved sort by nature, but I think she and Miss Lydia would get on very well together, given their shared love of the penny papers.”

“She is very like you, then? Reserved, but less so with those she is acquainted with?”

“You take the Darcy likeness accurately, Elizabeth. How long I have wished for my sister to meet you, that your company might do her some benefit in enlivening us.”

Elizabeth blushed at his use of her given name. She did not know if these occasions were slips of the tongue or purposeful, but she was greatly affected by them. “You honour me, sir, with such praise,” was all that she could reply, for they were nearing the drawing-room. They entered, and, given the time was nearing when Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy’s respective sisters would be expecting them, they took their leave of the house.

## Chapter 19

Mrs. Bennet stepped out of the carriage in front of the Gardiner's home, gently dabbing her perspiring forehead with a handkerchief. "Mr. Bennet," she began, her voice edged with discomfort and exhaustion, "we must invest in a well-sprung carriage. The state of the roads is deplorable! Surely, we would not have been jostled about half so much if we had an equipage half so fine as Mr. Bingley's."

"My dear, Mrs. Bennet," said her husband with an amused glint in his eye, "you shall have to marry off several more daughters before we can afford such a luxury."

Mrs. Bennet huffed in response and strode forward to greet her eldest daughters. Equally motivated by the desire to escape the chilly December air and to see their relations, the rest of the Bennets followed her.

Elizabeth was the first to greet them, embracing first her mother and father and then her sisters. Jane was only steps behind, but was eclipsed by the four Gardiner children, who were eager for new playmates. Jane might be their favourite cousin, but she lacked novelty compared to Kitty and Lydia, who had great high spirits and newness to offer. The youngest Bennets allowed themselves to be herded toward the schoolroom with alacrity, as the children were eager to show their cousins their new dolls and blocks, what new words they could read and write, and how tall they were when compared with the previous marks on the doorposts.

Mrs. Bennet, too focused on her own grievances, barely registered the warmth of the reunion. Instead, she fixed a scrutinising gaze on her second eldest daughter. "Well, Lizzy," she said, "have you had any suitors while in London? Surely there must be some gentlemen about. They might not be equal in consequence to Mr. Bingley, but then you are not equal to Jane in beauty."

Elizabeth fought the urge to blush and answered her mother steadily, "I have had no proposals, if that is your

meaning, Mamma. We have been often to balls, and there have been many pleasant gentlemen to dance with.”

“Pleasant gentlemen are worth little if they cannot be taught to admire you or your sisters,” said Mrs.. Bennet in a scolding tone.

Elizabeth did not know how to respond to such a statement, and therefore was thankful when Jane redirected their mother by talking of her wedding clothes, assuring her that they had visited all of the warehouses that Mrs.. Bennet had suggested. Further relief was at hand when one of the maids came in to announce that baths for the travellers were ready, and they were then able to escape Mrs.. Bennet’s invasive questioning for the space of an hour.

Eager for news of their sisters’ time in London, Lydia and Kitty were the first to return from their rooms. “Pray, tell us,” Lydia whispered conspiratorially to her eldest sisters, “have there been any attempts on Mr. Witting’s life since you left Hertfordshire?”

“Good heavens, no!” Elizabeth replied, the mere thought causing her heart to clench.

“There has been no such excitement, Lydia. You should not speak so lightly of such matters.” Jane’s voice held a hint of gentle reprimand.

“Very well,” said Lydia with a dejected air. “You will tell me if something thrilling occurs, though, will you not?”

Exasperated, Elizabeth and Jane agreed to inform their sister if anything exciting happened. They did not imagine, however, that there would be anything more exciting than morning calls to report, however.



The Darcys were punctual the following morning, arriving at the Gardiners’ home just as calling hours began. Elizabeth had been anxiously awaiting them, when the sound of a carriage drew her and her sisters to a window, and they saw a

gentleman and a lady alighting from a carriage. Elizabeth immediately recognising the livery, guessed what it meant, and imparted no small degree of her surprise to her parents and younger sisters by acquainting them with the honour which she expected.

The Gardiners and Jane were the only ones not amazed by the circumstance, feeling that there was no other way of accounting for such attentions from such a quarter than by supposing a partiality for Elizabeth. While these newly-born notions were passing in their heads, the perturbation of Elizabeth's feelings was at every moment increasing.

She retreated from the window, fearful of being seen; and as she walked up and down the room, endeavouring to compose herself, saw such looks of inquiring surprise in the eyes of her father and sisters as made everything worse. Mrs. Bennet's demeanour remained unchanged as she assumed the honour was intended for Jane alone, given Mr. Darcy's friendship with Mr. Bingley. This little mercy, at least, Elizabeth could be thankful for.

Miss Darcy and her brother appeared, and this formidable introduction took place. With astonishment did Elizabeth see that her new acquaintance was at least as much embarrassed as herself. Despite what she had been told by Mr. Wickham, she could find nothing of pride in Miss Darcy. The lady was, indeed, exceedingly shy. She found it difficult to obtain even a word from her beyond a monosyllable.

Miss Darcy was tall and on a larger scale than Elizabeth. Though little more than sixteen, her figure was formed, and her appearance womanly and graceful. She was less handsome than her brother, but there was sense and good humour in her face, and her manners were perfectly unassuming and gentle. Elizabeth, who had expected to find in her as acute and unembarrassed an observer as ever Mr. Darcy had been, was much relieved by discerning such different feelings.

Elizabeth made introductions then between Miss Darcy and the rest of her relations, finding much to her pleasure that her mother said little beyond the ordinary greetings. Lydia

boldly approached Miss Darcy and revealed their shared love for the penny papers, which she discovered through Mr. Darcy. She informed Miss Darcy that if she hadn't read the latest chapter of Sir Francis, she could borrow their copy, as the local bookseller was now sold out of the issue.

Elizabeth gasped at her sister's audacity, but thence was surprised to see a smile on Miss Darcy's face. Miss Darcy whispered her answer and agreed to be escorted by the youngest Bennets to the library, where they might read the instalment. The trio of ladies went off, and left Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth, and the rest of her relations to have tea.

"I do wonder that Mr. Bingley is not with you, sir," said Mrs.. Bennet a moment later. "I hope he is well. He seemed in good health just days ago."

"Indeed, I have heard nothing to the contrary, and I saw him last evening. I hope I do not intrude by calling without him, madam," said Mr. Darcy stiffly.

"Certainly, you do not," said Mrs.. Bennet. "I am certain you are most welcome. Is he not, Mrs.. Gardiner?"

"Indeed, you and your sister are most welcome, sir," said Mrs.. Gardiner. "I am certain all of my nieces agree."

"I thank you, Madam," Mr. Darcy replied to Mrs.. Gardiner, although his gaze was fixed on Elizabeth.

Elizabeth stared into her tea, fearful of looking into his eyes. Certainly, with but a look, her tender feelings would be exposed. Mr. Darcy talked little, allowing the others to carry most of the conversation. Nonetheless, his manners were easier than what she was familiar with, as if he had relinquished his customary reserve. Mrs.. Bennet looked at him calculatingly, much in the same way that a jeweller might assess a stone.

Once all had taken tea, Mr. Darcy asked to be allowed to visit Mr. Witting, which was agreed to with alacrity. He proceeded by himself, having recalled the route to the valet's room from his previous visit. As soon as he left the room, Mrs.. Bennet was eager to speak.

“You did not tell me that you had a beau of such consequence, Lizzy!” said Mrs.. Bennet. “You have been a very wicked daughter, indeed, letting me fret so about your future when Mr. Darcy calls upon you in such a way.”

“Mother,” said Elizabeth, “I am certain that he thinks of me as nothing but a friend for his sister and as Mr. Bingley’s future sister. From what I understand, Miss Darcy has not often had the company of other young ladies.”

Despite these and other protestations from Elizabeth and Jane, Mrs.. Bennet could not be moved in her conviction that Mr. Darcy must be in love with her second daughter. Only the entry of Miss Darcy into the room quieted her, and only then for a moment, as the young ladies had returned only for the retrieval of scissors to make over a bonnet.

“What shall you do if he hears you, Mamma?” asked Elizabeth. “He will think me the worst sort of social climber!”

Mrs.. Gardiner agreed with Elizabeth, and it was well that she did, for Mrs.. Bennet was convinced to be silent on the subject just a moment before Mr. Darcy joined them. The gentleman had a smile on his face unlike that which Elizabeth had ever seen. Mrs.. Bennet was quite startled to see him in such a good humour and asked him if he was quite well. He assured her that he was, and that he was delighted to report that Mr. Witting was able to walk about a little.

As soon as the Darcys left, Mrs.. Bennet began again to exclaim over Elizabeth, how rich she should be if she married Mr. Darcy, and how fine the carriages and jewels would be. Mr. Bingley, her hero of only that morning, was quite forgot.

“Mamma,” Elizabeth reminded her mother, “Mr. Darcy and I have no understanding. There have been no promises made or hints that any such should be forthcoming.”

Her mother would not listen. Mrs.. Bennet was quite certain that Mr. Darcy was a man in love, and nothing would convince her otherwise. Mr. Bennet could not be convinced to quiet his wife.



“Father,” said Elizabeth to him in the library, where they both had sought escape, “pray, forbid her of speaking of her wishes that Mr. Darcy and I should wed, for she shall quite mortify me this evening if you do not!”

“Mayhap she wishes to hurry the matter along by engaging his honour. Would you not like to have such fine carriages and gowns?” asked Mr. Bennet. When his daughter’s face did not change and instead tears began to form at the corners of her eyes, his mood sobered. “You do like Mr. Darcy, then, Lizzy? Dear me, how can this be? I believed you disliked him more than any other man of your acquaintance. Is he not proud and disagreeable? So you proclaimed him only a month past.”

Elizabeth turned away and dabbed away the tears before they fell. Turning back to her father, she said, “I do, I do like him,” she replied, with tears in her eyes, “I love him. Indeed, he has no improper pride. He is perfectly amiable. Pray, sir, do not speak of what I said before I truly knew who he is. Prior to discovering his kindness towards even the lowliest of servants and his humble nature, I might have uttered such words, but my misconception couldn’t have been further from the truth. He is all goodness.”

When Elizabeth looked up, she found her father smiling at her, his eyes twinkling with mirth. “Well, my dear Lizzy, you have painted his character as quite perfect. His care for his valet must speak well of him, as does his friendship with Mr. Bingley. If he is as fine a man as you say, I will consent to see him if he should find you just as amiable as you do him.”

Elizabeth’s spirits lifted at her father’s words and she kissed his cheek in thanks.

“Your mother is again above stairs, complaining of a dreadful megrim. I shall say that she should remain behind, lest the music and dancing prove too much for her. Mayhap she will, in future, plan her megrims more carefully,” Mr. Bennet continued.

“Dearest Papa!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “How good you are!”

“It is nothing to do with my goodness,” he replied with a smile. “I have heard that Pemberley has a remarkable library. The prospect of being surrounded by a wealth of knowledge for the rest of my days makes enduring one night of your mother’s complaints tolerable.”

## Chapter 20

Laughter and conversation greeted Elizabeth as she and her party entered the ballroom. Her eyes scanned the crowd, searching for one particular gentleman. She glimpsed him in a corner of the room, speaking with Mr. York. At nearly the same time, the gentlemen noticed her party's entrance and came forward to greet them.

Mr. Gardiner made the necessary introductions between Mr. York and those he had not yet met. As Mrs. Bennet had now decided that Mr. Darcy was for Elizabeth, Mr. York was of now greatest interest to her. He was not a very wealthy man, having an income similar to that of Mr. Bennet, but he was handsome and likable. Thus, she urged Mary and Kitty towards him, which he bore with good grace, asking them each, and then the other Bennet daughters in turn, for a dance.

After making his greetings, Mr. Darcy stood a distance apart from the rest of the party, being made more comfortable when others took upon themselves the duty of conversation. Only once most of the others had taken themselves off, either to dance or to the card room, did Mr. Darcy seem at all at ease.

"You look very handsome, Miss Elizabeth," he said when they were left momentarily alone.

A small smile played about Elizabeth's lips as she considered her reply. "I thank you, Mr. Darcy. I must inquire if I am handsome enough to tempt you to dance, or if you wish to rescind your request for my first set?"

Mr. Darcy groaned and shut his eyes for an instant. "I was in an ill-humour that evening and should not have said such a thing, particularly as it was the grossest falsehood."

When he looked again at Elizabeth, her dark eyes were dancing with merriment. "I am unkind to tease you so, sir," she said. "Do not trouble yourself. The incident is long forgot."

“I fear I should not be easy until I make an apology, Miss Elizabeth. I must humbly beg your pardon,” said he, so seriously that Elizabeth could not tease him.

“You have my pardon, sir,” she said. “Come, unless you do wish to rescind your request, we ought to take our places. The dancing is beginning.”

Mr. Darcy, very much wishing to dance the first with his beloved, tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and led her to their place in the set. The dance was an elegant one, meant for lovers to be able to speak during the performance of it, but Mr. Darcy remained silent as he executed the various steps. They moved elegantly together, and Elizabeth could feel the eyes of many upon them.

“We must speak a little, Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy broke the silence, his eyes never leaving hers as he spoke. “Else it will look odd to be entirely silent for a half hour together.”

“Very well,” she laughed, blushing at the memory of their last dance. “I shall observe how pleasant private balls are compared to public ones.”

“I do agree. Now I shall observe that there are a great number of couples dancing tonight.” As he bent closer towards her so only she could hear his words, she felt her breath catch in her throat.

“Indeed, there are,” she whispered. “Do you talk by rule, then, Mr. Darcy, when you are dancing?”

With a soft chuckle, he whispered, “Only if my partner prefers it.”

“But what do you prefer, sir?” she asked, eyebrows raised. “To be unsocial and taciturn?”

“I prefer to be in your company.” He gazed into her eyes, his voice deep and sincere. Mr. Darcy’s intense expression made Elizabeth’s heart skip a beat. The dance separated them, and she did not have a chance to respond. When they came back together, Mr. Darcy began to speak on a different topic, having felt that he embarrassed her earlier.

When the music stopped and they went to await the next song of the set, Mr. Darcy requested that they might take a turn about the room.

Elizabeth placed her hand on his arm in response and smiled up at him. "I would like that very much, Mr. Darcy."

They had walked barely a quarter of the circumference of the room when a high voice shrieked, "Mr. Darcy! Miss Eliza!" Mr. Darcy winced. Well did he know the voice!

Miss Bingley came into view and hastened towards them, her insincere smile widening. "Good evening!" she said. "I trust you both are having a pleasant time."

Elizabeth forced a smile and murmured an agreement, all the while hoping that the musicians would soon begin their next song so she might escape Miss Bingley.

Mr. Darcy bowed slightly and replied, "The evening has been pleasant thus far, Miss Bingley."

"Indeed. Although I do wish that the musicians were better," said Miss Bingley. She proceeded to scrutinise every detail of the ball and how she would alter the event for the better. When Mr. Darcy, despite his fine manners, could not help but appear bored, Miss Bingley asked, "Where is Miss Darcy? I had so hoped to see her tonight," hoping to keep him a moment longer.

"My sister is not out, madam, as you know, so she is at Darcy House," was his only response.

A brief look of disappointment crossed Miss Bingley's features, but she quickly recovered and began to praise both Miss Darcy and Darcy House in equal measure. Thankfully, the musicians began soon to play the second dance of the set and they were relieved from further conversation with Miss Bingley.

A lively dance followed, making conversation nearly impossible. Still, it was impossible not to observe the fluid movement between Darcy and the lady dancing with him, or how their gaze remained fixed on one another. The dance

fuelled speculation, and Elizabeth heard whispers every time she neared the edge of the floor.

“Are you quite alright?” asked Darcy, when the dance was concluded, and they had gone in search of refreshments. “You seem displeased. Have I offended in some way?”

“It is nothing, sir,” she said. “Perhaps only the heat of the room.”

As she said this, Darcy caught Lord Glamorgan’s nearby comment, “A nobody from somewhere in Hertfordshire. She has little enough to recommend her,” and he understood her distress.

He laid a gentle hand on her arm. “Ignore them, Elizabeth. They do not know you.”

“I find it rather hard to do so when it is the only thing I hear about me,” she said frankly.

Darcy frowned, understanding her distress. Ever since he came into his inheritance, he heard whispers about his circumstances whenever he went to a gathering such as this. “Shall I fetch your relations so you might return to your home? Or perhaps Mrs.. Gardiner could convey you to the library?”

“I shall be well,” she answered. “I thank you for your consideration, sir. Perhaps we might just sit for a moment.”

With a gesture, she indicated an alcove that was partially shielded from the rest of the room, yet still visible to those positioned directly in front of it. Within there were three tables with two chairs a piece. An elderly woman and her companion were seated at one table, leaving the other two tables empty. Darcy knew the elderly woman a little. He greeted her and introductions were made between those unknown to each other. Having not the energy for conversation, the elderly woman sat and watched the crowds mill about, while Darcy and Elizabeth seated themselves nearby.

“Is this an improvement?” asked Darcy.

“Indeed, it is, Mr. Darcy,” she replied. “I needed only a moment of peace. I thank you for attending to my needs.”

“I shall always be at your service,” he said, his gaze earnest. “Will you not call me Darcy? I should like to think we are past the point of such formality.”

“I should be glad to, Darcy,” said Elizabeth with a smile.

The elderly woman and her companion soon rose from their table, leaving Darcy and Elizabeth alone in the alcove. The musicians began to signal the beginning of the next set, but neither Elizabeth nor Darcy rose from their places. They sat in silence, watching the orchestra. As the music swelled and the dancers began to take their places, Darcy turned to Elizabeth and said, “I wonder, Miss Elizabeth, if you could verify something that Mr. Witting disclosed to me yesterday. You must forgive me for repeating second-hand information, but I find that I cannot rest easy unless I know the truth of the matter. It shall tell me how to act.”

“I have no notion of what you speak, sir,” said Elizabeth, creases of confusion appearing on her brow.

He was about to reply but did not have the chance.

“Miss Elizabeth! There you are! Mr. Bingley is looking for you; you had promised him the next dance,” said Mr. Mallory. He approached but suddenly paused when he realised she was not alone. “I’m sorry for interrupting you,” he said upon seeing Mr. Darcy.

“Miss Elizabeth was a little overwhelmed by the crowd. Are you feeling better now?” Mr. Darcy asked.

“Indeed, I am,” she replied.

“Shall we then proceed to find Mr. Bingley?” asked Mr. Mallory, extending his arm to her.

Elizabeth took Mr. Mallory’s arm and offered a smile of apology to Mr. Darcy before departing from his side. As they walked away, she sensed Darcy’s gaze upon them, but resisted the urge to turn around. A moment later, she was being led to the floor by Mr. Bingley.

Elizabeth smiled and gracefully curtsied, her mannerisms belying her unease.

“Are you well, Miss Elizabeth?” Mr. Bingley asked, clearly concerned. “You are unusually quiet.”

Elizabeth felt a warmth spread across her face as she quickly reassured him, “I am quite well. I am only taking in the elegance of the room.”

Mr. Bingley smiled and responded with his own observations. They passed a pleasant half-hour, talking of their relations and friends, the wedding plans, and estates that Mr. Bingley might, in the future, wish to let or purchase. He and Jane had recently decided to stay only until the end of the lease at Netherfield. “Recent...changes have made settling nearer to Derbyshire more appealing than a proximity to London.”

“Oh?” asked Elizabeth. “What could have changed so much?”

“My sister, for one, will not be remaining in my household after my marriage to your sister. She shall live in town with the Hursts.”

“Indeed, but I do not comprehend how this affects if you should be at Netherfield or elsewhere.”

Mr. Bingley gave her an assessing look. “Jane has expressed a preference for the North, given that some of those she values might soon be also relocating thither.”

Elizabeth looked away and did not answer as the dance separated them. When they again stood together, she said, “I have no knowledge of anyone who might relocate North, but if I learn of such, I shall tell you and my sister directly.”

Mr. Bingley seemed surprised at her answer but said nothing except to express his thanks. For the rest of the dance, they spoke of very little of consequence. This was well, for Elizabeth could not help reflecting on the interrupted conversation between herself and Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley’s strange conversation.

As the dance ended, Elizabeth curtsied to Mr. Bingley and excused herself to go find her aunt and uncle. In the midst



of the crush, she felt a wave of relief when she caught sight of the Gardiners.

“Elizabeth,” said Mr. Gardiner with a smile. “Come. I must introduce you to some of my acquaintances.”

With a smile, Elizabeth joined her uncle as he conversed with a group of gentlemen. She was introduced to them and attempted to attend to their conversation. However, as their discourse did not include much of interest to her, Elizabeth’s thoughts often drifted to Mr. Darcy. She did not see him, and she could not be so rude as to be searching for him while speaking to others.

“Miss Elizabeth,” said Mr. Mallory with a bow. “I apologise for taking you away from such a pleasing conversation, but I do believe it is time for our dance, if it still pleases you to dance with me.”

Elizabeth excused herself from her conversation and turned to Mr. Mallory. “Of course, sir.”

Elizabeth accepted Mr. Mallory’s extended arm. They approached the busy dance floor, where couples were organising themselves into the lines of the dance. As the music began, they commenced the steps of the latest quadrille. Elizabeth felt the room’s gaze intensely while dancing, as she did earlier with Mr. Darcy.

“You are garnering a great deal of attention, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Mallory observed.

“It is... rather disconcerting, sir,” said Elizabeth, “to be stared at so openly.”

“I would think a lady so lovely as you are would be used to being admired.”

Elizabeth was taken aback by his words. “It is kind of you to say so,” she said, uncertain how else to reply.

“I believe I know the reason for the attention this evening, however,” he pressed on. “I must ask if the general assumption is true, madam.”

“I am not aware of to what you refer.”

“That you and Mr. Darcy have some sort of understanding? I believed, that is, I hoped that this might not be the case, but it becomes more and more difficult to delude myself. You are too kind to let me endure such misery,” Mr. Mallory said earnestly.

His boldness caught Elizabeth off guard. She did not know how to respond to such an inquiry when she did not know herself how to express what was between her and Darcy.

“I must admit that no promises have been made between Mr. Darcy and me, sir,” she replied.

“Do you hope there to be, Miss Elizabeth?” His manner had relaxed slightly at her words, but there was still a stiffness about him.

“I do not believe it is proper to discuss such things, sir,” she said, a frown marring her usually cheerful features.

Mr. Mallory’s expression dropped, but he regained his composure quickly. “Of course, Miss Elizabeth. My apologies if I have caused you any offence.”

Elizabeth finished their dance with a final curtsy and headed towards a quieter area of the ballroom. Uncertainty filled her as she let out a sigh, wondering if the entire night would be filled with awkward exchanges.

Thankfully, that was the last she had to endure, for the rest of her partners were mere acquaintances with no interest in such personal matters. Most spoke of her sister’s engagement and asked whether the happy couple would reside in London, Hertfordshire, or elsewhere after the wedding, if a date had been set, where the wedding would be, and if she was enjoying assisting her sister in planning. Even so, she felt conscious of the eyes on her throughout the evening, particularly those belonging to two gentlemen who watched her much more than the others.

## Chapter 24

As she stirred from her sleep, Elizabeth's senses were immediately drawn to the feel of a piece of paper beneath her fingertips. Instantly recognising Darcy's meticulous handwriting, she lifted the note from its place. His tender consideration made her smile. Elizabeth, despite the mostly pleasant night prior, felt a wave of self-consciousness wash over her as she realised her dishevelled appearance, as the note gave no precise indication of when her husband would return. She summoned Sarah and requested that the bathtub be filled and her clothing prepared.

Elizabeth's mind drifted to the events of the previous evening as she settled into the warm water. The memory made her heart flutter, and she blushed, recalling her husband's tender caress. Her mind wandered to the sensation of his touch, the gentle pressure of his hand and the softness of his lips against her skin.

Elizabeth emerged from the warm water and covered herself with a soft towel after finishing her bath. Moments later, Sarah arrived with an assortment of elegant day dresses for Elizabeth to pick from. Among many options, she settled on a cream muslin gown that seemed less extravagant than the others.

The moment Elizabeth stepped onto the stairs, she was greeted by the heavenly scent of freshly baked pastries and the rich aroma of coffee wafting up from the breakfast room. As she entered, the housekeeper and two maids dropped into elegant curtsies and greeted her with soft, respectful murmurs.

"Good morning, Mrs.. Darcy. Breakfast is almost ready. Would you like tea or coffee?" asked the housekeeper.

Upon accepting the offer of tea, Elizabeth watched as one of the maids swiftly retrieved it, while the housekeeper directed another to uncover the trays of food. As she was just beginning to fill her plate, the door to the breakfast room swung open, and in walked a familiar figure.

“Good morning, my love,” her husband greeted her. After a quick apology for the delay, he shared that he had been busy tending to the horses and observing how Titus was getting along with the other stable lads.

“And what were your findings, dearest?” she asked.

“He was busy with his work when I went to look, but he seemed content. When I asked him how he liked it, he said the work is hard, but the stable is warm,” said Darcy. “He already looks much healthier than when he came to us.”

“I imagine so,” said Elizabeth, her mind drifting back to when Witting had first introduced them to the boy. Not finding him a place had never been a consideration, given the state of his health. Even with the care that Arthur had shown him, the boy had looked half-starved.

As she enjoyed her breakfast, Elizabeth reflected on how lucky she was to have a husband with such a kind heart. His concern extended beyond those of their own station, encompassing all individuals in need, regardless of their position in life. She loved that about him, among many other things.

Over the next several days, Elizabeth was able to learn many more things that she loved about her husband, many of which would have made her blush had anyone learned of them. Such blissful contentment as the couple felt could not remain forever, however. Before they were ready, it was time for them to go to Pemberley.

With them, although in another carriage, travelled Georgiana, Kitty, Lydia, and Mrs. Annesley. The three young ladies had quickly become close, considering each other sisters. Mary had been invited to visit as well, but had decided to remain in Hertfordshire, as she was being courted by a clerk of her uncle's. This clerk she eventually married, although whether her marriage was a result of love or freedom from being often alone with her mother at Longbourn is not known to the author.

It proved a well-considered decision to invite the two youngest Bennets to Pemberley, as the young ladies were

occupied with each other and their lessons, so the newlywed couple was not deprived of time to themselves. In society so superior as that which the Darceys then moved, Kitty and Lydia became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid. Mrs. Annesley even occasionally managed to persuade Lydia to read something that was not a novel or penny paper, although she never would come to enjoy improving literature.

Although thoroughly frightened away from anything related to investigation and intelligence for some time, Lord Barlow begged her help a year after the afore described events with an investigation that included a lady of some standing in London. Although not seeing her as more than his cousin's sister at the time, Lydia continued to assist Lord Barlow and Colonel Fitzwilliam in the coming years. Mrs. Bennet continually insisted that Lydia would never find a husband if she gallivanted around the country chasing after traitors and murderers — especially if anyone ever learned of her activities beyond the family circle. Yet, her mother was to be proven wrong. On Lydia's twenty-second birthday, Lord Barlow asked for her hand in marriage. She accepted, with the condition that she be allowed to participate in all his adventures. She was not the sort of wife to remain quietly at home, after all.

The Bingleys did not last long at Netherfield, as predicted, and thence bought an estate less than half a day's journey from Pemberley. Kitty soon married a gentleman of Mr. Bingley's acquaintance. The gentleman was not at all charming or intelligent, but he was handsome and rich, which pleased Mrs. Bennet exceedingly. Kitty loved him, which was enough for her sisters to be pleased as well.

Miss Flint was for years burdened with the shame that her uncle had brought on her family. Her cousin maintained her lifestyle, but she was not received by many in society. At the age of eight-and-twenty, she wed a wealthy American. Across the sea she made a good life with her husband, away from any taint of scandal.

The villains were all punished as one might imagine, dancing upon nothing shortly after their trials. Unfortunately,

this left many orphans and widows in Hertfordshire, but such cannot be helped. Most entered into service or found other employment. A few of the boys went to work at the mill or picked rags, as Titus had done before.

Prime Minister Perceval was killed by an assassin in the spring of 1812. Although it is said that the killer had nothing to do with the Luddites, some remain dubious, given all that transpired only months earlier. Much of this was kept from the public, however, mostly due to the diligent efforts of those at the Home Office.

If anyone's fate was overlooked in this summary, it can be presumed that they received the future they deserved. This is, after all, but a story, where things always turn out as they ought.

*Finis*

## Chapter 21

“Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lord Barlow to see you,” said Sarah. “Shall I say you are at home?”

“Of course, Sarah,” said Elizabeth. Jane, too, gave her agreement.

The two men appeared a moment later, looking exhausted but as fine as they had ever before appeared. Sarah was sent for tea, which must have been set to boil before called for, as it was not long in coming.

“We have come, I fear, to beg a favour of you ladies,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam, after the servants had all gone.

“We are at your service, sirs, I’m sure,” said Elizabeth. Jane nodded in agreement.

“Before I continue, are there others about? I would not like to be overheard,” said the colonel.

“My mother and younger sisters have all gone with my aunt and uncle to his warehouses, as they had a wish to see what had come in on the last ship. My father is in the library and shall not come out unless called for. Excepting the servants, we are quite alone,” said Elizabeth.

“Good,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam, looking about himself. He got up and walked to the door, glancing out into the corridor to ensure no one was listening. He then shut the door completely. “I have had intelligence that Lord de Clare is much in communication with the Luddites. The source, however, could offer no proof except that of his own eyes and ears. In order to prove that he is involved with them — perhaps even the one commanding them — I must have access to his papers.”

“To what purpose is Lord de Clare said to be involved with them?” asked Elizabeth. “What can it serve him for a mill in Hertfordshire to come to destruction?”

“Lord de Clare has political ambitions,” said Lord Barlow. “He would like to show that Prime Minister Perceval is ill-suited to his position. He is convinced that by stirring up unrest in the country, he can gather support for his own cause. He sees the Luddites as the perfect pawns in his game.”

Elizabeth sat in stunned silence as she processed the information. She had known from his niece’s intelligence that Lord de Clare was ambitious, but she had not anticipated the ruthless tactics he would employ to achieve his goals.

“I understand the gravity of the situation,” said Jane, “But how can we be of help to you? We have no experience in such strategies as must be undertaken to obtain Lord de Clare’s papers.”

“You know how to pay a call on an acquaintance, do you not?” asked Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Of course, sir,” said Jane.

“Then, pray, assist me in this. There is no way that I could get approval to demand to search his lordship’s things and if I could, he likely would burn anything incriminating before I could find it.”

“But why should you ask us? Are there not wives of influential women who could pay a call and be better suited to the task?” asked Elizabeth.

“Perhaps,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam, “but you shall be less conspicuous than they might be. Pray, do not delay any longer. Every moment I remain in your home, there is a chance that Lord de Clare could learn of my visit here this morning and be therefore suspicious of your call. Already he has learned of my surveillance of his movements, but I hope he is arrogant enough to consider himself above the law’s touch.”

“This is all happening very quickly,” said Elizabeth.

“It is not,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam. “I have been working on this matter since I arrived in London. I must have your answer.”

A look was exchanged between the two sisters, each inquiring what the other thought. Elizabeth then turned back to



the Colonel. “Very well,” was her reply.

“Good. Now, I must go before anyone sees. You must arrive at de Clare House in one hour. Make sure that Miss Flint and his Lordship are occupied for at least a half hour,” said the colonel.

“How shall we assure he attends us?” asked Jane. “Perhaps only Miss Flint attends us?”

“He will not miss a chance to flatter and impress any young lady who pays him a call, most likely with the intention of later acting in a dishonourable manner,” said Lord Barlow.

Jane let out a gasp at Lord Barlow’s words. Each gentleman took leave of the sisters, bowing over their hands and departing. Jane and Elizabeth looked at each other, then hastened up the stairs to find gowns befitting such a strange errand as they must undertake.



“And why, pray, cannot your sisters accompany you?” asked Mrs.. Bennet, indignant on her youngest two children’s behalf.

“Only Jane and I were invited to call, Mamma,” replied Elizabeth. They had already canvassed this subject several times, but Mrs.. Bennet was not to be reasoned with.

“Kitty or Lydia would do very well for his lordship, you know. I cannot believe that you could be so selfish when you will both be so very grand,” said Mrs.. Bennet. She had already begun to speak as if Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy were already betrothed, much to the displeasure of the former.

“Mayhap he believes that they shall be very like us when they are older and therefore wishes to assess us first,” said Jane. This concept made no sense to Elizabeth, but Mrs.. Bennet was appeased by it.

“Do be charming then,” their mother said. “But you must hint that your sisters are very fine young ladies as well and would do very well as friends to Miss Flint. Lizzy, do not be hesitant to simper at him, either. You are not yet assured of

Mr. Darcy, you know. Mr. Darcy may be far richer, but a bird in the hand..."

Elizabeth barely restrained herself from replying unkindly, instead thanking her mother for allowing their visit and departing with a kiss to Mrs. Bennet's cheek.

As de Clare House came into view, Elizabeth's heart quickened. In an effort to relax, she reminded herself it was only a social call. Likely the most important social call that she would ever make, but a social call nonetheless. Their carriage stopped in front of the grand front entrance. A footman stepped forward to hand them down.

Upon entering, Elizabeth and Jane were met by Miss Flint, who then directed them to the sitting room and arranged for tea to be sent up. The room was very fine and quite overdone. As she looked around, Elizabeth counted at least twelve different colours, all at odds with each other. There was a great deal of gold adorning every piece of furniture, plus a large clock made, it seemed, entirely from jade. She had to wonder whose taste this was, Miss Flint's or the late Lady de Clare's.

There was no sign of the lady's uncle in the room, nor did Miss Flint mention anything of him as they sat in the garish sitting room. After a few more minutes of conversation, Elizabeth determined that she must mention the man in order that he might perhaps be summoned.

"And your uncle?" she asked. "Is his lordship in good health?"

Miss Flint gave what seemed like a forced smile. "My uncle is well, thank you for asking. He has been kept busy with his business affairs, as always."

"Not at the moment, my dear niece," said Lord de Clare from the doorway. "I had just come to look in on you, dear. How fine it is to be treated to not just the company of one beautiful young lady, but three!"

He bowed to them all and entered the room. His niece hastily prepared a cup of tea for him. He took it and sat down

in the chair nearest Elizabeth. He smiled at her and asked after the rest of her family. How a gentleman that seemed so fatherly and harmless could be such a rogue as Lord Barlow and Colonel Fitzwilliam had said was beyond Elizabeth. His guise must be very practised, she supposed.

“And what of you, Miss Bennet?” he asked Jane. “I have heard that your sister plays a little, but I have heard nothing of your talents.”

Elizabeth supposed that the conversation had advanced while she had been pondering his lordship. She hoped that her lapse had not been noticed.

“I sing a little,” said Jane, “but I have not the inclination to music that Elizabeth and Mary both possess. I quite disappoint when it comes to the usual accomplishments of young ladies, sir. All I may boast of is a fair hand at sketching.”

“I am sure that your sketching must be very fine,” said his lordship. “Pray, next time you visit my niece, I would greatly enjoy seeing your work if you have a mind to display it to others.”

Jane looked at her hands and agreed, not wanting to show her work but also not wishing to disoblige their host.

Just then, there was a loud thud from somewhere in the house. As soon as Elizabeth glanced at Lord de Clare, she could see the worry in his eyes.

“What could that have been?” said his lordship, beginning to rise.

“I- uh -,” Elizabeth stumbled over her words. “I am sure that was just a servant who dropped a bucket or some such. They have a tendency to be quite clumsy.”

“All the more reason for me to see what has happened. We have recently hired a new maid. I am certain that it is she that just last week broke a priceless vase from the ancient Orient.”

Before they could say anything further to attempt to persuade his lordship to remain, he had left the room. A

feeling of unease settled over Elizabeth. She exchanged a glance with her elder sister, who looked equally concerned.

“Do you think we should go after him?” Jane whispered, her voice shaking slightly.

Elizabeth hesitated, filled with doubt about what she should do. This lasted only an instant, however, as a loud scream emanated from somewhere within the house. She leapt up from her seat and ran towards the door to the room. Jane and Miss Flint were only a second behind.

“I think it came from that direction,” said Miss Flint, gesturing down the corridor. Elizabeth did not respond except by hastening in the indicated direction.

“Where is your uncle’s study?” Elizabeth asked Miss Flint as they ran.

“There,” said Miss Flint between gasps. She waved her hand in the direction of a closed door some three yards away.

Not accustomed to any vigorous exercise besides dancing, Miss Flint was quite undone by the sprint and unequal to any further exertion. Elizabeth and Jane passed her, unwilling to delay on her behalf. Pushing open the door, they were greeted with the sight of three men’s backs.

“We have given the papers back, my lord,” said Mr. Mallory, one of the men before her. “Now pray, let the child go.”

On the other side of the room, Lord de Clare held a knife to Lydia’s throat as Mr. Mallory, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Lord Barlow watched in horror. Upon seeing her sisters, Lydia’s eyes, previously filled with fear, briefly contained a spark of hope.

“Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, do come in,” said Lord de Clare. “I was just becoming better acquainted with your young sister. You ought to teach her better manners. It seems she decided to enter my home through a window instead of the front door.”

Elizabeth and Jane entered as ordered, their shoes crunching papers underfoot. “Release my sister!” said

Elizabeth firmly, her voice steady. "She is not without friends! You will regret any harm that comes to her."

Lord de Clare laughed as he pressed the knife harder against Lydia's throat. "I think not, my courageous Miss Elizabeth, despite your threats," he said calmly. "You see, Lord Barlow and Colonel Fitzwilliam have been a thorn in my side for too long. I must, in fact, thank your sister. She alerted me to their presence and saved me a world of trouble. What is more, I believe she shall do nicely, as any gentleman must exchange his life for a lady's under such circumstances."

Horror washed over Elizabeth, causing her to feel like she might swoon. Jane's hand on her arm steadied her. She looked at Lord Barlow and Colonel Fitzwilliam, and noticed the exchange of glances between the brothers. Mr. Mallory's gaze was fixed steadily on Lydia, whose face was as pale as a sheet.

"Do not fear, Miss Elizabeth," said Colonel Fitzwilliam. "I am sure Lord de Clare is not so foolish as to think he can get away with murder. If any of us die here, you certainly shall hang. Others know where we have gone."

A moment of doubt crossed Lord de Clare's face before it hardened once more. "I shall hang either way then," he said. "You do not make a good case for your cause."

Lydia's eyes widened in horror as she considered the evil man's plans for her after realising his impending death. Mr. Mallory tried to speak but Lord de Clare ordered him to silence. "Move to the side and let me pass. I shall free the lady once I have made my escape." The man took up the papers that had begun the incident with his other hand, keeping his grip on Lydia.

"No!" came a voice from the corridor, causing everyone's attention to be captured. A vase shattered on the floor in front of Lord de Clare. Miss Flint was in the doorway, her face displaying unwavering determination. "How could you be so unfeeling, Uncle?" Miss Flint asked, her voice nearly a sob.

"Move aside, Susan," said Lord de Clare, coldly.

Shocked, the young lady did as she was told, moving to the side of the doorway.

“Further away from the door, all of you!” said Lord de Clare, his voice nearly a growl. They obeyed, stepping aside, hoping he would honour his word and free Lydia upon his escape.

Lord de Clare backed slowly out of the room, not turning his back on his advisories as he did so. Before Elizabeth could process the situation, Mr. Darcy revealed himself from the corridor’s shadows. With a single swift motion, he plunged a dagger into Lord de Clare’s arm, forcing him to release Lydia. Lydia almost fell into Lord de Clare’s desk after being released suddenly, but Lord Barlow caught her in time to prevent any harm.

While Lord Barlow guided Lydia to her older sister, Lord de Clare attempted to take hold of the dagger deeply embedded in his arm, refusing to relinquish his papers. Colonel Fitzwilliam quickly moved to restrain him, but the elder man struggled against him. Lord de Clare winced in pain as he forcefully extracted the dagger from his wound, causing blood to spray out like a fountain. Elizabeth’s mouth went dry as she watched Mr. Darcy pick up the knife that had fallen from Lord de Clare’s hand and step forward to assist his cousin.

Lord de Clare, driven mad by blood loss and fear for his life, wildly swung the dagger. Colonel Fitzwilliam made several unsuccessful attempts to subdue the fearless man. Mr. Darcy skirted the edge of the room, hoping that Lord de Clare might be once again taken unaware. He was not. The mad lord heard his approach and spun to face him. Lord de Clare, filled with rage, lunged at Mr. Darcy and thrust his dagger into his shoulder. Mr. Darcy’s face contorted into an expression of agony as he collapsed onto the floor.

## Chapter 22

Elizabeth rushed to Mr. Darcy's side, a cry escaping her lips. She forcefully shoved Lord de Clare aside, the sound of his head hitting the floor echoing through the room.

"Do not take the knife from the wound," Colonel Fitzwilliam said as he too rushed to attend the fallen man. The colonel took off his coat and swiftly used it to wrap the knife, applying pressure to the wound.

"What shall I do to help?" asked Miss Flint.

Elizabeth looked in the young lady's direction. Behind her, Lord Barlow was attending to Lord de Clare, restraining him and attending to his injuries.

"Send for a doctor, two if it is possible," ordered Colonel Fitzwilliam. "And clean cloth and hot water."

Miss Flint took herself off to fulfil these requests. Elizabeth hurried to the sideboard where a bottle of whiskey and two glasses sat undisturbed. She splashed some of the amber liquid into each of the glasses and brought one to Jane, who now was helping attend to Lord de Clare and took the other to Mr. Darcy.

"Elizabeth," he murmured. "I am so cold."

"I shall build up the fire," she responded immediately, but he stopped her before she could rise.

"Do not go, my love. Your touch warms me more than a fire." Instead of his usual strong and commanding voice, the words came out weakly.

"We must keep him warm," said Colonel Fitzwilliam in a tone of command. His eyes shifted first to Lydia, thence to Jane, who was holding a glass for Lord de Clare to drink from. "Miss Bennet, close the window and build up the fire as much as you might. Miss Lydia, go and fetch whatever quilts or blankets might be found."

The ladies obeyed at once. Glad that she did not have to leave her beloved's side at such a time, Elizabeth helped him to sip at a bit of the whiskey, hoping it might warm him.

"Dearest Elizabeth," said Mr. Darcy, his eyes closing in agony, "I love you. I have loved you for months."

"I love you as well, Darcy," she said. "Pray, open your eyes. You ought to remain awake during your proposals, I believe." Her attempt at levity was met with a gentle smile from the gentleman, who then opened his eyes slightly.

"I would be more eloquent in the making of my proposals if I had the energy, dearest. Elizabeth, you deserve a speech that is long and carefully considered. Yet, I can just ask for your hand, and beg that you forgive my brevity." Mr. Darcy's eyes had once again begun to close as he spoke, and Elizabeth gripped his hand more firmly to keep him awake.

"I'll marry you, sir, but under the condition that you promise to survive. If you do not, I shall be seriously cross." Elizabeth's eyes, which had been filling with tears, spilled over onto her cheeks.

Darcy responded only with a faint, "Very well, my love." Yet he could not keep his eyes open or remain awake. The pain was too great.

Lydia came back, bringing blankets with her and followed by two servants with more. Elizabeth hardly noticed, even when Lydia moved about her, covering Darcy as much as she could without disturbing Colonel Fitzwilliam's work.

What felt like hours later, but probably was less than fifteen minutes, a doctor arrived and began to attend to Mr. Darcy's injuries, ordering the ladies out of the room on his entrance.



It was over an hour before the ladies had any word of the condition of the men. After changing into gowns borrowed from Miss Flint so their soiled garments could be washed, they



remained in the sitting room, pacing the floor. Over and over, Miss Flint apologised for her wicked uncle, swearing that she had no knowledge of his doings. None of the Bennets could blame her for her ignorance.

“And how came you to be here, Lydia?” Jane asked at one point.

“Mamma told me what you had said and that the colonel and Lord Barlow had called. I deduced there must be something occurring and resolved to follow. When I arrived, I entered through the window, and I fear I lacked grace in so doing. I believe it was the sound of my entrance that alerted the household.” Lydia looked on the verge of tears. “If either man dies, I shall be guilty of causing their death. What a wretch I am!”

Jane placed a comforting arm around her youngest sister. “Do not abuse yourself so, Lydia. Your actions were well-intentioned, if a bit foolish.”

“If anyone must be at fault, it is my uncle,” said Miss Flint.

The others could not but agree.

Lord Barlow emerged from the study some while later and reported that Lord de Clare had passed. His condition had been beyond salvation. When he had pulled the knife from his wound, he had sealed his own fate. Too much blood was lost and could not be recovered. The doctor was still tending to Mr. Darcy.

Despite her poor opinion of her uncle, Miss Flint began to sob at this news. Lord de Clare had acted in the role of her father since she was young. She was now completely alone in the world, burdened by the stain of her uncle’s betrayal that would haunt her wherever she ventured.

“The magistrate has been called for and there will be an inquest on the morrow. Likely we all shall be called to give an account,” explained Lord Barlow.

“What was in the papers he held so dear?” asked Elizabeth.

“He held a great many debts for men among the Luddites. The threat of debtor’s prison is enough to secure many men’s loyalty. He had also many letters and papers that could be used as blackmail against various members of Parliament and people from influential families,” explained the viscount. “I judge that he meant to use these as a means to persuade those he victimised into voting how he wished. It would not be enough to convict him on a charge of treason. We had hoped for more. Perhaps more will be found once a thorough search has been completed. Yet now a conviction is rather unnecessary.”

“Indeed,” said Elizabeth darkly. “But what shall happen with the Luddites now? Shall their cause be disrupted?”

“We have cut off the head of the snake, I believe,” said Lord Barlow. “But we have no notion if there are other heads with whom we must reckon. I would be surprised if there are not.”

“This might all have been for naught, then, my lord?” asked Lydia, dispiritedly.

“Not for naught,” he replied. “We have stopped great harm from occurring, and we now know more about the threats we may face in the future.”

The doctor then entered, appearing ill at ease.

“What news of Mr. Darcy, sir?” Elizabeth asked immediately.

“He is not yet awake,” said the doctor, “But he is resting peacefully. If he does not die today, he likely shall live, provided the wound does not fester.”

Elizabeth let out a relieved sigh, but her heart still felt heavy with concern for her love.

The doctor proceeded to explain that the wound was deep, and the healing process would be slow and require patience. “He may never recover full use of the arm. I cannot tell the full extent of the injury to the joint until the wound has healed.”

In a matter of moments after the doctor's departure, Colonel Fitzwilliam entered the room. Upon viewing Elizabeth's distress, he took it on himself to comfort her. "I have seen men live after far worse wounds, dear Miss Elizabeth. And with far worse care as well. Darcy shall live to wed you."

Elizabeth gave a small smile and thanked the colonel for his comfort.

An hour later, Mr. Gardiner arrived to fetch his nieces home. Regardless of Elizabeth's wish to stay and nurse her betrothed, her uncle would not allow it. Reluctantly, she returned to Gracechurch Street, and thereafter went to her aunt, who promised that she might visit de Clare House every day if she wished, until Mr. Darcy was well enough to be removed. This was enough for Elizabeth's satisfaction.



The next day the inquest took place, and Elizabeth was called upon to give her testimony. The crowd was raucous, as often was the case at such proceedings, but Elizabeth was shielded from the worst by remaining in the carriage until it was time for her to speak. She did so with sobriety and dignity, and the jury was satisfied with her account. Mr. Darcy, of course, could not give his account of the matter, as he was not awake. Much to Elizabeth's relief, the jury found that Lord de Clare's death had indeed been at Mr. Darcy's hand, but in defence of the lives of others. No crime had been committed by anyone except Lord de Clare, who could not now answer any charges.

A thorough search was made of de Clare House and more documents were uncovered, some giving a great deal of information about the movement of which Lord de Clare had been the head. Several of his co-conspirators were arrested, but none were satisfied that they had beaten the movement entirely.

The day of the inquest was the only one where Elizabeth was unable to visit Mr. Darcy. For two days after,

Elizabeth called at de Clare House and two days she sat beside Mr. Darcy's bedside while he slept. That he was recovering, and the wound had not festered must be a comfort to her, but she wished he would awaken. Then she might feel assured of his future. Sarah willingly acted as Elizabeth's companion on these journeys, ensuring there was no whisper of impropriety while also offering a sympathetic ear, given her own recent experience.

On the fourth day of his rest, as Elizabeth sat embroidering what might become her initials on a handkerchief, holding out hope that her work would not be in vain, she saw Mr. Darcy stir. It started with a tiny movement, but then his eyes opened. Elizabeth jumped up from her chair, her heart filled with relief and excitement. He looked at her in incomprehension and for a moment she feared that he might not recognise her. Such things were heard of after such a severe injury.

She took his hand in hers and leaned in close. "Mr. Darcy, can you hear me?"

The corners of his lips curled up and his grip on her hand tightened. "Elizabeth," he whispered.

Relief washed over Elizabeth, both at his speech and his ability to recall her. "How do you feel, Darcy?" she asked.

"Like someone stabbed me," he replied with a wry smile.

Elizabeth let out a small laugh, relieved to know he was well enough even to jest.

She leaned over to kiss his forehead, and he closed his eyes to savour the touch of her lips. "What day is it?" he asked.

"Friday, I believe," she said. "You have been asleep four days, dearest, if today is included."

"Four days?" Darcy repeated, his voice laced with disbelief.

"Indeed. Your body needed much rest to recover."

“Lord de Clare?”

“He did not survive his injuries.”

Sadness flickered in Darcy’s eyes. He was too good a man to wish for the death of another, even such a one as Lord de Clare. “How does Miss Flint bear under it all?” he asked.

“She copes admirably. The earldom passed to a cousin, but the gentleman knows his duty and will allow her to remain in her home. The new Lord de Clare shall arrive next week.”

“The de Clares were not stripped of their title?” Mr. Darcy’s voice was all astonishment.

“Indeed not. The new earl is friends of people in high places, and therefore must have convinced them to allow him to inherit.”

Too much conversation had exhausted Mr. Darcy, and soon the doctor arrived upon hearing news of his rousing. The doctor examined Mr. Darcy and stated he was much improved, but still required much rest. Elizabeth was made to depart by the lateness of the hour, but promised her love that she would return on the morrow.

## Chapter 23

Two days after he awakened, Darcy determined that he must speak to Elizabeth on a most serious matter. When he said as much to her and asked that Sarah might wait in the corridor, Elizabeth was surprised but agreed to hear him.

“I must know, my dear Elizabeth, if I actually made my proposals to you or if that was the fevered imaginings of a man on the brink of death,” he began.

Elizabeth’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “Do you think that my relations would allow me to attend you so much if I had not agreed to become your wife? Have you thought better of your choice? What prompted these questions?”

“I shall never regret asking you to be my wife, my dearest,” said Darcy earnestly. “Yet, when you accepted, I laid dying. I shall not hold you to what you said, if you agreed to marry me only to soothe me at such a time. I must, if you do love me and wish to wed me, have your agreement now that such stress is not upon you. Even if marrying you would bring me pleasure, I should abhor any thought that you might be made miserable by the union.”

“Be made miserable? Of what can you be speaking? I shall never be miserable with you, my love,” Elizabeth replied with conviction. “You likely shall vex me as I shall you, and our marriage shall not be any easy one for neither of us are easy people, but I shall have, on the whole, no cause to repine. I love you and have loved you for many weeks!”

Darcy sighed in relief and reached for Elizabeth’s hands. She willingly offered them, and he brought them to his lips. “You’ve made me so happy, my love,” he said, kissing the back of each of her hands. “I have been plagued by the thought that you might regret accepting my proposal, that I might have unknowingly pressured you into accepting during a moment of distress.”

Elizabeth’s fine eyes sparkled with merriment. “The fact that you thought I might not have informed you if I did

repine is amusing. I am not one to be pressured into a marriage I do not wish, or else I should have accepted Mr. Collins the morning after the Netherfield Ball.”

Darcy grimaced at the remembrance of the clergyman. “Is he still paying court to Miss Lucas?” he asked.

Elizabeth shook her head in merriment. “He thought my speaking at the inquest, as was published in the papers, most unsuitable for a lady and abused me greatly in Charlotte’s hearing. She scolded him and sent him on the first post back to Kent, with her father’s blessing. Sir William and Charlotte would not have their friends abused in their home.”

The couple started at the knock from Sarah, who was then bid to re-enter the room. Having reaffirmed their betrothal, both halves of the couple decided that Mrs.. Bennet ought now to be told of the upcoming marriage, for she alone had yet to be told. How she might have wailed and suffered if Mr. Darcy were not yet returning to health when the whole became known to her.

Elizabeth might have wished to speak to her mother alone to make such a pronouncement, but Mr. Bennet would make sport by telling her in front of a large part of friends. This decision he regretted, for upon hearing such news, Mrs.. Bennet fell into a swoon. It took several minutes to rouse her, and the doctor had to be summoned afterwards to look her over. Elizabeth could only be glad that Mr. Darcy was not there to hear Mrs.. Bennet when she regained her senses, for she exclaimed most indecorously, “Good gracious! I knew how it would be! Have I not said it for some weeks now? Lord bless me! How rich, how great you will be! What pin-money and carriages you shall have! I am sure Jane’s shall be nothing to it. I am so pleased, so happy, my dear Lizzy!”

Elizabeth was equally mortified and amused by her mother’s outburst. She glanced at her father, who was attempting to conceal his smile behind his hand. The guests present at the dinner looked decidedly uncomfortable, particularly Mr. Mallory. His hopes had long since been dashed, but to learn that Elizabeth would marry another was unpleasant. She was glad that she had never told him, but once

she had considered him in the role of villain. Such would cause great mortification.

Only recently did Colonel Fitzwilliam admit to having placed him about Elizabeth and Jane as a sort of guard, Mr. Mallory being a man in his service. Mr. Darcy had initially agreed to his guarding Elizabeth but had wished his cousin would have chosen a man less charming for the part.

Mrs.. Bennet likely would have gone on for some minutes longer in her exclamations, had the doctor not urged her to silence so he might listen to the beating of her heart. Such violent approbation of the match might have been seen as an ill-omen of what the matron's behaviour around Mr. Darcy would be. Mrs.. Bennet's tendency to swoon, exclaim, and fawn had ceased by the time she next saw her future son-in-law, and she instead regarded him with awe. Mrs.. Bennet did not venture to speak to him, unless it was in her power to offer him any attention or mark her deference for his opinion.

As for Elizabeth's younger sisters, they were quite pleased at the prospect of Elizabeth's marriage, particularly as it would mean such privileges for themselves and the promise of furthering their friendship with Miss Darcy. However, Jane was the most satisfied among her sisters, as she had been aware for quite some time of Elizabeth's feelings for the gentleman and the distress that such love had caused before the lovers finally came to an understanding. To now see her sister as happy as she was a fine thing indeed!

Mr. Mallory's heart was not broken for long, as soon Mr. Bingley introduced the gentleman to Charlotte Lucas. Before Elizabeth and Darcy were wed, Mr. Mallory was officially courting the lady. He found her charming and unaffected, quite different from the ladies he was used to in London.

The only ones disapproving of the match were Lady Catherine and her daughter, Miss de Bourgh, who were as vocal in their disapproval as Mrs.. Bennet had been in her approbation. Mr. Collins, of course, took the side of his patroness, sending several letters to the Bennets beseeching them to call off the betrothal. The unhappy trio even took it



upon themselves to call at Darcy House on the very day when Mr. Darcy was returning from his confinement at the de Clare residence. They were promptly turned away and told Mr. Darcy would not receive them. Soon after, they were informed that he would not again receive them, unless they apologised for the vile words they had chosen to hurl at Elizabeth in their letters. They would not do so and therefore were cut off from all of Darcy's property with no great loss to himself.



Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet disposed of her two most deserving daughters in marriage. Happier still were the daughters and their most deserving husbands, although one might not have known it from Mr. Darcy's demeanour. Never one comfortable in company, he made an attempt to appear easy for the sake of his wife, but the large party that their relations insisted upon made him withdraw into himself. Would that elopement was not looked down upon, he might have suggested that he and Elizabeth flee to Scotland instead of wedding in Hertfordshire.

Thankfully, a wedding is only but a few hours at the beginning of a marriage. As soon as the carriage pulled onto the main road, Mr. Darcy's countenance transformed to one of pure bliss. His new wife noticed and commented upon his improved disposition.

"Can you not guess why it might be so?" he asked her.

"I know that you were not easy among so many people this morning. I daresay you are glad to be away from the crush," his wife answered.

"Perhaps that may be responsible for a portion of my happiness, but the larger part is because I may now be alone with you, dearest Elizabeth."

Elizabeth's cheeks warmed at his words, and she could not meet his eye.

“Do not be embarrassed by my words, dearest. I did not mean them in a lewd way, my love. We have had such little time even to speak since our betrothal became public knowledge. A dozen family members milling about does not create such intimacy as I might like.”

Elizabeth, despite still feeling embarrassed, gathered her courage and took her husband’s hand, leaning on him. “It has been a long few months,” she agreed. “I am glad it is over and that we are wed.”

“You are not saddened at leaving your family?” he asked.

“A little, perhaps, but as there is fortune enough to make the expenses of travel unimportant, the distance is not great evil. We shall often be in London — so you promised me — and an easy distance from there to Meryton.”

“Indeed,” said Darcy as he gathered her in his arms. “And you may have your family as often as you wish to any of our houses.”

“Not too often,” she replied. “I believe a woman can see her family too frequently or be settled too near them.”

“You speak of the Bingleys?”

“I do. I believe they shall not be at Netherfield more than a twelvemonth. Even their easy tempers must have their limits.”

“Should that be the case, I shall look for estates for let in Derbyshire or the neighbouring counties,” promised Darcy. “How happy it would be for your sister to be within a day’s travel.”

“Let us speak no more of my family — although I agree with you. Where are we bound?” Elizabeth asked.

“Darcy House,” was Darcy’s answer. “I thought it best not to spend our first night of marriage in an inn. We shall go to Pemberley in a few days, but there is no hurry to go thither.”

Such words again made Elizabeth blush and Darcy apologised yet again, conscious of his bride’s innocence. She,

however, would not have her husband watch his speech so around her, and decided that she ought not to be missish with her own husband. She leaned further towards him, closing the gap between them with a light kiss.

Darcy's reserve was broken with just this action, and he passionately responded to her advances. His sudden ardour caught her by surprise, but she soon found herself melting into his embrace and enjoying his caresses. With a growing sense of fascination, she explored her new husband's body, her curiosity and desire taking over. She traced her fingers over his broad shoulders and down his back, feeling the strength of his muscles under her touch.

A moment later, she was unsure what had happened, for she was soon seated alone with her husband across the carriage from her, looking out the window with evident disinterest.

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked.

Darcy turned to her, his face softening into a slight smile. "You did nothing wrong, my love. I would not have you think that you did. I just..." he searched for the words to express what he needed to say. "I need to calm myself, lest I be unable to wait until London."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "Oh," she replied, "I believe I understand." She was not certain she did, despite the talks that her mother and aunt had given her, but she had some notion that she soon would know. Regardless, all that mattered was that nothing was amiss.

For the rest of the carriage ride, Mr. and Mrs.. Darcy merely spoke. Mr. Darcy briefed Elizabeth on the background of the various servants she would encounter that evening, before they moved on to discuss the events of the wedding breakfast.

"I did find it curious that Mary danced a great deal," said Mr. Darcy.

"I believe once the colonel requested her hand for the first, others began to see her as a desirable partner," explained

Elizabeth.

“I also believe I saw Mr. Mallory and Charlotte slip out onto the terrace together. I think an engagement may be announced soon. I must say, I like him much more when he is not chasing after you,” said her husband.

Elizabeth frowned slightly. “He was guarding me, dearest. He had to ‘chase after me’ as you put it. He was naught but a gentleman at all times, regardless of any feelings he may have had. Let us forget that now. He shall make Charlotte a fine husband.”

“Even so, I still have not forgiven the Colonel for placing such a one as your guard. Had I been able to choose your guard, I might have chosen someone like Mr. Garron,” said Darcy with a wry smile.

Elizabeth had to laugh at the image. Mr. Garron was a friend of Lord Barlow’s who was wider than he was tall and shared Mr. Hurst’s affinity for drinking more than he ought. At least, that was the persona he portrayed, but Elizabeth had recently learned that often he only pretended to doze in order to learn what people might say when they thought themselves safe. This method was very successful, especially since the ones overheard tended to forget he had even been present. When found out, often they turned on each other, assuming the other had been indiscreet.

The carriage ride was smooth, and they arrived in London with plenty of daylight left. Upon their alighting, they were immediately welcomed by the butler of Darcy House and ushered inside to the foyer, where the entire household staff had congregated. During her previous visits, she had encountered a few individuals, but she had not realised how many servants she would be mistress of, and this only at Darcy House.

Thankfully, soon the staff all returned to their duties, leaving the newlyweds to themselves. Darcy took her hand and led her to the stairs “Come, Elizabeth, I have ordered the cook to prepare a light meal. If you wish to refresh yourself, it should be ready in a half hour.”

Overwhelmed by the events of the day, Elizabeth nodded wearily and accepted his offer to show her the way to her chambers. Darcy opened the door with a flourish before stepping aside to let his new wife enter. The room was beautifully decorated and spacious, featuring a large four-poster bed and a balcony that provided a view of the garden. “I do hope you like it,” said Darcy. “I had to assume your preferences, as the room has not been redone since my parents’ wedding.”

“It is beautiful,” she replied. “I like it very well.”

Darcy smiled. “I am glad, yet also do know you have the authority to alter anything according to your preference. You should be comfortable in your chambers. Now, if you excuse me, I shall leave you to freshen up.”

A moment later, Sarah appeared with a dinner dress from Elizabeth’s trousseau. The maid carefully laid the exquisite garment on the bed before informing her that the bath was ready. Elizabeth thanked her maid and allowed her to help her undress.

Slipping into the warm water, Elizabeth sighed contentedly. After a day full of emotions, she cherished this moment of peace. The bath was exactly what she needed, and she luxuriated in the feeling of it soothing her tired muscles. Yet, she did not tarry long, for she knew her husband would be waiting for her.

Elizabeth rose to her feet and Sarah draped a towel around her, then helped her prepare for the evening ahead. The dress she had opted for was an ivory silk gown with delicate lace sleeves and a full skirt that flowed gracefully down to the ground. Her figure was flattered by the dress’s simple cut, making her feel beautiful.

Upon descending the stairs, Elizabeth was met by Darcy in the drawing room, who was waiting for her dressed in his evening attire. Sitting down to eat, Elizabeth couldn’t help but feel the warmth of her husband’s admiration as his eyes lingered on her.

A delicious meal was had as the cook prepared a variety of dishes to showcase his culinary skills to the new mistress. The wine was a particular pleasure, as Darcy had specially chosen a fine vintage for the occasion. The conversation naturally progressed from the wedding to more general topics, as they sat enjoying their meal together.

Dessert being served made both parties aware that the meal was drawing to a close. The conversation became slow and filled with awkward silences. They were both reluctant to leave the dinner table before the other, not wanting to seem too eager for what was to follow. Only when the servants arrived to take away the dishes did they stir from their seats. Elizabeth led the way upstairs, and Darcy followed closely behind, his heart racing with anticipation.

Upon reaching the door of Elizabeth's chamber, he requested, "My dearest Elizabeth, may I join you in half an hour? Is that enough time?"

A smile played on Elizabeth's lips as she turned to face her husband. "Half an hour should be more than enough time, my love," she replied, her voice soft and reassuring.

Darcy's cheeks flushed with excitement and gratitude. In this moment, he felt more blessed than ever and was eager for what was ahead. He placed a gentle kiss on his wife's forehead and then made his way to his chambers.

When Elizabeth shut the door behind her, Sarah was laying out a pale blue nightdress for her to wear. Sarah aided her in donning the delicate, nearly sheer garment.

"Sarah," Elizabeth said tentatively, "does it hurt as much as they say?"

Sarah, who had married Mr. Witting only the week before, considered before answering, "I didn't hurt much at all for me. Everyone said it would, but there was just a little blood is all. I think it depends on the person, perhaps."

Elizabeth nodded, grateful for Sarah's reassurance.

"The master loves you, Miss." Sarah caught her mistake and laughed, "I mean, Madam. I do not think you

ought to worry overly much.”

Elizabeth smiled upon hearing Sarah’s kind words. She knew that Darcy loved her deeply, and she loved him in return. Shortly after, Sarah left with a small smile of reassurance.

Elizabeth’s heart raced with excitement and nerves as she sat on the edge of the bed. When Elizabeth heard the knock on the door that adjoined the master’s and mistress’s chambers, her heart skipped a beat, and she quickly stood up. As she approached the door, she hesitated for a moment, taking a deep breath to steady herself.

Her husband stood before her, dressed in a simple white nightshirt, his eyes betraying a hint of nervousness. Elizabeth felt a smile light up her face at the sight of him. “Good evening, William,” she said softly, stepping aside to let him in.

Darcy walked into the room, closing the door behind him. His eyes wandered over his wife, filled with both wonder and desire, as he admired her beauty. “You look stunning, Elizabeth,” he said, his voice low.

“Thank you,” she replied, blushing at his words.

Darcy bridged the space and tenderly cupped Elizabeth’s cheek. She melted into his touch, savouring the feeling of his warm palm against her skin and letting out a soft sigh. Their lips met, and at first, it was a gentle touch. But as the kiss deepened, Elizabeth’s senses were overwhelmed by the taste of his lips and the scent of his cologne. The passion between them was undeniable, and as they broke apart, Elizabeth felt Darcy’s strong arms wrap around her, holding her tightly.

“Are you ready, Elizabeth?” Darcy asked with a voice full of tenderness and concern.

As Elizabeth nodded in agreement, excitement and anticipation filled her heart.

“Just tell me if you need me to stop,” he whispered, before leading her to the bed.

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I also would like to acknowledge that I am not British, so if there are errors in the book, I apologize.

Please, if you enjoyed this book, leave a review. A five star review does a great deal to help this book reach others and support my writing of future books. Thank you.



## *Books By This Author*

### **Heir Apparent**

What if Jane had been born a boy? James Bennet takes on many of his father's duties, checks his mother and sisters, improves Longbourn's income, and more. All of these changes result in a very different tale. Will the road to happily ever after be smoother without the threat of the entail looming so very large?

### **Such Happy Manners**

How would the story of Pride and Prejudice be altered if Mr. Wickham had been a good man? Instead of becoming a scoundrel who regularly attempts to elope with teenage girls, Mr. Wickham studies the law and begins to work as an attorney alongside Mr. Phillips. He even becomes engaged to one of the Bennets. How will Mr. Darcy and the rest of the Netherfield party react to this altered Wickham? Without lies altering Elizabeth's opinion of Mr. Darcy, will they more easily come to understand each other?

### **Arrogance And Inheritance**

If a different Mr. Collins was the heir to Longbourn, what would have happened?

Gregory Collins is a good man, albeit one in trade. He is not handsome or poised, but he is polite and kind. He is precisely the sort of man the two elder Bennet daughters had always assumed their meagre dowries would enable them to marry. While becoming the wife of someone active in trade would be a lowering of status temporarily, the security of their family would be ensured. When Mr. Collins comes to understand the value of the eldest two Bennet daughters and considers if it would be advantageous to everyone if he married one, how will Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy react in the face of competition?