

JULIANA ABBOTT



Guletide
PROMISE

A CHRISTMAS MASQUERADE

Yuletide Promise

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

Juliana Abbott

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About the Book

At London's esteemed Twelfth Night Masquerade Ball, Christmas brings miracles as young people in disguise find love unhindered by prejudice. Elizabeth Bennet secures an invitation, hoping for her own magical moment. Can love truly blossom without seeing each other's faces?

Her dreams come true when a captivating masked gentleman sweeps her off her feet with moonlit dances, passionate conversations, and a secret ice-skating rendezvous. Unfortunately, fate separates them, but they pledge to reunite at the same ball the following year.

While Elizabeth attempts to find her mysterious stranger, her efforts are frustratingly fruitless. But the real obstacle in her quest is her growing affection to a certain irksome gentleman from the north, Mr. Darcy, who, despite his vexing manners, increasingly occupies her thoughts.

Things take a complicated turn when the masked stranger finds Elizabeth, forcing her to make an impossible choice between the man of her dreams and the one she can't stop thinking about. Will Elizabeth's heart lead her to the right decision, or will she forever wonder, "What if?"

Yuletide Promise is a sweet and clean variation of Jane Austen's timeless classic, *Pride and Prejudice*, and it's above 60000 words long.

Chapter One

Elizabeth

Cheapside, London

4th January 1811

The floorboards creaked beneath Elizabeth Bennet's feet as she descended the steep, narrow staircase of her aunt and uncle's London home. Her hand brushed against the festive garlands strung along the banister on Christmas Eve. The lovely festive smell had all but faded. She sighed deeply, wishing the Christmas Season lasted longer than it did, for it felt like it had hardly begun.

Or perhaps it was because she had been so very busy this year. She'd spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day at home, with her family. However, on the morning of Boxing Day, she'd travelled to London to visit her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner. Jane and Mary had gone off to visit her Uncle Phillips' parents in Devon, leaving only her parents and younger sisters at Longbourn.

Ever since her arrival, she'd been kept busy by her aunt and cousins. Every day, there were things to do, people to visit, and shops to frequent. Nights were filled with dinners at her uncle's Cheapside home or their friends' homes. Indeed, as much as she loved London and Christmas, she was looking forward to returning home to Hertfordshire.

Christmas at Longbourn was not necessarily quiet or reflective, but lovely, nonetheless. Especially when it snowed, which she knew from her sister Mary's latest letter that it had. London was covered in fresh snow as well, but it was not like in the country, the carriage wheels soon churned the blanket of white into a rather muddy mire. Seeing fields covered in thick snow filled her heart with a joy that could not compare to snow in London.

“Cousin Elizabeth,” her little cousin, Henrietta, called from the drawing room. “The yule log is still burning, can you believe it?” The young girl sat on her knees in front of the fireplace where orange and yellow flames flickered around the yule log. To say it was holding on for dear life was not an understatement for the once mighty log had indeed almost been consumed by the fire, another sign that the season was ending.

“It is,” she said. “Your father selected a good one this year.” As she looked into the flames, she thought of her own home. Their log would have long burnt out. Not many homes had a fireplace large enough to fit a log that would burn all through the twelve days of Christmas. One of her mother’s chief complaints about Longbourn was the lack of space.

However, such worries were swiftly forgotten when her mother was reminded that Longbourn—which she considered so very small, could be taken from her the moment her husband died. Then, her attitude changed, and one could be led to think Longbourn was the grandest home in all of England. She smiled when Henrietta turned her head, a frown on her forehead.

“Harriet! What are you doing?” Henrietta called and leapt to her feet. Her dress, a deep blue gown with elaborate bows affixed to the sleeves and around the hem, crackled with the sudden movement. Elizabeth turned in time to see the youngest Gardiner girl picking up the greenery they’d arranged around the house and placing it in a woven basket. She stretched on her toes to reach an arrangement of festive leaves woven with dried apples and oranges displayed on the small table next to the armchair where her uncle liked to read.

“We must remove all the decorations before Twelfth Night!” the little girl called with alarm. “If we do not, then Lady Fraser said we will have bad luck. One day for every leaf that remains! We must burn them. Help me!”

The girl, all of seven years of age, sounded truly alarmed, and Elizabeth felt for her.

Her sister, Henrietta, on the other hand, was incensed. “You silly girl. It isn’t even Twelfth Night yet. That’s tomorrow. Put it back!”

“No!” the child replied sharply and stomped her foot. “I do not want bad luck.”

Elizabeth rose from her chair and crouched in front of her cousin, cupping her face with her hand. “Harriet, Henrietta is correct. It’s not Twelfth Night yet and we will have all the time in the world to remove the garlands tomorrow. I promise you. Don’t you want another evening surrounded by all the pretty decorations? Look at these ribbons,” she said, pointing to one of the golden ribbons tied around the greenery in the girl’s basket.

Harriet puckered her lips but nodded. “I do. They are ever so pretty,” she said.

“They are very pretty,” a voice said, followed by a renewed footfall. “But we do not say ever so. That is what the commoners say, and you are a little lady.”

“Like you?” Harriet said as Lady Elspeth Fraser, Aunt Gardiner’s dear friend, entered the room.

“One day you will be. If you speak properly,” the lady said, patting Harriet’s head. Elizabeth rose to her full height, inhaling the odour of the lady’s strong vetiver and orange blossom perfume. It suited her, she thought. It was as sweet and powerful as the person wearing it. Elizabeth hadn’t met Lady Fraser before this week, but she’d heard of her often over the years.

Aunt Gardiner and Lady Fraser—or Miss Elspeth Markham, as she had been called then—had been childhood friends and kept in touch all their lives even when Miss Markham married a Scottish laird and moved to faraway Glasgow.

Now, she and her daughter, Morag, had come to visit the family for a few days before starting the long journey back to Scotland in the morning. Elizabeth had to admit that having Lady Fraser and Morag around had been quite lovely,

especially as young Morag was her age and she'd temporarily filled the spot of close confidant and companion in Jane's absence. Not that Jane could ever be replaced.

"Mama do not trouble her, she is just a child," Morag said now as she swept into the room, all elegance and allure. She was a beautiful young woman with dark hair and eyes similar to Elizabeth's own. Although unlike Elizabeth's, Morag's complexion was pale as she stayed mostly indoors. Or perhaps the weather in Scotland simply didn't lend itself to the long walks Elizabeth so adored back home.

"One is never too young to learn to speak properly," Lady Fraser said while Aunt Gardiner walked past her and winked at Elizabeth. She knew well that her friend was a lady with high expectations of those around her. However, she also had a kind heart. As if to show it off, she pinched Harriet's nose.

"You are a little lady in the making, however. I can tell. Soon enough, you will be invited to grand balls and events as well. You'll break many hearts, I predict. So will you," she said to Henrietta, who shook her head.

"Me? No, I want nothing to do with any boys," she said, rumpling her nose. Aunt Gardiner chuckled at this.

"I am glad to hear it, but I fear you shall change your mind soon enough," she said. "Another five or six years, and you will trouble us about your coming out ball."

Lady Fraser turned her eyes to her daughter then. "Ah, I remember your coming out ball. It was quite the affair." Then, as if remembering Elizabeth was there, she looked at her.

"Did you have a ball? I cannot remember," she asked but Elizabeth shrugged.

"A small one. There are five of us after all," she said, and Lady Fraser smiled.

"Indeed. I admire your parents. It takes nerves of steel to raise one daughter, let alone five," she said, and Elizabeth had to suppress a giggle. Nerves of steel were not what her mother possessed but she did not want to tell the kind lady that.

“I dare say my mother is keen for us to be married,” she said instead, and Lady Fraser nodded.

“I can imagine. And there is no better way to find a husband than at a ball. Margaret, have you told the girl?”

She blinked at Aunt Gardiner who wrung her hands in front of her lap, her eyes darting around the room from one woman to the next.

“I am uncertain if I can accept your offer, Elspeth,” she said, the hesitation in her tone betraying her true apprehension about whatever it was the women had discussed.

“Of course, you can. The costumes will just go to waste otherwise. Besides, nobody in their right mind turns down an invitation to the Earl of Matlock’s Twelfth Night ball,” she said and nodded at Elizabeth with her eyebrows raised high.

Elizabeth’s interest was piqued at once and she looked at her friend. “The ball you told me about yesterday, Morag?”

“Yes, the same,” her friend confirmed. Elizabeth wetted her lips. She was usually not bothered about balls. They were a pleasant enough pastime, but she’d been to so many she had no particular desire to attend another. Except for this one. And not so much because she wanted to go to this much talked about Earl’s ball. It was because the ball in question was a masquerade ball—and she adored a masked ball more than anything else.

“You see? Eliza wants to go,” Lady Fraser said. “She could meet an eligible gentleman there. Of course, you’d have to pretend to be Morag and myself.”

“And that is why I am in two minds about accepting,” her aunt protested.

“But why, Mrs Gardiner?” Morag said then. “It is a masked ball, so nobody will know if you are my mother or Eliza is me. Why not enjoy yourself? And besides, you’d never get an invitation otherwise.”

“Morag, where are your manners?” Lady Fraser chided her daughter, but Aunt Gardiner waved a hand dismissively.

“She is quite correct. In the eyes of Lord Matlock, we are of no consequence and not worthy of receiving an invitation.”

“All the more reason to take this one. I insist. You can have my costume, I already told you. Morag and I each brought ours with us, not expecting we’d have to leave before the ball,” she said in a regretful tone. It was true that Lady Fraser had intended to stay for another fortnight, but her husband, the Laird, had slipped and broken his leg and urgently requested her company.

Elizabeth tapped her toe in anticipation. “It may well be a very enjoyable time.” She meant for the statement to sound nonchalant, as she didn’t want her aunt to know that she really wanted to go.

“You will look lovely in my costume, Maggie. I was going to be an ice queen. And Morag’s costume will be a perfect fit for Eliza.”

Elizabeth smiled broadly at Morag, her new friend had already told her all about the outfit, and Elizabeth could hardly contain her excitement at the prospect of attending the ball in the elaborate attire. Morag had intended to dress as Beira, the Scottish Queen of Winter—or a hag, depending on which story one believed. Whatever it was, the costume was spectacular with its beautiful elaborate gown and flowing cape. Morag had even had a wig made, which she’d modelled for Elizabeth, before she’d been informed she would not get to actually wear it.

“I dare say you shall make a splendid Beira. I am glad we did not go with my first idea, which was to dress as her when she was old. I would much rather have you be the younger version and show off your beauty,” Morag said with a smile.

Elizabeth felt her cheeks blush, uncomfortable with compliments about her looks.

“You’ll have to speak with a Scottish accent to do her proud,” Morag added.

“You are a lady, Morag,” Lady Fraser said, “and high-born ladies do not have accents.”

“Not even a wee one?” Morag said, with a laugh.

Her mother gave her a stern look and then broke into a smile.

“You’ll have to teach me,” Elizabeth replied, and Morag took her by the hand.

“I intend to. We won’t leave for a few hours, so that is plenty of time. I’ll show you how to put the costume on,” she said eagerly before pausing. “That is, if it’s settled that you are going.”

Three sets of eyes rested on her aunt, who bit her bottom lip so hard Elizabeth saw the blood rush back to them when she released her teeth.

“I suppose it won’t do any harm. It’ll be interesting to see how the other half live. And it is Twelfth Night after all—what better day to be merry and dance?”

Elizabeth beamed and rushed to her aunt, hugging her tight.

“Thank you, Aunt. We shall have a splendid time!” And then, when Morag excitedly took her by the hand and led her to her chamber to try on the costume Elizabeth had secretly coveted, her heart thundered with excitement from what she was certain would be a splendid ball indeed.

Chapter Two

Darcy

Matlock House, London

5th January 1811

“... most certainly dance the quadrille with Anne. She has her heart set on it, Fitzwilliam,” his aunt’s voice hummed beside him as Darcy stood and inspected the view outside his uncle’s grand London home. The streets were covered in a fresh layer of snow, and Darcy imagined himself running his hand along the railings, flicking the snow off into the road while his hand grew red and cold.

He’d always loved sweeping snow from surfaces when he was a boy, and it was a habit he still enjoyed to this day. There was something enjoyable about methodically clearing surfaces in such a manner. He did not particularly care for Christmas these days, but was happy to retain his small childhood pleasure.

Snowflakes danced in front of the dim lamps on the road outside. The lamps, hardly strong enough to fight the dark, made the snowflakes glow in a manner that was almost ethereal. Darcy wasn’t usually someone who notices such things, but tonight, he could not help but wish he could sit in his armchair back at Pemberley and watch the peaceful scene outside. It would have made for a much more pleasant evening than in his current circumstances.

“Fitzwilliam?” his aunt called again, a hint of indignation in her voice. “Will you pay attention? I told you, Anne ...”

“Adores the idea of dancing the quadrille with me, yes,” Darcy said as he turned to his aunt, a forced smile on his lips. He knew very well that Anne de Bourgh, his cousin, and future wife—at least if his aunt had her way—had as much interest in dancing the quadrille with him as he had in dancing with her.

Which was none at all.

However, he was not going to tell his aunt that.

“I will find her in time, you can rest assured.”

This appeared to appease the older woman, and her face relaxed. At least as much of her face as Darcy could see. As every year, the Twelfth Night ball was once again a masked one, and to mark the occasion, his aunt had chosen a rather elaborate silver and white frosted mask that concealed most of her face, save for her lips which were pressed together in a narrow line, showing off her perpetual state of vexation.

“Be sure you do,” she said, patting his hand before disappearing into the crowd.

Darcy let out a puff of air and walked across the room, avoiding revellers attired in a wide range of costumes. In keeping with the winter theme, the ball was teeming with snow queens, kings, and animals such as hares and foxes.

He leaned against the Chinese hanging paper near the entrance hall, his eyes taking in the scenery around him.

The grand ballroom in his uncle’s London home was lit with dozens of gleaming chandeliers, each holding countless candles that bathed the room in a warm, golden glow. It stood in stark contrast to the frigid cold outside.

Lining the ballroom’s high walls were draped silks and velvets in deep winter hues of midnight blue, silver, and ivory. He glanced up and shook his head, noting that this year his aunt, the Countess of Matlock, had even included glass icicles that hung from the chandeliers, put there no doubt by a poor footman. He could almost see the man swaying on a ladder as he tried to place the icicles. Had anyone even noticed them besides Darcy?

He shook his head, wishing he hadn’t been made to come here. He’d attended these balls every year for as long as he could remember, and while half of Town coveted invitations, Darcy would much rather have given his away. He was needed at Pemberley. His sister needed him, he knew this. Yet, he’d given in to the familial pressure to attend. He didn’t really know why. It was a masked ball, thus, it stood to reason that

nobody would know whether he attended or not. Aside from his own family, of course.

“You look rather despondent for being at so merry a ball, sir,” a voice called out then, and he braced himself, expecting one of his aunts. However, to his relief, it was neither.

“Anne,” he said, pleased to see his cousin appear. Dressed in an elaborate white feathered outfit complete with a white cloak and a matching mask, his cousin placed a finger in front of her mouth.

“Not Anne,” she hissed under her breath. “I am Sybil, the Winter Swan.”

“Of course, I beg your pardon, Sybil,” Darcy replied, amused by how seriously his cousin took her disguise. Then again, this ball was one of the few occasions his cousin had to be free to an extent from her mother for a time. Of course, Lady Catherine knew what her daughter was dressed as, but there were so many people it was easy for Anne to slip away. And slipping away was exactly what his cousin wanted that night, this he knew from their earlier conversations.

“That is better. I came here to warn you that Mother is determined to make us dance the quadrille. She swore that you are keen to dance with me.”

Darcy let out a chuckle. “Is that so? She assured me I would break your heart if I did not dance it with you.”

Anne rolled her blue eyes and shook her head, a hint of the feistiness she’d of late possessed shining through.

“I shall survive even if we do not share one dance tonight, Fi ... Boreas,” she said, using the name of the character he’d chosen for tonight’s festivities—Boreas, God of the North Wind. “Indeed, I already have agreed to dance several dances with a rather handsome fawn.” She smiled broadly, and Darcy felt a rush of excitement.

“Is the fawn who I think he is?” he asked, leaning forward as he dropped his voice. “A certain Baron?”

“Shh,” Anne said, but this time she nodded eagerly. “Edward is going to speak to Uncle Matlock tonight regarding

making an offer. He feels our uncle will smooth the way with my mother. Given how determined she is to make a match for the both of us.”

Darcy rose to his full height again, though he kept his voice low. “I should think a baron is a more desirable match than a mere member of the gentry,” he said, though he had to admit he didn’t enjoy feeling beneath someone else’s touch, though, of course, it was true. Edward Martell, or Baron Brunswick to use his full title, was a more illustrious choice of husband for his cousin. He wasn’t as rich as Darcy, but he was well enough off to be comparable. What set him apart was his title, of course. And that, Darcy knew, would ultimately be what mattered to his aunt.

“I am certain all will be well. We must only get through this evening without her setting us up.”

Anne nodded eagerly, the feathers she’d placed in her hair as part of the attire swaying back and forth.

“That is why I am here. I shall keep to the left side of the ballroom for the rest of the night if you stay here. That way, we will never be close enough for her to arrange a dance. I think the less she sees us together, the more likely she will let her preconceived notion about our suitability go once—”

Darcy raised a hand, stopping her.

“Naturally. Let us do just that sooner than later. I do not want her to catch us either.” Anne nodded and was about to slip away when he called her back.

“Sybil?”

She looked over her shoulder, head dipped to one side.

“Yes?”

“I am happy for you. He seems like a lovely fellow, your fawn.”

“He is.” Her face, or what was visible of it, lit up, and she departed, more floating than walking.

Darcy took a deep breath. The scent of pine mingled with the aroma of the dried oranges, and suddenly Darcy had a

strong craving for the wassail bowl these smells reminded him of. He looked around and spotted the long banquet table near the front door upon which an array of drinks and sweetmeats rested. He pushed himself off the wall and made his way to the table, past the fireplace where flames emitting the sweet cedar wood aroma danced.

Mixed with the orchestra's festive melodies and the thrill of laughter that filled the air, the atmosphere was indeed jolly—as one would expect at one of London's best-known and loved Twelfth Night balls.

Darcy filled a cup at the table with the spiced ale and inspected the many treats that filled the space. Mincemeat pies, sugared almonds, and spiced cakes were piled high. His stomach rumbled, but he knew he would not be able to take a bite. Not with so many people all around.

He wasn't the sort of person who enjoyed a crowd, and this ball in particular was hard on him. His mother and father had adored the Christmas sand since their deaths, he hadn't felt the same magic. He did his best for Georgiana, but it wasn't like it had been. In fact, if it were up to him he'd be in his study, reading a good book with a glass of brandy in hand.

Alas, he was here and there was no way of getting out of it. This ball was an obligation he had to fulfil for the family, like it or not.

At least he would not have to worry about Anne anymore. If all went well, she'd be married soon enough, and his Aunt Catherine would finally let go of the ridiculous notion that Anne and he were meant to be, based on a supposed promise she'd made his mother. Indeed, he'd always thought it rather odd that his mother never mentioned such an arrangement to him. Especially not when—

“Fitzwilliam!” His aunt called out, paying no mind to the mystery that was supposed to be part of a masquerade ball. He spun and spotted Anne standing a few paces away, her mouth curled downward.

“Anne tells me that she's already promised the quadrille to another gentleman,” his aunt stated rather incredulously.

“So I have stopped her so you can dance the cotillion, which is next. Come now,” she said and took Darcy by the wrist.

He saw Anne’s face and knew she didn’t want to dance with him any more than he did. Then, from the corner of his eye he spotted the reason. The gentlemen she was truly interested in stood a little to their left, two glasses of Negus in hand and his gaze fixed on the scene unfolding before him with a concerned expression. Darcy gently withdrew his arm.

“I am afraid I cannot, Aunt Catherine. I already promised the cotillion to another lady,” he said with as much confidence as he could muster. His aunt blinked rapidly.

“Another lady? And who, pray, would that be?”

Darcy gulped, not having expected this challenge. His eyes darted around the room. Everyone in his vicinity was either already paired up or in conversation. Then, he saw her. The solution to his problems.

Walking into the ballroom beside a tall, slender woman dressed as yet another snow queen, was a most dazzling young woman. Clad in a flowing icy blue, grey, and silver gown that hung in layers to give her an almost ethereal appearance, she stood out to him at once.

Her greyish-brown hair—a wig, he assumed—was braided and hung down her side to her waist while crystals had been woven into the wig to sparkle as she moved beneath the chandeliers. In one hand, she carried a staff decorated with ribbons that matched her clothing while an orb dangled from her narrow waist. A large cloak waved behind her.

Who was she meant to be, he wondered? Another snow queen? No, he didn’t think so. There was something about her, the grey streaks in her hair indicated age. Yet, she was clearly a young woman. His eyes fell to her hands, and he saw that one of her gloves had been made to look as though her skin was wrinkled.

Then, a smile came to his face. Suddenly, he knew just who she was meant to be. Beira, the Scottish Queen of Winter. Although not a very well-known mythical creature, Darcy

knew all about her thanks to his Scottish governess who loved to entertain him with tales about the woman often depicted as an old hag.

Tasked with blanketing Scotland in snow and frost, Beira was known to start out as a lovely young maiden in spring, only to age rapidly as the year turned. By winter, she had become an old crone, representing the year's harshest season. The stories had other, less pleasant aspects, but he chose to ignore those for now. Suffice to say, the young lady before him had cleverly captured the story in her costume.

"I am dancing with Beira," he said to his aunt without taking his eyes off the young woman.

"Beira?" his aunt asked, irritated.

"Indeed," Darcy said, and without waiting another moment, he made his way toward the woman who'd captured his attention. As he stopped before her, he caught the aroma of her bergamot perfume, and instantly a smile materialised on his lips, as he adored the scent.

"Lady Beira," he said and bowed before her. The young woman's lovely dark eyes turned to him, and her lips curled into a smile.

"You knew my costume at once," she said in a faintly Scottish accent.

"I have a great interest in mythology and legends. The glove gave it away, half old and half young, just like the Beira in the stories. Well, in some of them anyhow," he said, surprising himself with the ease he spoke to her.

She blinked, her lashes long and beautiful as they framed her eyes.

"Anyhow, would you do me the honour of dancing with me?" he added quickly. Her lips parted in surprise, but she nodded and took his proffered hand. And then, Darcy led this mysterious young lady to the dance floor, past his aunt who glared daggers at the both of him, and past Anne, who nodded her head in encouragement.

And when the music came and he held this stranger's hand in anticipation for their dance, Darcy felt a warmth flood him he hadn't felt in many years.

Chapter Three

Elizabeth

Elizabeth stepped onto the dance floor with the masked stranger, her lips slightly parted as she looked up at him. The man intrigued her from the moment he stepped toward her, all confidence and certainty with a smooth, deep, faintly northern-accented voice. However, what had truly captured her interest was that he'd recognised her costume immediately. She hadn't even heard of Beira until Morag told her the stories. Yet this young man had known who she was at once.

And he'd asked her to dance before she'd even had a chance to take off her cape. Who would have thought that she, Elizabeth Bennet, would be asked to dance at one of London's most renowned balls without having to so much as take a turn about the room. She wasn't the sort of silly girl who needed attention or to be admired, not the way Lydia or Kitty craved such adoration. Still, there was no denying that it boosted her confidence.

As they made their way to the dance floor, she examined the stranger closely, taking in his costume. Like hers, his costume was rather loose and kept in white and icy blue tones. His face was hidden behind a false beard. Tiny sparkling gems had been affixed to the beard to represent ice. The upper portion of his face was hidden behind a simple black mask that shimmered as they moved under the grandiose chandelier above them.

"I hope you do not mind me asking you to dance when you've just arrived," he said and turned at the dance floor's edge, placing his hand on hers. She felt his strength as he held her, another sign of his confidence.

"Is it not the purpose of a ball to dance?" she replied as they fell into step with the other dancers. The man was a good dancer though she noted a certain stiffness in his movements, as though he were a little rigid. Did this speak to his character as well?

“It is, but I am afraid I was rather blunt.” He leaned forward. “I will confess, you saved me.”

She dipped her head to one side. “How so?”

He looked over his shoulder toward an older woman who stood at the edge of the dancefloor, her arms crossed as though she were displeased. Her right foot tapped against the polished wooden floor and her eyes were cast upon them.

“I was about to be pushed into a dance with a most unwilling lady,” he confessed and her ego, which had received a boost just minutes earlier, deflated somewhat.

“Oh, I see,” she said, feeling foolish for having thought herself special enough to be asked to dance.

“My lady, I didn’t mean to offend. I only wanted to explain my rudeness. Although now I appear to have made an even bigger blunder. I am ...” he shook his head and mumbled under his breath, chiding himself. This in turn made Elizabeth’s momentary upset evaporate.

“I did not mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I was a little foolish to assume ...” her words trailed off as an awkwardness descended between them. Eager not to let this stand she cleared her throat. So what if he had an ulterior motive to ask her to dance? They were still dancing and there was no reason they should not enjoy themselves.

“Let us not ruin the atmosphere, sir. It is such a wonderful evening, and we are at one of the finest balls in London. We ought to enjoy ourselves.”

He looked down at her, and the corners of his lips turned up beneath his beard.

“You are quite right. Do you come to this ball with regularity?”

Grateful for the change in subject Elizabeth almost told him this was her first time, forgetting that she was supposed to be Morag. At the last moment, she remembered and nodded without meeting his eye. Lying did not come naturally to her, but at times, it was necessary.

“I adore masquerade balls,” she said instead. “Do you?”

He let out a puff of air and dropped his shoulders slightly. “I come to this one every year. I must.” There was a distinct lack of enthusiasm in his voice when he spoke. Why? She wondered why he would be here if he didn’t want to be.

“You are rather elaborately dressed for someone who does not wish to attend balls such as this.”

He smiled at this. “I have a younger sister who is enthused in helping me choose a costume. She is too young to attend herself, but she loves little more than to make sure I have a suitable costume.”

The warmth with which he spoke about his sister touched her. There was genuine love in every one of his words and a longing for her own sisters ignited inside her.

“I can understand that. I too have sisters and when they were young they liked to do the same, although they enjoyed decorating my face more than dressing me up.”

He dipped his head to the side. “Decorate your face?”

“With burnt cork to draw shapes on my face, or with my mother’s lip pomade. Not that she was terribly enthusiastic about these activities, but I could never deny my younger sisters their joy. They have outgrown this phase, which is fortune.”

He chuckled and spun her around as the tempo picked up. “I am glad my sister has forgone a desire to draw on me.”

The two smiled at one another, and Elizabeth felt the ease return between them.

“I do rather like your costume. I think my sister would admire it too. She liked the story of Beira as well,” he said. “Have you always had an interest in mythology?”

She gulped, not wanting to admit the truth. “I enjoy reading all manner of folktales. The tale of Beira is one I only recently became acquainted with,” she replied, glad to have found yet another way to twist the truth so it was not quite a lie.

“As do I, the Greek mythology in particular, as you can perhaps tell by my costume.” His voice had a challenge, and she quickly took in his attire again. He was a winter entity of some sort and, judging by the small wings attached to the back of his costume, a god. But what sort?

“I am afraid I am not certain. Pray, what is your costume?” she asked and at once, his eyes grew wide.

“You don’t recognise me?” he said, the jest in his voice as he gave an amused shake of the head.

“I must beg your pardon, but I do not. Although I suspect you are a fellow deity,” she said with a smile. The stranger chuckled and nodded his head.

“Indeed, I am. I am Boreas, the Greek God of the North Wind.”

“Of course, I should have recognised you, Boreas. How foolish of me,” she said unsure why she felt so oddly giddy. Perhaps it was the glass of cognac she’d shared with Morag before her friend had to depart.

“We are quite the fitting pair,” he said and the warmth she’d felt intensified in her stomach. “May I ask, from whence does the Queen of Winter hail? Scotland, I assume.” Boreas asked, with a playful glint in his eye.

“From the Highlands, can ye not tell?” she replied, accentuating her accent. Then, she dropped back to the fainter accent she’d spoken in all night. She would not have been able to maintain the faux Scottish accent for too long and had thus come to an agreement with Morag—she’d pretend to be a Scot who did not live in Scotland.

“I have long left there, however,” she said, and he nodded.

“I adore Scotland. I live ...” he bit his lip and shook his head. “Pardon me. We ought not to discuss where we are truly from. Lest we ruin the magic.”

“We cannot have that,” she said as the dance came to a halt and the music faded. When they stopped and he dropped his hands from her body, she felt an intense sense of loss. They

stood across from one another, and she knew they should bid their farewells, but somehow, she could not bring herself to. And neither, it seemed, could he. She wanted to continue their conversation, although they had not spoken of anything significant. Still, it felt right to be at his side, to dance with him and talk to him. She did not want their time together to come to an end just yet.

As she was about to muster the courage to ask if he'd like to take a turn about the room, Boreas opened his mouth, but any words were lost to the sudden peals of laughter emanating from the other room. The unexpected interruption took her by surprise, and Elizabeth turned to him, her eyebrows knitted in confusion.

"That," Boreas began, gesturing towards the sound, "is where the party's hosts are setting up the games."

She tried to discern the activity, her curiosity piqued. "Games?"

"Indeed, you must have missed them the last time you were here," he said, and she quickly looked away, not wanting to give away the truth. "The Matlock ball always has every game known to man. Bullet Pudding, Lookabout, Charades, Blind Man's Buff. Oh, Snap-dragon, of course. Although I am not fond of raisins."

Elizabeth smiled. "I adore all manner of games. Every time one of my sisters has a birthday, we play Lookabout and Charades. And I love Bullet Pudding," she said, craning her neck to see what game they were playing.

"Ah, Bullet Pudding. I do like it also but not tonight. I shall never get the flour out of my beard," he said with a chuckle. "But that is what they are getting ready to play. Would you care to accompany me?"

Her heart leaped as she took his proffered arm and together, they made their way into the adjacent room where a dozen or so people had gathered around a table where a large mould containing flour had just been placed on a table. Elizabeth bit her bottom lip as she watched, remembering the many times she'd played this game with her family.

Boreas, a half head taller than her, gently placed a hand on her shoulder and moved her in front of him for a better view.

There, at the table, a man dressed as a harlequin removed the mould, revealing a tower of flour. Placed on top of the construction was a coin, rather than a bullet. The object, she knew well, was to slice away at the flour until the coin fell into the flour. The poor sod who'd cut that slice would then have to retrieve the coin with his mouth. She looked up at Boreas and grinned. No wonder he didn't want to do it. The flour would indeed ruin his costume.

Together, they stood and watched as the group passed a dull knife around, each slicing away at the construction until the coin fell into the pile of flour. A young woman, dressed in an elaborate swan's costume, was the unlucky person who had to dive into the flour.

"Oh dear, poor thing," Boreas exclaimed a little louder than she'd expected. The swan looked up and her face lit up when she saw him. Elizabeth's stomach tensed at this, though she did not quite know why. Was this jealousy? She'd never had occasion to be jealous before because before this night she'd never met a man she had felt anything for.

Yet, now that biting feeling ate at her as she watched the two smile at one another.

"A friend?" she asked, her tone coming out a little sharper than she'd intended. Boreas looked down, the smile still on his lips as he nodded.

"A relation of mine," he said and at once, Elizabeth's unease disappeared only to be replaced by a jumble of emotions she could not quite place.

She liked him and she didn't want anyone else to be interested in him. Was that strange? She hardly knew him, after all. She'd read about love and attraction in her many novels. She'd even speculated what it might be like to fall in love one day when she, her sister Jane, and her friend Charlotte had talked about the future.

Jane, always the romantic, had spoken of her hope to meet a handsome stranger and be swept off her feet while Charlotte, the pragmatic one, only wished for a man to make an offer before she was officially on the shelf. Elizabeth, meanwhile, had declared herself willing to wait for the right person. Someone who'd make her feel a connection, someone with whom she could converse with ease, someone who made her ... feel.

As she glanced up at Boreas, she could not help but wonder—could it be that she had met just such a man? Or was she being foolish to even consider this, after having just met him?

Chapter Four

Darcy

Darcy glanced down at the young woman, a slight smile playing around his lips. Was she jealous of Anne? It had certainly sounded like it. He wasn't sure how he should feel about that. A part of him thought it charming, for the only other woman he knew who acted jealous around him when another woman was even in the same room as him was Miss Caroline Bingley.

On the other hand, he worried what this might mean. If she felt jealousy, then surely she felt ... other things. Did he? He shook his head at the question. He already knew that he felt something for her. He wasn't yet sure what it was. Passion? Attraction? More? Whatever it was, he hadn't felt anything like it before and the only thing he was certain of was that he wanted to spend more time with her.

While Anne rose from the table, the coin she'd extracted from the pile of flour now in her mouth he turned his attention back to Beira.

"Would you care to play a game? I am rather good at Lookabout. Or Charades? I think there is a game going in the next room."

Charades? Charades? What was wrong with him? Darcy hated Charades. The only time he willingly partook in it was when he was with his nearest and dearest. Indeed, all games played at balls were more enjoyable when engaged in with those he knew well and trusted. He didn't like playing with strangers, it was uncomfortable. And yet, he'd willingly offered up his time. Why? To impress her?

He didn't want to admit it to himself, but it was true. A part of him had the odd desire to make Beira like him, to enjoy being with him. And that brought an odd sense of insecurity. Why was that? He wondered if the wassail bowl he'd had to drink earlier was clouding his senses.

“Oh, I adore Charades,” she said, and his stomach clenched as he regretted bringing up the idea. But then, her smile faded and she leaned closer. “Although I prefer to play games with people I know, not strangers. Would you mind if we just watched instead?”

Darcy felt his entire body relax. She understood. And this only made him feel more drawn to her.

“I do not object at all. In fact, I am rather glad you said this as I ...” he bent forward and dropped his voice. “I also prefer playing the game with people I know. I did not want to take away from your entertainment, however.”

“You are not,” she said and shook his head. “My younger sisters would accuse me of being a terrible bore for not partaking but I am afraid I am at times a little shy. Although one would not think it, given that I can also be a gabster as my mother says.” She snapped her lips shut and chuckled. “Such as right now. I tend to talk when I am nervous.”

Nervous? Darcy wondered if his presence was making her nervous or if it was something else altogether.

“There is no need to apologise, my own sister has on more than one occasion accused me of being a bore too. Perhaps we just lack the exuberance of youth? I most certainly do not find you boring, quite the opposite, in fact.” He was about to repeat his offer to escort her to watch the game of Charades, when he spotted his Aunt Catherine weaving her way through the crowd. He scratched his beard as his eyes darted around. For the moment, his aunt’s attention was on his cousin who would surely be censured most severely for her flour covered face. But as soon as she was finished with that, she’d come for Darcy. He had to get out of her way quickly.

Yet, he didn’t want to part ways with Beira. Her presence had made his evening turn from dreadful to delightful—although he wasn’t sure how she’d managed that feat. What he did know was that he didn’t want their time to end. Thus, he spun around, turning his back to his aunt and facing her.

“Would you care to take the air? It is rather stuffy in here. There is a balcony beyond the ballroom, near the orchestra.

We could take a cup of Negus with us and observe the road?”

Observe the road? What sort of suggestion was this? Darcy groaned inwardly at his ridiculous suggestion. However, once again she surprised him as her eyes lit up and she nodded.

“I would love that. I am famished, however. Could we take a plate of sweetmeats with us?”

He felt his cheeks stretch with a wide smile for he had wanted to suggest they eat as well, though he had been concerned that the idea of sitting outside with a drink and food when everyone else was dancing and making merry would be perceived as boring. To hear she was of a similar mind delighted him.

“We shall,” he said and then, they exited through the grand arched doorway back to the ballroom and made their way to the banquet table. Together, they assembled a delicious plate of mince pies, cheese and small bowls of jellies and blancmange. At the last moment, Beira also picked up a bowl of custard before making toward the servant who just brought the two cups of steaming Negus Darcy had requested. She took hers in her free hand while he balanced the plate in one and held the cup with the other.

Then, laden down with refreshments, the two made their way to the balcony. Darcy knew nobody would disturb them here because the door was hidden from view by the orchestra. Once they’d stepped outside, Beira placed her bowl on the stone bench before them and walked to the balustrade, her gloved hands laid flat upon it as her eyes widened beneath her mask. He watched as she took in the view before her. Her lovely lips were slightly parted as she looked at a view Darcy had seen dozens of times. As he took her in, however, it was as if he too saw it for the first time. And he had to admit, it was quite breathtaking.

Hyde Park lay before them, although it was transformed by the still falling snow into a wide, white expanse that appeared to stretch much further than the park’s usual confines.

The trees, skeletal now that they had been stripped of their leaves, stretched their branches toward the dark sky, heavy with fresh snow. It should have been eerie, but Darcy found the panorama soothing. Perhaps it was the way the faint light of the moon reflected off the Serpentine's frozen surface. Or it was the way the streetlight's dim glow illuminated the park.

"It's magical," Beira said, her voice carrying a hint of true enchantment. "It makes me wonder what is happening in the homes all around us." Darcy followed the movement of her head. It was true, all around the park, or at least as far as they could see, other homes were lit by candlelight, movement visible behind the windows and curtains.

People living their lives. It was fascinating to imagine what their lives were like, what they were doing while the two of them stood and observed.

"Perhaps someone is on a balcony now, looking over at us wondering the same thing," he said, and she turned to look at him.

"Do you think they can see us?" There was a hint of alarm in her voice, and he quickly shook his head.

"I doubt they can through the snow. The light behind us is blocked by the orchestra, anyhow."

She dipped her head to one side. "How did you know about this door?"

He wetted his lips, feeling the fake, scratchy beard at the end of his tongue as he did so.

"I have been here many times, and I like to explore." He paused before going on. "I found this particular door one afternoon after my mother died, and we were visiting my—" he paused, remembering their pact not to give away their identity. "My sister, who was only six at the time, disappeared from the gathering we were attending and I went in search of her. I found her here, looking out over this same view. It was winter if I remember correctly." With a jolt, he remembered why he always felt an eerie sensation whenever he looked out

over this park. And he remembered something else. “No, that is not true. It was not winter. It was autumn. I remember the leaves now, gathered beneath the ash tree over there.” He pointed at a tree across from them, now barren, its branches only carrying snow.

“I can only imagine how difficult it must have been to lose your mother that young, for both of you.”

He turned to her, realizing his confession had made their conversation heavy.

“I beg your pardon, I should not have brought it up. I do not know why I did. I do not naturally speak about my parents, nor my sister.”

She watched him with a tenderness in her eyes that made him want to tell her more. What was it about this woman that had managed to allow him to open himself up to her? Usually, he found it hard to communicate his thoughts and memories to anyone, even his best friend Charles Bingley, or his cousin, Richard. But with her, he found it easy. Too easy perhaps.

“I am glad you can. Sometimes it is not good to keep things inside. When my grandfather died—he was my father’s father—I felt trapped in my own grief for so long. I could not speak to anyone.”

He heard the longing and prolonged sorrow in her voice, a tone he was all too familiar with.

“You were close to him?”

She nodded. “Very. I was close to all my grandparents, but they are gone now. He was the last. And even he has been gone for half my life.” She shook her head and turned back to the scenery before them when he noticed her shoulders shaking with the cold.

“I should have brought out cloaks with us,” he said, more to himself than her.

“No, do not worry. The drink will warm us up,” she said and took a sip, steam billowing up as she did so. She closed her eyes, her long lashes flickering slightly. Then, he followed suit. The Negus was still hot, and the tangy spiced lemon

flavour stung his mouth in a delightful way. He felt the warmth spread down his throat as he swallowed.

“Would you care for a piece of pie?” he asked, remembering she said she was hungry.

“I would,” she said, reaching for the plate just as he did, their hands brushing against one another for a second.

“Oh,” she exclaimed, retracting her hand as though she’d been bitten.

“No, please. You go first,” he said, stepping away though he longed to touch her again. He wanted to do more than just touch her. He wished to hold her, hold her until she no longer shivered because even though the drink had helped, he saw her lips quiver slightly. He wanted to still that quiver with his own lips, draw her in—

I must stop this. I do not know her. I cannot assume she even wishes to spend more time with me.

“... always wanted to try. Have you?” she said, her voice sweet and warm as it penetrated his thoughts.

“I beg your pardon?” he said and took a bite of the mincemeat pie to make it seem as if he’d been distracted by the food, not his conflicting thoughts.

“The Serpentine. I saw people ice skating there the other day and thought about how I always wanted to try it. Have you?”

The change in topic was jarring but he recognised that she was as keen to keep their conversation from slipping into melancholy as he was. Thus, he turned to stand beside her swallowing his mouthful of pie and cleared his throat.

“I have. Many times. At my home we have a lake that freezes in winter. I often skate there with my sister. When I was a boy, my parents would join us. It was wonderful, of course our winters usually last longer than down here.” He stopped then, not wanting to say too much else, he didn’t want to give away his identity. At least not yet. “Is there no water near your home,” he asked, to keep the conversation going.

“There is and it was always my childhood dream to learn to skate on the lake near our home. Alas, when I was six a local fell through the ice when he attempted to skate there the first morning after the frost. It was dreadful. We were all there, building snowmen and playing when it happened. I remember my father diving in and helping him along with some others. I have always been afraid since that day,” she said and shuddered.

“He must have attempted it when the ice was not yet thick enough. One must wait until it is truly solid,” he said, and she nodded.

“I know. And I never lost the desire to do it, but the fear held me back. Yet when I look upon the river, I can’t help but wish I was brave enough to try.”

Darcy watched her carefully, weighing what to say next and then decided to follow his instinct, something he did not often do.

“The Serpentine is quite safe this time of year. It is rather shallow, and the ice is thick, I suspect with the recent colder weather it is frozen solid in parts. You can feel the chill in the air, can’t you?”

She nodded for it was true, the wind had picked up again and brought with it more chilling winds. Frost would be with them for some time.

“Would you like to try skating? We could stay close to the edge just in case something happens. Which, I assure you, will most certainly not.” He waited with bated breath, hoping she would agree and when she turned her face up to him, her eyes shining behind her mask, he knew that she would.

“But where would we find skates at this hour?”

Recalling the miscellaneous collection his uncle maintained, Darcy responded, “The Earl has some stored downstairs. I can fetch them with the assistance of a maid I’m acquainted with.”

A momentary pause ensued as Beira considered the proposal, he saw the tension creep into her jawline before she

relaxed, nodding, she gave her consent.

Feeling an unexpected surge of excitement, Darcy quickly made his way inside, leaving Beira inside the ballroom by the orchestra, not wanting her to wait in the cold. Then, he rushed through the ballroom and down the hall toward his uncle's study. Just next to the heavy oak door that held his uncle's opulent study was another, smaller room. There, his uncle stored peculiar collections from his travels and various interests. Darcy knew that the large wooden box to the right contained skates in all sizes, should anyone in the family desire to go skating.

While he rummaged through the box, Darcy's mind raced with thoughts of his companion in this venture. Who was she? The mask hid her face very well, though he saw enough to know she was beautiful. She was certainly witty and charming. But who was she beyond that?

Beira's faintly Scottish accent, the snippets of information about her family—they presented a puzzle he was eager to solve. Which family did she belong to? His knowledge of the British nobility was extensive, and he tried to match what he knew of Beira to this record. The criteria were precise.

The family needed to have proximity to London. At this time of year, many nobles returned to their country estates to spend Christmastide there. Some returned to London for the Twelfth Night festivities, while others did not leave town at all, preferring to reside in the city for the entire season.

She had to be from one of those families. Or from one that lived close enough to return to London for a ball. And a family that had a Scottish ancestry. Or perhaps an estate in Scotland. Her choice of Beira for a costume indicated she was likely from Scotland, rather than the offspring of a Scottish parent or grandparent.

All he knew with certainty was that she was of noble blood. It wasn't just because she moved with such grace and spoke like a highly educated woman. It was because he knew his uncle did not invite anyone who wasn't connected to a

high-ranking member of society. No, if you didn't have at least one knight in your family, you were not invited to the Matlock Ball.

He sat on his heels, having located a pair of skates that would fit her, and another pair for himself and then hurried back to her, his mind still occupied with the puzzle of her identity.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden appearance of his aunt when he was about to turn into the ballroom. She rushed down the hall toward the card room, her head swaying back and forth in search of someone. Someone he hoped was not him.

Avoiding a potential encounter, he swiftly headed in the opposite direction, toward the servants' door. There, he deposited the skates behind a curtain and hurried back to the ballroom. It was time to put his plan into action.

Chapter Five

Elizabeth

Elizabeth followed Boreas out of the ballroom and down a wide hallway. She glanced over her shoulder at her Aunt Gardiner. She'd taken the time Boreas was away to find her aunt and reassure her that she had not seen her for some time because she was enjoying herself too much in the game rooms.

To ensure her aunt did not look for her while she was away, she'd told her a fib—that she was going to take the air with a group of young ladies. Fortunately, her aunt had not objected, probably because she'd make a connection of her own and was going to spend some time playing cards.

With her aunt appeased, Elizabeth knew she would have some freedom. Still, the air thickened with tension as each step took her further from the familiarity of the grand ballroom. A familiar feeling filled her stomach. Fear. It was not fear of him that gnawed at her, quite the opposite was true. She felt oddly safe with Boreas, though she had no idea who he was or what he looked like. No, it was the impropriety of her own actions. Sneaking away with a man she barely knew was unlike her, even on Twelfth Night, where spirited behaviour was more forgivable.

Actions like this could ruin a young woman's reputation forever. Not just hers, but her entire family. Yet, she could not resist the thrill of it all.

Boreas beckoned her over, and she gave a quick glance to the left and right before joining him. He stopped in front of a narrow door and retrieved two pairs of skates from behind a curtain before opening the door. "This is the servants' staircase. It leads to the servants' entrance at the back of the house so we shall not be seen. I've taken the liberty of having a coat waiting for you at the door. And one for me."

She blinked in surprise. Boreas genuinely thought of everything.

They rushed down a narrow passage, the flickering lights from tallow candles, casting dancing shadows on the walls. Every now and then, a servant passed them, but none paid them any mind as they carried trays of food and bottles of wine up to the waiting guests.

How did he know this place so intimately? The question gnawed at her. The skates he'd managed to procure, the knowledge of the hidden nooks and crannies of the vast Matlock House—every detail suggesting familiarity with the residence. She had discerned from his demeanour, his speech, and even his confident gait that he was a gentleman. But how did he know the Earl? Or did he? Perhaps he was friendly with one of the Earl's children. Or just a frequent enough guest to know the place.

Elizabeth remembered the young lady dressed as a swan. Was she related to Boreas? She knew well that in the aristocracy, a common ancestor could often be found without too much trouble. Perhaps it was just one of those inconsequential connections.

As they continued, she tried to push away the rising tide of questions, this was not a night to worry about such things. It was a night of adventure and new experiences—and this was most certainly a new experience.

Then, a realisation flashed through her. This was a night of adventure indeed. And one she could enjoy freely for nobody knew who she was, nor would they ever find out. Even if they were discovered and whispers about the mysterious girl with Boreas spread, no one would ever connect it to her. Even if it was discovered she used Morag's invitation, it would soon be known that Morag hadn't been in London to attend the ball. Thus, she did not even have to worry about Morag's reputation. The identity of Beira the Queen of Winter would forever remain a secret unless she chose to reveal it.

She was torn from her rushing thoughts when Boreas stopped and held a cape out for her. It was not hers but rather a simple maid's cape, but once she was wrapped in it, she felt the warmth and realised this was better than the flimsy one she'd arrived in.

“Shall we? Your Majesty?” he asked with a smile and opened the door.

At once, a gust of frigid air greeted them. She stepped out, snow crunching under her dancing slippers. The temperature had dropped, and the increasing snowfall blanketed the road. The once-clear night was now a canvas of white, the snowflakes swirling in muddled patterns. Up ahead, Hyde Park lay before them, a sea of white. She squinted to see better through the flurry of snow and momentarily wondered if it was wise to go outside when the wind was picking up like this. What if they got caught in a snowstorm?

She dismissed the thought. They would be fine. The park was just across the street, after all. Boreas proffered his arm, and she gladly took it, making her way with him across the snow-covered ground.

The cold was biting, making her cheeks flush and her breath turn into misty clouds in front of her. The music still spilled out of the house, but soon faded when they crossed the street, entering the park instead. A few faint figures were visible through the snow, also making their way into the park. Otherwise, the place was deserted. They were alone.

They were free.

For now, it didn't matter who he was. Tonight was a gift, a chance to do as her heart told her. Elizabeth decided to live in the moment, to let the magic of the night guide her. Come morning, this would all be a memory. After all, by dawn, everything would return to normal, and the spell of Twelfth Night would be broken. But until then, she was bound only by the whims of her heart.

Chapter Six

Darcy

Darcy wiped a thick layer of snow off a stone bench by the frozen river and stepped aside so Beira could sit before the ever-increasing snow could cover the seat again.

When she did, he watched her slip on the skates he'd found over her dancing slippers. Her long braid fell forward, and she brushed it back swiftly before standing up—and falling directly onto the bench again.

“Faith, I do not know if I am made for skating,” she said and laughed. Darcy quickly sat beside her, forgetting to remove the snow which promptly caused his nether regions to freeze.

“Let me put on mine, and I will help you,” he said and did just that. Then, he stood and extended his hands to her. She didn't hesitate before placing her hands in his, and when she stood, he gripped her firmly to help steady her. Well, and to hold her closer, he was not going to deny it.

“Now, let us get to the edge. I'll show you what to do,” he said with a smile. Once they'd made it to the river's edge, he let go, assured that she'd at least found her balance on the snow. He placed one foot on the ice and slid forward, his feet finding their place on the ice with ease. He'd skated here and at home at Pemberley for many years, and his body remembered the movement each winter.

“See, you push forward and then ...” he demonstrated while she watched, and he made a turn on the ice before coming to a stop before her. When he did, he was momentarily struck speechless because seeing her stand there in the fresh snow, her mask sparkling under the moonlight, took his breath away. She was beautiful. She was special. His heart thundered in his chest, but he pushed away the awe he'd felt, reminding himself they were not courting. They were not anything to one another but strangers who'd stolen away a few moments at a

ball. Come morning, he'd be back in his own home, faced with his own problems, and she'd forget about him.

"Boreas?" she called, her voice warm and thick like syrup.

"Yes," he said and skated her way. "Come," he offered his hands to her and helped her onto the ice. She let out a small gasp, uncertainty taking hold.

"Do not worry. You only have to focus. Take it slowly," he said, aware that he was sounding more like an authoritarian than a potential love interest. Oddly, at this moment, it did not bother him. He wanted to be sure that she was safe and felt comfortable.

"Slide one foot forward, and then follow with the other, but be sure not to let your legs slide too far apart or you might lose your balance and—"

"Oh!" She called as just that happened. Her right leg swung out to the right so far, her left couldn't follow, and she was in the process of performing the splits on the ice when Darcy pulled her up. He slung his arms around her, feeling her slight body pressed against his and helped her up. When she was secure once more, he looked down at her, inhaling her enticing smell as he took in her lovely dark eyes.

His lips parted and he meant to smile at her but found his face frozen. At first, he thought it was the chilling cold as the wind whipped against his face, but then he realised it was her.

He could not look away from her. Slowly, his face inched forward, and he saw her long lashes flutter as she closed her eyes. She wanted him to kiss her just as much as he wanted to. Darcy took in a freezing cold breath and closed his eyes, imagining how sweet her lips would taste with the remnants of the Negus they'd drunk earlier in the evening.

Her warm breath wafted against him, a stark contrast to the cold that had eaten into his cheeks, not shielded by his fake beard.

For a split second he felt her lips against his, soft and sweeter than he'd imagine when—

“I ... I beg your pardon, Beira. I ... I forgot myself.” He pulled back but held on to her so she would not slip. She blinked rapidly and steadied herself, drawing a sharp breath. Was she upset?

He knew that was the risk he was running here, but he could not in good conscience risk ruining his young woman.

He knew they were cloaked in anonymity with their disguises, and there was hardly a soul in the park to care what they were doing. The few people he’d seen were rushing home to escape the snow for the warmth of the fireplace. Something they ought to have been doing as well.

No, the chance of them being seen was slim, but it was still a possibility. And if they were seen, or even if someone had seen them slip out of the ballroom, they might uncover their identities and then, she would certainly be ruined.

Twelfth Night revelries were certainly expected, but this? A kiss with a stranger? No, this was a step too far, and they both knew it.

“I must apologise, Mr ... Boreas. I am not usually so reckless, so impulsive. This night has been quite enchanted.” Darcy wasn’t quite certain, but for a split second, it sounded as though the faint Scottish accent with which she’d spoken had disappeared entirely. Then shook his head. Perhaps it was the cold. Or could it be because the accent was part of the costume?

Reminding himself that this was not the topic of concern right now, he cleared his throat.

“I know what you mean. I will confess that if anyone knew I was out here with a lady, I do not know, they would be most alarmed. I am known for being rather stoic.”

She smiled at this. “I dare say there is nothing stoic about you.”

Darcy let out a laugh. “Tell my sister that. No, I am often judged as being more serious than I am. It is difficult for me to allow myself to be free, to do the things I want to do. I must know a person rather well to be myself.”

“I understand. It is sometimes better to be guarded. I have a sister who is the opposite, and it can be difficult for my parents to control her spirited nature. Not that they necessarily try,” she said, and he sensed a certain exasperation in her voice.

Darcy realised that they had been standing very close together, so much so that they might appear like lovers to anyone who walked by. Not that anyone did.

He moved back a little while still holding her hand.

“Shall we try and skate a little? The snow is increasing, and we may not have much time before we must return,” he said, and she exhaled, her shoulders dropping as if a weight had fallen off her.

“Yes, but slowly,” she held onto his hand, the feeling so natural. Darcy wondered if this was what it was like to be with one’s true love. Had his parents felt this way when they held hands? His mother and father had never been overly affectionate in public. Still, he’d spotted them sitting together, hands entwined as they read, or exchanging small touches here and there all of his life, and hoped to one day have the same.

They skated across the frozen river, and with each movement, she gained more confidence. Soon, the frown she’d worn disappeared, and she smiled as she moved.

“Can I try to make a turn on my own?” she asked, and he nodded, letting go of her hand.

He missed the intimate touch the second they parted but the look on her face as she skated slowly, her upper body bending forward toward the river’s edge. There, she turned and beamed at him with pride.

“Very good! You are doing well for the first time. I remember the first time I skated. I was a lad of five or six. I caught my skate and fell forward, scraping my chin. I still have a scar,” he said and was about to motion to it when he remembered his beard. “Well, it is there.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” she said lightly. She looked upward at the snow, which was now falling faster and denser

than before. “Have you ever caught snowflakes with your tongue?” Without waiting for a reply, she stuck her tongue out and caught some. He watched her, and inside him, the desire to tell her who he was grew so strong he knew he could not control it for much longer.

He knew that the secrecy was part of the appeal, but he also understood that they’d have to return to the house in a moment. And then, they would have to part ways. The idea of never seeing her again sat heavy in his stomach, so heavy he could not bear it.

“I ...” he started, but she had already looked away at the sky.

“Perhaps we ought to return. I would love to skate more, but the weather is taking an ugly turn,” she said, and when he followed her eyes, he saw the sky was blanketed with the sort of whitish grey that told of an incoming snowstorm.

“Of course,” he said and proffered his hand to take her back to the path. As they stepped onto the snow and sat on the bench to take off their skates, he examined her from the side. He had to know her name. He could not let her go. There was no way he could go on without knowing her better. The question was, how would she react? Would she want to tell him her name? Would knowing who she was destroy whatever magic was between them?

The only thing Darcy knew for sure was that he had to try. Just as soon as they were back in the house and out of the increasingly ugly elements.

Chapter Seven

Elizabeth

The wind howled around the street corners at an ever-increasing speed, and the cold whipped into Elizabeth's face with more force than even a few minutes ago. A snowstorm was upon them, and what little had been visible of the roads before, was quickly disappearing beneath a layer of white.

She struggled to keep pace with Boreas, who strutted across the park and then to the road ahead of them with large steps, eager to get out of the weather.

The grand townhouse they were returning to towered ahead of them, lit up against the rest of the darkened street by the many candles within. It looked inviting, and under normal circumstances, Elizabeth would have been eager to step inside and warm her hands against a roaring fireplace while chasing the cold out of her bones. Yet, this night, the comfortable house filled her with unease, for the closer they came to the home, the closer the time to bid Boreas farewell drew.

There was so much she wanted to ask him, so much she wanted to say, and yet their footsteps crunching in the snow were the only sound breaking the stillness of the evening. She glanced up at her companion, wishing they had kissed when the opportunity arose. But, of course, he was a gentleman and had acted like one.

She would not deny it, if he'd kissed her, she would have reciprocated gladly, though she knew it was wrong. However, the draw she felt to his man was like nothing she'd ever felt, and everything she'd dared dream about. She knew nothing about him yet felt as though she knew him intimately.

And yet, they would be parted soon. There was no way they could continue spending time with one another. Her aunt would most certainly be looking for her, and a gentleman like him would surely be missed as well.

They'd have to part, there was no other way. Perhaps later in the night, they might steal another dance, but beyond that, it was impossible to stay in one another's company again.

Although the mere thought of parting ways filled her with dread, she knew it had to be done.

Unless...

Unless he felt what she felt. Could it be? Or was all of this a mere illusion?

They hurried across the road as a carriage came toward them, its lamp swaying rapidly in the increasing wind and its wheels dredging up snow as the horses struggled to keep their speed.

They made their way to the servants' door again, but to her surprise, they didn't enter. Instead, Boreas stopped and turned to her.

The muted lantern above the door played upon his features, revealing that he too was deep in thought. A line had appeared on his formerly smooth forehead, and his lips were pressed together so much they almost disappeared.

"Beira," he started, his voice was thick with emotion. The wind howled once more and he took her arm, moving her slightly over so they were partially covered by the stone portico, which offered at least some protection from the elements.

He cleared his throat, breaking their comfortable silence once again. "Beira, I must say what is on my mind lest I regret it in the morning. I've never made such a declaration to anyone, but I must do so with you. I am drawn to you in a way I cannot explain, and I think you feel the same."

She was surprised by his honesty, his boldness, and yet she could not make the same declaration, though she felt it. Something stopped her, some fear had got its grips into her and was pulling her back to reality. Was it because she was not actually invited to this ball? She'd sneaked in there pretending to be Morag Fraser, she'd imitated her accent, she'd ... she'd lied. Or had she?

Was Boreas actually drawn to her, or to the illusion of her? And what about her? Was it all just a spell woven by the magical evening?

She swallowed hard and raised her eyes, “I can’t deny that I feel something but perhaps it’s the allure of the masquerade, the mystery of the night? Can you be sure that it is not only that? The adventure?”

“Perhaps I have considered it,” he said and ran a hand through his hair. He stood so close to her she felt his warm breath on her cold skin.

“But what if it isn’t?” he countered, drawing closer. Their breath mingled, creating plumes of steam in the chilly air. “I must know who you are, who you really are, and I wish to tell you who I am so we might see if this can be something real.”

She looked away, knowing she should say yes, that she’d never in all her life experienced such a connection with another person. Despite this, she once again remembered that she was not a lady who would be invited to such a ball under normal circumstances. Just by being here she’d lied. She’d infiltrated a world she had no business being a part of. And surely Boreas thought her a highborn lady—not a mere gentleman’s daughter who’d soon enough lose the only home she’d ever known.

“I fear that we will lose this magic moment if we reveal ourselves. I am scared that we are enveloped in the rush of the moment. You might be disappointed if you know who I am.”

“I dare say I do not think so. I already know who you are, I know your character, your heart—the only thing I do not know is your name.”

“But what if the magic we’re feeling is just the thrill of the evening?” She asked gently, and saw doubt flash across his formerly eager face.

“How can we know. But what should we do? Walk away and pretend this never happened? Live with the memory of one perfect night, knowing it will never happen again?” He

turned his hands up and shrugged. “Agree to meet again in a year at this same place to see if we still feel the same?”

She looked up, suddenly captivated by this proposal.

“In a year?”

“Yes, he replied, but he didn’t sound convinced. “We could promise one another to meet again in a year from now, at this same ball. We will dress in the same costume as well, so we will know each other.”

He wetted his lips and scratched his faux beard as he looked at her for an answer.

As romantic as the idea was, she had to admit she didn’t like it. She didn’t want to wait an entire year to see him again, that was silly. Perhaps as foolish as her fears ... What Elizabeth really needed was a little time. Not a year, but—

Suddenly a sheet of newspaper blew past her, and she put her foot down, capturing it.

Feeling a rush of boldness, Elizabeth remembered the pencil in her reticule. She extracted it under his curious look.

“I have an idea,” she said with a small smile, hoping he would not think her foolish. She reached down and picked up the paper and tore off a piece. “I will write my name on this and the village I am from.

“I think time will tell if what we are feeling is just the excitement of the night, or if it is more. Take this and put it away. Then, if your feelings persist in a fortnight,” she murmured, handing him the scrap of paper, “find me.”

He smiled, touched by her gesture.

“Very well, that is a clever way of thinking, I shall do likewise. May I trouble you for your pencil?” He eagerly tore off a piece of newspaper.

Alas, before he could even start writing the servants’ door opened, and a harried-looking man in a coachman’s uniform exited.

“Sir!” he exclaimed upon resting his eyes on Boreas. “There you are. We have been looking for you everywhere. You are needed at home immediately.”

He looked up, his lips parted as he stared at the man.

“What has happened? Is it my sister?” he asked at once, and the coachman nodded.

“Yes, Sir. Please, come quickly. The carriage is ready, and your aunt and uncle are waiting at the front, we must make haste before the roads become impassable,” he said before hurrying toward the stables.

Boreas’ features darkened with concern. and he took her hands into his. “I must go. My sister is ...”

“I understand,” she said and squeezed his hand in hers for a moment. Then, he held up the scrap of newspaper with her details. “I will find you.”

She smiled at him, wanting to ask him to do so, to disregard her silly idea, but there was no time. The carriage she’d seen coming down the road had turned into the narrow side street, and in the shadows, she saw pale faces within. Boreas’ aunt and uncle, as she’d learned.

“It has been a—”

“What is the hold-up?” an older man shouted as he threw open the carriage door from within. He was in costume, her face hidden behind a black mask. “We cannot waste any more time,” the man bellowed, and Boreas let go of Elizabeth’s hands.

“I must go. Thank you for a magical evening, truly.”

He turned away then and rushed toward the carriage just as the wind increased once more. Swirls of snowflakes danced in the gust as the trees lining the road bent as if seeking to bow to the incoming storm. Despite the chilling wind, Elizabeth stepped out of the shelter and followed Boreas, though she stopped just as he clambered into the waiting carriage.

Once inside, he leaned out, still holding the piece of paper.

“Beira,” he called upon seeing her. “I will seek—” he was cut off when the carriage set in motion. Suddenly the wind tore the paper from his grasp.

Boreas grabbed for it, but his fingers just missed and it was carried away. Elizabeth gasped and ran after it, though realizing as she did that it would not matter. Only her own name was written, nothing else.

“Halt!” she heard Boreas’ voice, but the carriage did not stop. The horses’ legs moved faster and faster, pulling the carriage away. Its wheels crunched on the snow, and she watched it—and him—move further and further away, though his shape was visible still as he leaned out of the window.

“Elizabeth Bennet!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “I am Elizabeth Bennet!”

He called something in reply, but she could not make it out. She picked up the hem of her gown and rushed after the carriage, the cold whipping against her skin.

At the corner, the carriage slowed to let another carriage pass. She caught up enough to almost see his face when he called to her just as she was about to shout her name again.

“Next year! Here!” He shouted as the carriage moved on and he disappeared from view for good.

Elizabeth stood in the middle of the road the wind blowing her costume around her. Some of the crystals woven into her hair had fallen out and dropped into the snow, where in the morning they’d sparkle like diamonds.

Her lips were parted, and a fog formed in front of her mouth with each breath. He was gone. She hadn’t been sure if she wanted to believe that the intense feelings he’d inspired were real, but now that he had gone, she understood that they were.

As improbable as it was, she had fallen in love in the space of one evening—and now, the man she would have willingly given her heart to was gone.

Why hadn’t she told him her name sooner? Why had she been so afraid?

She exhaled and dropped her shoulders, no longer feeling the cold as she stared at the empty street ahead.

She was alone. Although as she let snowflakes fall upon her, she realised all was not yet lost.

They had one more chance to see one another again, one more possibility to find one another—here, at this ball. One year from tonight.

Chapter Eight

Darcy

Meryton

12th August 1811

Darcy pulled on his cravat to release some of the heat that threatened to choke him from the inside out. Why in the world had he deemed it wise to wear a tailcoat meant for autumn at the height of summer?

And to a dance. Everyone knew that between the candles lit all around, the throng of people inside a small room and the vigorous locomotion taking place it was exceedingly hot at balls. Especially in summer.

He exhaled in such a manner as to blow air toward the upper portion of his face, though it did nothing to provide relief. Instead, he ran a handkerchief over his forehead, knowing he had to be glistening with sweat. After returning his handkerchief to his pocket, he leaned against the wall, the coolness against the back of his neck providing momentary relief, as his eyes scanning the crowd at the Meryton Assembly. He took care to maintain an air of indifference, not wanting to be pushed into dancing any more than he already had. Indeed, one of the more insistent—dare he say insufferable—ladies had already attempted to make him dance with one of her many, many daughters. That would not happen again.

He'd danced twice, once with Caroline Bingley, and once with her sister, Louisa. That would have to do. Even those dances had been participated in only to indulge the two ladies and please his friend Bingley. No, when it came to dancing, Darcy was done for the night.

The soft music, laughter, and chattering all faded into the background as he allowed his thoughts to wander. The warmth of the assembly hall, paired with the rich scents of women's

perfumes and the lingering aroma of beeswax candles, did help transport him to the ball he truly longed to be at. Alas, the heat would not allow him to truly daydream.

“Looking for your Beira again,” Bingley’s jovial voice pulled him from his reverie. “Can you not stop your search for your mystery woman for just one evening?”

Darcy ran a hand through his dark curls. “It’s been six months, Bingley. Six months of wondering where she might be, regretting not telling her the truth. Every event, every gathering, I hope to catch a glimpse of her.” He looked around the room once more, hearing the laughter and chatter melt into one. “Of course, she won’t be at a ball like this. She’s a lady after all. Not a commoner.”

“Ah, Darcy must you always consider everyone beneath your touch? I dare say my friend, you can be a little high in the instep,” Bingley said, though he carried jest in his voice, thus negating some of the childish intentions.

Darcy took a sip of his drink. “I might have been accused of being haughty, but that assessment of my character is neither here nor there. Not when it comes to her. She knows who I am, what I am.” He closed his eyes, wishing he could still see her in front of him as clearly as he had that night, but the more time passed, the more her image faded, until all that remained was the echo of her voice, calling something he couldn’t quite make out over the winter night’s chilled air.

Hang Wickham! If it wasn’t for that blasted man, then perhaps now he would be with his beloved. Wickham had turned up like a bad penny at Darcy House on the night of the ball and had once more tried his luck with Georgiana. If it hadn’t been for the action of his quick-thinking butler, Jarvis, then— no he couldn’t bear to think of what might have happened. Poor dear Georgiana...

“Is she truly worth all this effort? Why not see if there is another lady who might suit you?” Bingley’s voice pulled him from his thoughts. He was among the few who knew the story of Beira. He hadn’t wanted to tell too many people because he had felt a little foolish admitting that he, one of the most

rational people in his circle, could have fallen in love with a woman he'd known for not even a full day. And given Bingley's commentary, he was glad for it. If his dearest friend could not see that Darcy simply had to see Beira again, then who would?

"She's everything," Darcy confessed, looking down. The polished wooden floorboards seemed to absorb and reflect the golden hues of the candlelight, blurring his reflection. "I should have been honest with her from the start."

Bingley's face softened with understanding. "Well, it was a masked ball. The mystery is part of it. And you could not have known your sister would ..." He pressed his lips together and waved a hand, not wanting to bring up the unfortunate topic of Georgiana and her Twelfth Night adventure. "You'll see this Beira at your uncle's ball, won't you?"

Darcy's lips pressed into a thin line. "That's months away, and what if she doesn't come? I can't just hang my hopes on that one event." Indeed, he had partaken in a great many more balls than was usual for him, and he'd spent more time in town than he generally preferred. He missed Pemberley and he knew Georgiana would rather have been back home as well, but he had to try and find her. A year had seemed impossibly long that awful night when he'd lost her name and address. Why had he waved it in his hand during a snowstorm as if clutching at a prize? Why had he not tucked it in his pocket like any sensible man would have done?

"I should have stepped out and told her my name, something. Anything," he said and crossed his arms.

"You're in love, my friend!" Bingley said and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Who would have thought that Fitzwilliam Darcy would fall in love so rapidly and completely!"

Darcy sighed in exasperation, ignoring Bingley's jest. "It seems I am not the only one who has fallen rapidly for a lady. Look at you, so smitten with Miss Jane Bennet already."

Bingley beamed in the direction of the young Miss Bennet who'd captured his attention. "She is rather special. Is

she not the most beautiful woman you've ever seen? Well, aside from your mysterious lady?"

"She is handsome indeed. But what of her mother and younger sisters? Rather a boisterous bunch, wouldn't you say?" Boisterous was putting it mildly, but Darcy didn't want to say what he truly thought of the woman and her daughters. They were uncouth, coarse, and whatever else one might call the behaviour displayed by the woman. She all but pushed her daughters into dancing with assorted gentlemen and the ones who were unwilling were set upon and pressed into dancing. Well, not him. Not Darcy. He'd declined and walked away. And seeing the display put on by the family now, he was glad for it. But Bingley—his poor friend was hopelessly in love.

Bingley smirked, "I dare say Jane is rather refined. Besides, not everyone is fortunate to be raised by a dignified figure like Lady Catherine."

Darcy chuckled, the mention of his formidable aunt softening his demeanour. "Indeed. Though I dare say Anne might dispute the term good fortune. She's had to battle her mother just to marry the man she loves."

Raising his eyebrows, Bingley inquired, "What's the status on that front?"

"Thanks to my uncle's influence, she'll marry her chosen suitor. They've set a date for December." Darcy smiled as he recalled how delighted Anne had been when she'd written to him to let him know the courtship her mother had been pushing for between the both of them was over forever—because she would marry the man she truly loved. The young gentleman disguised as a fawn at the ball.

"That's quite some time from now," Bingley said, and took a swallow of his whiskey.

"They met during winter," Darcy explained, "and they wish to commemorate their union during the same season."

Just then, the country dance ended, and the hall was alive with clapping and laughter. Bingley, always the more social of the two, nudged Darcy, "You should dance, Darcy. I've seen

Louisa and Caroline eyeing you, eager for another turn about the floor. The women far outnumber the men at this ball.”

“I’ve fulfilled my obligations with both of your sisters,” Darcy responded, “and I have no intention of venturing onto the dance floor again. As for the uneven numbers, you are doing your best to make up for it.” He winked at Bingley who had been dancing all night and would likely be of no use to anyone the following day due to the cramps he’d have in both his feet. Tonight, however, Bingley spared no thought for his poor feet.

“What of Miss Elizabeth Bennet? Miss Bennet’s younger sister? The one in the pale-yellow dress?” Bingley suggested. Darcy frowned but then recalled she was the one Mrs Bennet had pushed his way.

“Is she the dark-haired one?” Darcy asked. “She’s tolerable, I suppose. But not enough to tempt me.”

Bingley laughed, “Tolerable? Come now! Darcy you must dance.”

“Truly, I do not wish to,” he said, and Bingley pursed his lips.

“Very well, but I shall. If you will excuse me,” Bingley rolled his eyes, “I’ll be off to dance with Miss Bennet.” With a hearty clap on Darcy’s back, he left.

Darcy found an empty seat, his thoughts consumed by the mysterious beauty from eight months ago. The low hum of the constant chatter and music faded away as he remembered their one perfect evening. Beira was the one in his heart, and no assembly in Meryton nor any other ball in London could change that. No matter how often his aunt attempted to find him a match.

Chapter Nine

Elizabeth

Elizabeth Bennet made her way along the outer perimeter of her family's garden, inhaling the scent of freshly cut grass which mingled with that of peonies and roses planted along the stone wall. The sun shone brightly though it was not as hot as it had been the past few days.

In fact, it was a perfect day for walking, an activity Elizabeth usually cherished. It wasn't that she didn't this particular day, but she had to admit her mind was filled with a torrent of thoughts that made it hard for her to enjoy something as simple as the sunshine.

It had been eight months since the dance at the Earl of Matlock's home, and not a day had gone by when she hadn't thought of Boreas—or whatever his real name was. She'd tried her best to find out who he was, determined to figure out this puzzle but thus far she'd failed.

She'd written to Morag, who'd responded quickly, eager to help Elizabeth, but she'd hadn't come up with any ideas. Her only suggestion had been the Earl's sons, although one had not been in attendance and the other was married.

Elizabeth had visited the Earl's house in Town during her most recent stay with her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner. Of course, she hadn't gone inside. It wasn't like in the country, where one could view a home just by walking up to the front door. But she'd walked past, hoping to see Boreas.

She had been tempted to knock and simply ask, but that had seemed too forward, too improper. Besides, she didn't know if anyone at the residence even knew who Boreas was? It wasn't customary to reveal one's identity at such balls.

"Miss Bennet," a warm voice called from a distance, and she turned just in time to see George Wickham coming her way, waving his hat at her. He looked handsome in his regimentals. The red coat stood in stark contrast to his dark

locks and eyes. Indeed, it was no wonder the ladies of Meryton—and those in the Bennet household—were enamoured of him.

While Elizabeth thought him pleasant and enjoyed his company, she had thus far resisted his charms for in her heart there was room for but one man—Boreas.

As Mr Wickham made his way towards her, she spotted his friend, Mr Denny, talking to Lydia and Kitty, both of them engaged in a battle of who could laugh louder and more heartily at his jokes. She shook her head, which did not escape Mr Wickham's attention.

“Something the matter, ma'am?” he asked and stopped beside her.

“My sisters. They are both very fond of Mr Denny, though I hear it is Lydia who has caught his eye.”

“I can confirm,” Mr Wickham said in his smooth northern-accented voice.

“Poor Kitty. She strives to be seen as an equal to her younger sister and still always ends up left behind somehow. And Lydia, I feel she is too young to be so interested in officers,” she said and crossed her arms, aware she sounded like her mother. Well, if her mother were a sensible woman concerned about her daughter's reputation, rather than overly eager to see her wed.

“She seems to have a strong personality,” Mr Wickham said and proffered his arm.

“Lydia is so impressionable. And with all these officers around, I fear she might be carried away.” Elizabeth responded.

Mr Wickham chuckled as they fell into step and continued on her walk, as if he'd always been at her side, “Fear not, Miss Bennet. Denny is a gentleman, through and through. Your sister is in good hands. You have my word.”

Elizabeth smiled, feeling somewhat relieved, because though she harboured no romantic feelings for Mr Wickham, she cared for him as a trusted friend. Indeed, she would not

have been half-minded if Lydia had an interest in him rather than his flighty friend.

“I thank you, Mr Wickham,” she said and smiled up at him, for he stood a half head taller than her. Looking up at him as she now was, she found herself reminded of Boreas, who likewise stood half a head taller than her. It was silly, really, how everything and everyone reminded her of him sometimes.

“I appreciate you saying so, I know I can trust you. It is difficult, you know, to gauge the true character of a man at times.” Her thoughts drifted back to the Meryton Assembly two days prior, and she shuddered as thoughts of a particularly unpleasant man entered her thoughts. “Some wear masks of honour. They present themselves one way but are quite different beneath the surface.”

Mr Wickham’s eyebrows quivered, “Is there a particular gentleman you’re thinking of?”

She hesitated, then confessed, “There was a gentleman at the assembly ball. Mr Darcy. There was such anticipation about his presence, given his wealth and status. But as the evening went on, his aloofness, his refusal to dance with the ladies of our town... it left a rather sour taste.” She shook her head as she remembered his unkind words about her when he thought she could not hear. Tolerable. But not enough to tempt him.

Who did he think he was? She’d had no interest in dancing with him anyhow. Though she had to admit it had been mortifying when her mother all but pushed her on him only to have him turn away. And that was before she’d been deemed tolerable at best.

“It was quite shocking behaviour,” she continued, aware she was at risk of sounding like the village gossip.

Mr Wickham nodded slowly, “Ah, Mr Darcy. I heard he accompanied Mr Bingley. I always wondered how a gentleman like Mr Bingley could be friends with a man as unpleasant as Mr Darcy. Let me guess, he acted aloof and high in the instep? As though he were superior to everyone else in the room?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth nodded eagerly, assuming Mr Wickham had heard all about Mr Darcy from the other officers in attendance. “He was so high and mighty, looking down on everyone. He refused to dance with anyone other than Mr Bingley’s sisters, even though there were far fewer women than men and many were left wanting. Even my family wasn’t spared from his disdain.”

Mr Wickham’s face took on a sombre expression. “That sounds like the Darcy I know. I’m quite familiar with the man, Miss Bennet.”

Her curiosity piqued, and Elizabeth looked at him expectantly.

“You do? Pray, how did you have the misfortune of meeting a man like that?”

Mr Wickham took a deep breath, saying, “We’ve known each other since childhood. My father was a steward to him. The Darcys do own a rather splendid estate in Derbyshire named Pemberley.”

Elizabeth nodded, she’d heard of this Pemberley estate from Jane, who’d in turn heard all about it from the Bingley sisters who deemed it the grandest estate in Derbyshire, if not beyond.

“I hear Mr Darcy is quite proud of it,” she said, bitterness lacing her words.

“And he has reason to be, I will give him that. Not that he did much to make it what it is today. That credit belongs to those who came before him. In any case, his father, the late Mr Darcy, was very honourable and kind to me. He was my godfather, in fact.”

“What good fortune to have a benevolent godfather,” Elizabeth said, meaning it. Her godparents were her Aunt and Uncle Phillips, and while they were kind, one could not call them especially benevolent.

“A very good fortune indeed, and if he had lived, I might be in quite a different profession now.” He leaned forward.

“Although I might not have met you, which would have been rather a shame.”

“What do you mean, a different profession?” Elizabeth asked, not wanting to indulge his flirtation.

Mr Wickham rose and rolled his shoulders as they reached the end of the garden and turned back to the house.

“He intended to support me in my desire to join the church. He’d bequeathed a living to me. But after his death, young Darcy denied me the living that was rightfully mine.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in shock. She’d already thought badly of Mr Darcy, but this was beyond the pale. “That’s terrible!”

Mr Wickham nodded, “Indeed. Instead of the comfortable position promised to me, I was forced to join the militia. Mr Darcy might present himself as a gentleman of principles, but his actions speak otherwise.”

The pieces began to fit together in Elizabeth’s mind. The aloofness, the pride, the disdain—Mr Wickham’s revelations only cemented her unfavourable opinion of Mr Darcy.

Mr Wickham looked at her, a mixture of sadness and anger in his eyes. “I share this with you not out of spite but as a warning, Miss Bennet. It’s easy to be charmed by wealth and status, but true character lies beneath. And Mr Darcy is lacking when it comes to that.”

“I do thank you, Mr Wickham. I already thought ill of him, but this ... I am shocked.”

Mr Wickham grimaced and turned to her. “I would appreciate it if you did not share what I told you with anyone. I have no desire to have a confrontation with the man while he is here.”

“Of course not,” Elizabeth replied. “You have taken me into your confidence, and for that I thank you. It shall not be shared with anyone.”

She wanted to add ...” anyone but my sister Jane” but realised she could not even tell Jane for she was bound to tell

Mr Bingley, fond as she was of him. Instead, she gave her word once more before bidding Mr Wickham farewell when they reached the gate.

He had certainly given her much to think about—and for once, Elizabeth’s mind was not preoccupied with Boreas, but with another far more vexing gentleman.

After parting with Mr Wickham, Elizabeth hurried up the narrow staircase to her bedchamber, the floorboards creaking with each step. From the drawing room, Lydia’s boisterous laughter sounded, with the occasional snippet of Mr Denny’s voice. Elizabeth had seen Kitty enter the room, but she suspected this was more to be a chaperone than anything else. As usual, Lydia appeared to have taken all the attention away from her older sister.

Alas, Elizabeth had no thoughts to spare for her sister, she was lost on her own, still digesting everything Mr Wickham had told her. Once in her chamber, she took off her half boots and left them by the door haphazardly before dropping onto her bed, face turned to the window. The pale blue drapes allowed for the afternoon’s sunshine to bathe the room in a glow that might have been as lovely as the walk in the garden if not for Elizabeth’s unpleasant mood.

“Lizzy, you really should throw those flowers out,” Jane’s voice came then, and she sat up, supporting herself on her elbows. Jane stood in the doorway, a teacup in hand. Her blonde hair had been pinned up around her head rather like a crown.

Elizabeth glanced at the window where her sister had been pointing. a vase stood there with faded wildflowers she’d meant to throw away but hadn’t. Her mind tended to wander these days and now more so than ever.

“I will,” she replied, and let out a sigh. “And how is Mr Bingley?” she asked, noting the flush on her sister’s cheeks that appeared the moment she said his name.

“Ah, Lizzy,” Jane replied with a smile and sat beside her on the bed. “I did not see him. I only had tea with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow as she took a seat opposite her elder sister, her interest piqued. “And how did that go?”

Jane paused, considering her words. “They were... polite. There’s a certain air about them, I’m not certain what it is. I feel as though they are assessing me.”

With a dismissive wave, Elizabeth replied, “Of course they are. What else could you expect from such society ladies? Mr Bingley strikes me as a lovely, amiable man but his sisters seem a little aloof.”

Jane’s gentle reproach was evident. “Lizzy, you shouldn’t be so quick to judge. They were quite polite and welcoming. they did not have to invite me.”

Elizabeth chuckled softly, “Jane, you always see the best in people. I just wish you’d be a bit more discerning at times. Anyhow, where was Mr Bingley? I know Mother was eager for you to see him.”

“He was out hunting with Mr Darcy,” she replied as she fell back onto the bed, her hands resting on her stomach as she faced Elizabeth.

“Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth’s face involuntarily contorted into a grimace at the mention of Mr Darcy’s name.

Jane tilted her head, a quizzical expression in her eyes. “Why such a reaction towards Mr Darcy?”

Reluctantly, Elizabeth shared, “At the assembly ball, I overheard him talking with your Mr Bingley, he deemed me merely tolerable and not tempting enough to dance with.”

Jane’s eyes widened in surprise. “Oh, Lizzy. Perhaps he was just having a bad evening. Mr Bingley is very fond of him. He invited him to help him decide if Netherfield Park is worth buying rather than renting.”

Elizabeth’s thoughts shifted to her earlier conversation with Mr Wickham, but she chose not to share that with Jane,

not wanting to tarnish her sister's perennial optimism.

"Jane, any man who can dismiss someone so casually, without even knowing them, isn't worthy of much regard."

The room grew quiet, the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece providing a steady rhythm. Jane, breaking the silence, pressed on, "Lizzy, forgive me but perhaps your dislike of Mr Darcy is not rooted in his behaviour alone but rather in your longing for a certain gentleman."

Elizabeth's thoughts shifted to the mysterious Boreas, the man from the winter ball. Her heart quickened at the mere thought of him.

"I won't deny that's true. I do compare many to him, and I can't wait to see him again."

"Are you certain it is wise to focus so much on him? Is it not possible that there are other men out there? You told me yourself you worried that night was only magical because of the unknown," Jane said in her usual gentle tone.

"I did then, but when I saw him leaving, and I realised I would not see him again for at least a year, I knew. My heart ... I told you this before. My heart called out to him. There won't be another like him, I know it," she said, convinced that this was so. She'd known Boreas was the one for her all night, but she'd been too afraid to admit it.

She'd been too scared of what he might say if he found out she wasn't a highborn lady but only a gentleman's daughter. Yet now she knew he wouldn't have cared. He liked her as she was, false admittance to the ball or not.

"What if he is not at the ball this year? what if he didn't feel the same?" Jane said, and Elizabeth's head snapped around.

"He will be there. I know it," she said.

Jane's concern was evident, "Oh, Lizzy, pinning your hopes on a chance meeting might lead to disappointment. A year is a long time, especially for young ladies like us. Look at poor Charlotte Lucas, already seven-and-twenty and no prospects for a husband."

Elizabeth shook her head, her determination evident. “I felt a connection with him, something genuine and long lasting. I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

Jane sighed softly, her love for Elizabeth clear in her eyes. “I just hope you’re correct, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth sank back on her bed, her eyes cast to the stark white ceiling above. She knew she’d see him again, she had to. She’d spent months waiting for him and searching for him. Surely he was doing the same. Indeed, would it not be lovely if they found one another sooner? If he found her? If he came to her?

She didn’t know how he might achieve such a feat, but in her heart, she hoped that he would somehow find her before winter was upon them again. That, she thought, would surely prove that they were meant to be together.

Or could Jane be right? Was she pinning her hopes on something that might never come to pass? She thought of the men she’d declined to dance with, the ones her mother had looked to set her up with, and Mr Wickham who would surely want to court her if given the chance ...

Was she making a mistake?

No.

This was why she hadn’t shared her feelings with many people. The less people knew about her quest to find Boreas again, the fewer doubts could be planted in her head. She would see him. She would. She had to.

Chapter Ten

Darcy

Darcy stood by the window admiring the landscape before him when Mrs Bennet's voice, considerably louder than the rest, penetrated his silence.

The woman, as loud and uncouth as she had been at the assembly, regaled Caroline and Louisa with tales of the country, each story reflecting her narrow perspectives. To have her tell it, dining with twenty families was an achievement to not only boast about, but to repeat as often as possible and as loudly as possible, lest the scullery maid below stairs missed the announcement.

Every proclamation from Mrs Bennet grated on his nerves, thus his retreat to the window. However, it didn't provide much refuge, for the entire Bennet family—minus the more sensible Mr Bennet, had congregated at Netherfield for tea.

“Why, in the countryside of Hertfordshire, we have the best gatherings!” Mrs Bennet declared, once more drawing attention to herself.

“Well, there are rather spectacular balls and dinners to be had in town,” Caroline said sounding weary of being told how wonderful country life was compared to London. “Indeed, there are grand balls to be found in London, better than any here. The Midsummer Night's Ball at Doncaster Manor, or the Twelfth Night masquerade ball at Darcy's uncle's home.”

“Ah yes, both balls we have yet to attend,” Mrs Hurst added. “Although I thought Mr Darcy might at least have arranged for us to attend his uncle's ball.”

Attention now turned to Darcy who shrugged. “I would have, had I attended it this year but since I did not, I could not very well issue invitations.” He faced the window again, not wishing Bingley's sister to see his face lest she read the lie.

Caroline waved her hand. “Oh Darcy, you can be such a terrible bore,” she said with a chuckle before looking back at Mrs Bennet.

“Faith, no!” Mrs Bennet exclaimed, clearly trying to direct the conversation back to herself or her family. “Bumping elbows with all manner of ruffraff at balls, and having to listen to all that noise coming in from the road? No. My brother owns a rather large home in Cheapside, are you familiar with it?” she asked, but did not leave time for anyone to reply before picking up her speech again. “I always tell him, Edward, the noise here. the noise! My nerves could not take it for longer than a visit. And the dinners of which you speak are so devoid of true warmth.”

“Mother, it is not as though you frequent so many as to be able to judge,” Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the second oldest daughter, spoke up now. Darcy had noticed that after Jane, she appeared the most sensible of the five—though the other three were thoroughly silly and devoid of substance.

“Of course, I can judge, Elizabeth. One only has to attend one such event to know. Besides, you have not been to any society balls so you would not know,” she said and clicked her tongue, silencing her daughter who blinked and glanced up at him.

She was rather pretty, he had to admit. And unlike her sisters, she carried a certain poise. Still, when their eyes met, she glared at him as though she wished to eject a thousand daggers into his. But why? They’d hardly exchanged a sentence.

Darcy’s lips pressed into a thin line while Mrs Bennet continued to decry his and Bingley’s preferred way of life. The implicit criticism of city life, which he held dear, did little to endear the Bennet matriarch to him. How had this conversation even started? He scratched his temple and then recalled—ah yes, Caroline had indicated she found life at Netherfield boring compared to the hustle and bustle of Town. This had apparently been a personal affront to Mrs Bennet, who continued with her ramblings, painting the countryside as the epitome of all that was good.

Not wishing to argue with her, for she'd made it clear she remained cross with him for refusing to dance at the ball, he'd bitten his tongue. He would not be able to continue this exercise much longer, however, without losing at least the tip of it. Thus, he excused himself.

"It is rather stuffy in here. I think I will take the air," he announced and made for the door before Bingley could stop him. Louisa and Caroline glared at him as he escaped. He did not care if the company thought him rude, he had to get out of that awful atmosphere. Instead, he stepped into the sprawling gardens of Netherfield, the shrubs and flowers bathed in the soft golden light of the afternoon sun.

He took it upon himself to inspect the gardens, passing a peaceful half hour in the kitchen garden during which his thoughts wandered from his home at Pemberley and his sister to his Beira, for that was how he thought of her. His Beira.

Four more months, and he'd see her again at last.

"Mr Darcy," a voice interrupted his reverie.

"Miss Bennet," he replied upon realizing Elizabeth Bennet had also escaped to the garden. He nodded slightly. I did not realise you had left your party."

"And I did not realise I needed permission to take the air," she replied rather sharply. "Besides, I had heard that the gardens at Netherfield are only tolerable, so I wanted to see if they were fine enough to tempt me."

Darcy frowned. What in the world was she talking about?

"They are pleasant enough," he ventured, unsure what else to say.

"I am sure they pale in comparison to your estate. I've forgotten its name."

"Pemberley," he said and stuffed his hands in his pocket.

"I see," she replied and looked right at him. Darcy inhaled sharply. There was something ... familiar about her. But how could that be? They'd hardly met and had spoken

even less. Though it appeared enough for her to decide she did not care for him.

“Well, it is nice to have ... a civilised tea, I am sure,” he said, uncertain what he’d meant by this and why he’d said it.

“What does that mean?” she asked, head dipped to one side.

What did that mean? Darcy wasn’t sure but what he did know was that he felt odd around this young woman, and he didn’t know why.

“Nothing. Just that it is pleasant to have tea and get to know one’s neighbours. especially for Bingley.”

“I do hope our little town charms him more than it has you.”

He narrowed his eyes. “What makes you think that I did not care for it?”

“I saw the way you rolled your eyes when my mother spoke,” she said, and he bit his lip. He wanted to remind her that she had spoken up and chided her mother, something considered rather rude but didn’t want to inflame the situation further. She disliked him, that much was clear. What wasn’t clear was why.

Before he had a chance to decide what to do next, the wooden door leading to the kitchen garden opened and a familiar figure appeared. Darcy groaned inwardly. This was just what he needed ... Caroline.

“Darcy, there you are. I wondered where you’d—” she stopped mid-sentence when she spotted Miss Bennet standing there, though Darcy was sure she’d seen her from the door. Her mock surprise was just that—a way to emphasise the fact that he and the young woman were out here alone. “Well, Miss Eliza, I did not see you here. enjoying the gardens? Or the company?” Caroline’s voice dripped with sweetness,

“I assure you it is only the gardens I am here to enjoy, nothing more.”

Darcy heard the slight in her tone but said nothing. Caroline, on the other hand, appeared intrigued by the animosity that tainted the air.

“Ah, I see. Well, I had heard that you favour the company of a different sort,” Caroline said and let her eyebrows dance in a way Darcy knew she thought she was attractive and intriguing. In reality, it was annoying and nothing more.

“Pray, what do you mean?” she asked, and Caroline shrugged.

“Miss Bennet, I hear you and Mr Darcy have a mutual acquaintance. Mr Wickham, I believe?”

Darcy’s face darkened at the mention of Wickham’s name. Alarm bells rang in his head. Caroline had heard of Wickham and his deed, of course, so her bringing it up was nothing more than to stoke the fire she knew burned in Darcy’s chest. He knew he should not give in to her goading, but he could not help himself. When it came to Wickham, he lost all control.

“Wickham is here in Meryton?” he asked sharply.

Miss Bennet met his eyes in a way that could be described only as defiantly. “Yes, he’s stationed here with the militia.”

“Then I am sad to hear it and hope our paths do not cross. I urge you to take caution when it comes to that man,” Darcy said but refrained from saying anything further.

The young woman narrowed her eyes. “I must say I find him a rather charming gentleman. He certainly has a great many tales to tell.”

He felt his lips twitch with irritation. “That he does, I have no doubt. And I see you take a great interest in the gentleman.”

“I have a keen interest in anyone who has been mistreated,” she replied, arms crossed.

Darcy blinked, and a scoff escaped him before he could stop it.

“Ah yes, he has been greatly mistreated,” he said with a shake of the head.

“And you have only disdain for him.”

They looked at one another for what felt like an eternity while Caroline watched the exchange with wide eyes, clearly pleased with herself. Darcy could not take any more of this and bowed slightly to both ladies.

“If you will excuse me, I’ve had rather enough of the ... air.” he added and walked in large steps back to the house.

As he did so, his mind wandered back to Wickham. Had that despicable man told Miss Bennet Banbury tales as he was prone to do? It was likely. And it should not bother him. Anyone of consequence knew what George Wickham was truly like, and thus Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s opinion ought not to trouble him. And yet, as he entered Netherfield House, he could not help but feel unsettled. He wasn’t sure what the sensation was, only that it twisted his insides around and filled him with an anger he hadn’t experienced in almost eight months. Not since the night he’d had to chase the weasel out of his home for the second time.

And now, just as he’d thought Wickham was finally in his past, here he was again ingratiating himself with the woman whose sister sought to marry his best friend.

Darcy’s mind raced and images of a future in which Wickham was inextricably entwined in his affairs by way of his best friend materialised before him. Wickham and Miss Elizabeth Bennet, married. Bingley and Miss Jane Bennet married. And him? Forced to keep Wickham’s company through the connection.

And what about Georgiana... his poor sister. She’d be exposed to Wickham again if he were a member of their social circle. To avoid this, Darcy could think of only two things. Sever ties with the Bingleys and thus with his best friend—or ensure that Bingley’s connection to the Bennets was severed sooner rather than later. If Bingley was to see that Jane Bennet was an ill match and moved on to another lady, then Darcy would not have to worry about Wickham and his plans. He

could marry any of the Bennet girls for all Darcy cared—just as long as there was no relation to Bingley.

As the Bennets prepared to leave Netherfield, Darcy's troubled thoughts remained. He had to convince Bingley to abandon Miss Jane Bennet. He'd convinced himself that it would not be too difficult to do, given that he sought out Bingley, finding him in the library.

"Bingley," Darcy began, "I must speak to you."

Bingley looked up, his face alight with the glow of newfound love.

"Why so serious, Darcy?" he asked with a smile.

"It is a rather serious matter indeed. It is about Miss Bennet and her family. You should be aware of certain aspects of the Bennet family."

"You mean Jane? I'm quite taken with her."

Darcy hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "It's not just Miss Bennet, but her family. They're not the sort you want to align the Bingley name with."

Bingley's brow furrowed, "What do you mean?"

Feeling cornered, Darcy finally confessed, "That emergency during the winter ball? It was Wickham. He tried to approach Georgiana again, after everything he did. He's a scoundrel, Bingley. And now he's connected to the Bennets."

Bingley's expression was conflicted. "There will always be people connected to Wickham, Darcy. You cannot shut them all out of your life. Besides, it is hardly Miss Bennet's fault that Wickham arrived here just as she and I got to know one another. Besides, she is not the one keeping his company. Her sisters are."

Darcy took a deep breath and dipped his head from one side to the other. Why was Bingley being so stubborn? Couldn't he see that anyone associated with Wickham was doomed from the start? It was ridiculous.

“Charles, I am only looking out for you, you must know this,” he implored.

“I know you do, and I will consider your advice. You have never led me astray but Jane, she is precious to me.”

Darcy expelled a prolonged breath and nodded. “Very well. I suppose that will have to be enough. I shall bid you a good evening.” He bowed to his friend and turned before speedily making his way to his chamber. It was infuriating, he thought, that a man as intelligent as Charles Bingley could not see that Darcy wanted nothing but the best for him.

As Darcy stormed up the stairs to his chamber, he realised that if he wanted Bingley to avoid making a terrible mistake that would perhaps ruin him, he’d have to find a way to persuade him—and soon.

For the way Charles looked at Jane Bennet spelled nothing but trouble.

Chapter Eleven

Elizabeth

“This is grand, I’ll say,” Mrs Bennet said as she stepped into the ballroom of Netherfield House later that week. Elizabeth followed her mother’s gaze, and indeed, there was no denying it. Mr Bingley—or rather his servants—had turned the already impressive manor house into a true spectacle for tonight’s ball.

Though it did not compare with the ball at Matlock House. Nothing ever could, unless her dear Boreas was present. She thought back to earlier in the week, when her family had been invited to Netherfield for tea. Until then, she had not realised that the Earl of Matlock was Mr Darcy’s uncle. While he himself was not present at the ball, perhaps he might he know who Boreas was? She had considered asking him, but given their strained connection and her unwillingness to divulge such personal matters she thought better of it.

Beeswax candles flickered in the two crystal chandeliers above, while gossamer drapes had been hung to give the space a comfortable feel. The sounds of a string quartet filled the air around them, the atmosphere was one of joy and celebration. Already, guests happily danced, their silks and satins swishing melodiously with every movement. Remnants of intricate chalk drawing were still visible on the floor, though smudged now by the hems of ladies’ dresses and the soles of gentlemen’s shoes.

“Ah, what a shame. We’re too late! I wanted to see the drawings,” Mary lamented loudly before glaring at Lydia. “I told you to hurry.”

“You cannot hurry beauty!” Lydia bellowed back, already drawing the wrong sort of attention from those around them. “With all these officers here tonight, I had to look my best.”

“A shame you didn’t succeed,” Mary grumbled, and Lydia pushed her so hard, she almost knocked over Elizabeth, who’d been keeping out of the argument.

“Stop it, both of you,” she hissed and looked around the space.

“Looking for your Mr Wickham?” Kitty asked, but Lydia chimed in again.

“He won’t be here. He told Mr Denny he wouldn’t come because of that dreadful Mr Darcy,” she exclaimed, and Elizabeth grimaced. It was true, Mr Wickham had told her the very same thing when she’d asked if she’d see him at the ball. Not that she had a burning desire to see him. Still, it had bothered her to hear he would miss out on the event due to Mr Darcy’s actions against him.

“That dreadful man,” her mother muttered. “Ten thousand pounds a year, and not an ounce of class.

“There’s Jane,” Elizabeth called, eager to get away from her family before they drew more attention. Jane, who’d left for Netherfield earlier in the evening, eager to help Mr Bingley’s sisters prepare the ball, looked a vision in her beautiful white dress. She’d helped Jane put flowers in her blonde hair earlier, and the wildflowers looked beautiful against the dress’ hue.

“You look lovely,” Jane exclaimed when Elizabeth joined her.

Elizabeth felt her cheeks flush, she had worn a flowing gown of periwinkle blue, and had threaded cornflowers in hair to complement the colour.

“Thank you, Jane,” she said and looked around the room just as Mr Bingley walked past her. “Miss Elizabeth, what a vision you are.” He stopped and bowed more deeply than necessary. “Beauty indeed runs in the family.” He did not face her as he spoke but rather fixed his eyes on Jane, who beamed.

“You must excuse me, both of you. I have to find my sister, she wanted to be alerted as soon as Lady Rivers arrived.” He hurried away with Jane’s sparkling eyes fixed to his back. Elizabeth smiled as she gently elbowed her sister.

“You are moon-eyed over him,” she said in a chirpy tone and Jane’s smile only widened.

“I am, our meetings have been such a joy.” She grabbed her arm. “Oh, Lizzy. I hope he will make an offer. I dare not say it out loud to anyone but you, but I hope it will be so.”

“It will be, do not fret,” Elizabeth smiled, genuinely happy for her elder sister. “You deserve all the happiness in the world.”

“I hope we both find out a happy ending, Lizzy. Mr Bingley and I and you and ... You still have your heart set on Boreas?”

Elizabeth frowned. “Of course. It is but a few months until I see him again.”

“Very well. I could not help but notice that Mr Wickham has been by the house more frequently, that is why I thought perhaps—”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, he’s just a friend, Jane.”

Jane raised an eyebrow, her head dipped to the side. “Does he know that?”

Elizabeth nodded, her expression determined. “Yes. And even if he didn’t, my heart waits for the Twelfth Night ball, and for Boreas.”

Jane was about to reply when Mr Darcy entered the ballroom, his tall and commanding presence drawing attention. Although it could not be denied that the attention wasn’t entirely positive. When he’d first arrived in Meryton, there had been much excitement, for it was rare that not one but two eligible, wealthy men came into town. Alas, he’d quickly alienated all of Meryton due to his behaviour at the assembly. Still, it was clear that not everyone had disavowed him, for several ladies visibly pushed their daughters in his direction.

Oblivious to this, Mr Darcy scrutinised the room and paused upon spotting Elizabeth. Their eyes locked before he gave a formal, respectful bow. Elizabeth grunted under her breath and curtsied, although if her mother had seen it, she’d have censured her for the half-hearted effort.

Jane, observing the interaction, leaned in closer to Elizabeth, “Can’t you at least try to be civil with him, Lizzy?”

“Why ought I? He has been nothing but haughty we met him.”

“Yes, but there’s a lot you might not know.”

Elizabeth bit her lip as she watched Mr Darcy disappear in the crowd. What could her sister mean? More importantly, did it matter? She had no intention of keeping Mr Darcy’s company, not tonight or ever.

Elizabeth picked up a glass of sherry and made her way back to Jane, who’d just finished dancing with Mr Bingley when Lydia’s voice sounded out from across the room.

“Let’s play, Snap-dragon! Mr Bingley, it will be such fun!”

Elizabeth exchanged a quick, slightly anxious glance with Jane. “Snap-dragon? That does not strike me as a good idea.”

“Not in the slightest,” Jane agreed. “Where is Mother? She must put a stop to this post haste.”

Unfortunately, at that very moment, their mother rounded the corner, her eyes alight with excitement—or the influence of wine.

“Oh, what a marvellous idea, Lydia. Yes, Mr Bingley, every good ball must have games. And Snap-dragon is just perfect.”

Around them, others agreed, and Elizabeth closed her eyes, wishing someone, anyone would speak up. She was not opposed to games and found them rather enjoyable but Snap-dragon, the popular game where raisins soaked in brandy—which was then set alight—were fished out and extinguished in one’s mouth, was not the sort of game she trusted her sisters with. They tended to grow too boisterous at the best of times.

Mr Bingley, ever eager to please his guests, especially those related to Jane, chimed in with a cheerful, “Why not?” He signalled to the servants, who began preparing for the game. His sister, Caroline, sauntered over to Elizabeth and Jane, her lips puckered in disdain.

“Snap-dragon? It is such a horrid game, and so childish. Snatching raisins out of a fire? Whoever had such a preposterous idea?”

“And in summer at that,” Mr Darcy chimed in. Elizabeth blinked, surprised to see him once more. “It is a Christmastide game.” To her surprise, however, he didn’t sound entirely put out at the idea, unlike Caroline who shook her head and departed.

“Come, everyone,” Mr Bingley soon called as a bowl was brought into the room and placed upon a high table. A crowd gathered around the table and Elizabeth found herself pulled forward by Lydia, eager to have her join.

As the raisins soaked in brandy were set aflame in an ornate bowl, the room grew tense with anticipation. Guests began to gather closer, their faces illuminated by the ghostly blue flames.

Lydia clapped her hands together in a rhythm and soon, the guests fell into the familiar chant that always accompanied such a game.

Even Mr Darcy, who usually appeared so reserved and distant, was coaxed into joining. As he took his place beside Elizabeth, he remarked, almost begrudgingly, “Rather silly to sing at this time of year. It’s not even Christmas.”

“Come now, Mr Darcy, surely you can appreciate a little entertainment.”

“I can,” he replied. “Though I’ve not played this since I was a child.”

Elizabeth wasn’t sure what it was, but she felt a surge of glee overcome her and smirked. “Afraid, Mr Darcy?”

He met her gaze squarely. “Hardly. I simply prefer not to burn my fingers for the sake of a raisin. They are detestable at the best of times, and do not improve after being set alight.”

She narrowed her eyes, the wind suddenly knocked out of her as she remembered Boreas saying something very similar at the Twelfth Night ball. He too had an aversion to Snap-dragon on account of his dislike of raisins. Who would have

thought that of all people it would be Mr Darcy who reminded her of her beloved Boreas?

“Lizzy, your turn,” Lydia prompted her, having snatched her raisin already.

Pushing her thoughts aside, Elizabeth extracted a raisin from the flames and watched Mr Darcy pluck one as well. He did so with an ease that was truly impressive.

“See? I can do it, I simply do not like to,” he said and placed the raisin in his mouth.

“You’re not supposed to eat them, Mr Darcy,” Lydia called out and bent over with laughter. “You’re supposed to collect them. Don’t you know?”

“Yes, Mr Darcy!” Kitty chimed in, her eyes wide and sparkling—a clear indication she and Lydia had over indulged in the spirits even before this game. “Whoever collects the most will find his true love in the coming year.”

“Well, I already have eaten it, so I must hope and pray it does not bode badly for my romantic fortunes,” Mr Darcy said as her sisters giggled and Elizabeth wished the ground would open and swallow her for the mortification at her sister’s behaviour was truly immense.

Luckily, Mr Darcy ignored the taunts of her silly sisters while the guests continued to pluck at the raisins. When it was Elizabeth’s turn again, she was in such a dudgeon, she did not take much care as she reached for the flaming raisin as she had before and left her hand in the flames for a second too long.

“Ouch!” A sharp hiss escaped her lips as the flames licked her fingertips.

Instantly, Mr Darcy’s demeanour changed. “Miss Bennet are you alright?” he inquired, genuine concern lacing his voice.

She looked up, startled by his proximity and unexpected kindness. “It’s just a minor burn, but thank you for your concern, Mr Darcy.”

“May I?” he asked and pointed at her hand. She nodded and stepped away from the bowl, someone else swiftly taking their places.

“You ought to apply some honey, Miss Bennet. It will soothe your pain.”

“It is quite alright, Mr Darcy. I will when I arrive home. It is really nothing. I do appreciate your concern, however.”

Before they could continue their conversation, the playful atmosphere took a boisterous turn. Lydia and Kitty, always eager to be the centre of attention, were getting rowdy, especially in the company of the two young officers who’d taken Elizabeth and Mr Darcy’s places.

When Lydia threw her arm around one of the officers and pressed up against him in a way even Elizabeth found improper, Mr Darcy’s face, which had softened in his exchange with Elizabeth, tightened. “They are getting out of hand, I must say. Such behaviour is hardly appropriate,” he commented, unable to hide his disapproval.

Elizabeth, her pride stung and protective instincts flaring, retorted, “They’re young and having fun, Mr Darcy. There’s no harm in a little merriment.”

Mr Darcy’s jaw tensed. “There’s merriment, and then there’s impropriety.”

Elizabeth’s eyes blazed. She was in general agreement with him that Lydia was acting out of bounds, but the tone he used set her bristles up rapidly. “Perhaps if you indulged in a little impropriety now and then, you’d not be so quick to judge.”

“You presume to know a lot about me, Miss Bennet,” he said. “And yet you know nothing.”

Without another word, Mr Darcy excused himself, leaving a fuming Elizabeth in his wake. She retreated to the sidelines, trying to shake off the unpleasant change in their formerly amiable conversation. To think she’d been reminded of Boreas by this awful man. How haughty he was. How arrogant.

She glowered as the game finished and the orchestra started playing music again. Elizabeth took a deep breath, she could hear Lydia's laughter ringing out above everyone else's as she pulled a rather unwilling gentleman onto the dance floor. Her carefree spirit was on full display. Mr Darcy wasn't entirely wrong, she had to admit. Lydia was the embodiment of youthful folly, much to her dismay.

Just then, the familiar voice of her mother reached her ears.

"Oh, yes! My Jane has caught the eye of Mr Bingley," she was saying to a small group of ladies, most of whom were mere acquaintances. "And once they marry, it'll pave the way for my other daughters. With five of them, you see, it is essential that they marry well and to men of good fortune. But you'll see, my Jane's fortune will pay off for all of them."

Elizabeth cringed inwardly, her cheeks reddening. She knew all too well of her mother's tendencies to overshare, especially when it came to the prospects of her daughters. She shook her head, grateful that Mr Bingley was not near, lest he get the wrong impression of her mother and her declaration.

Alas, when she turned around, a lonesome figure in the corner of the room caught her eye and she groaned—for there, lurking near to where her mother had been standing, was none other than Mr Darcy. And his face told her that he had heard every word.

Chapter Twelve

Elizabeth

The night sky was sprinkled with stars and the half-moon stood high overhead by the time the ball came to an end and the Bennet family piled into their waiting carriage.

“I am wrecked,” Lydia said dramatically and dropped her head against her mother, who smiled benevolently, as if her daughter hadn’t made a spectacle out of herself.

Elizabeth shook her head when Mary elbowed her gently. “Have you a handkerchief? My nose is running.”

“You haven’t caught a cold, have you Mary? It is extremely poor form to catch a cold at a ball, people will talk,” her mother chided.

“Caught a cold?” Mary shot back. “I think not. Besides if ___”

“Perdition!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “I can’t find my reticule. Mother, we must return so I can look for it.”

Her mother let out a dramatic groan. “How can you forget your reticule, Elizabeth? Must you stretch my nerves at such a late hour? Very well. We shall return. Your poor father. He will be out of his mind with worry.”

“A few more minutes won’t hurt him, I am sure,” Jane said, as patient and calm as ever. Elizabeth rolled her eyes as her mother shouted for the carriage to be brought around again. She was certain her father was already in bed, gone to the land of nod hours ago. He was not the type to sit and wait impatiently for his wife and daughters to return. Quite the opposite. He’d likely enjoyed his evening’s peace and quiet and read a novel.

Once the carriage arrived back at Netherfield, she leaped out and rushed toward the house.

“Do not run, it is unbecoming for a lady,” her mother bellowed after her, while Lydia cackled. Ignoring them, she

rushed up the steps and headed back into the manor's opulent halls, Elizabeth made her way to the drawing room, where she had last seen her reticule. The soft glow of candlelight bathed the room in a warm, inviting ambiance. A handful of guests remained, but most were making their way to awaiting carriages. She examined the side tables but found them empty, save for the goblets and cups the servants had not yet cleared away. She pressed her lips together in concentration, mentally trying to retrace her steps, when it came to her. The chaise!

She sat and ran her hands along the gap between the cushion and the seat when her fingertips found it, she retrieved her reticule and gave a sigh of relief. Elizabeth was about to return to the carriage when voices drifted from the adjacent room. The drawing room led to the music room, she knew this from prior visits. French doors connected the two rooms, and she could clearly hear Mr Bingley's voice. Not wanting to eavesdrop, she made for the exit when—

"...the entire Bennet family is horrid." Mr Darcy's voice boomed out and Elizabeth immediately stopped in her tracks, all propriety and good manners forgotten. What was this man up to now?

They were talking about Jane, there was no doubt. Elizabeth quietly walked back to the door, this time closer so she could do what she'd vowed not to, eavesdrop.

Mr Darcy's usually composed voice now carried an undertone of frustration. "Bingley, you cannot seriously be considering Miss Bennet for a wife," he said, his tone disdainful. "Her family is insufferable, her mother rude, and her connections deplorable. I've learned that they are in danger of losing their property to my aunt's vicar, that dreadful Collins. Mrs Bennet must find a rich man to save the family. And I am afraid you are he."

Elizabeth's blood boiled at Mr Darcy's words, her anger bubbling beneath the surface at his exaggerated description of her family's faults, but she couldn't interrupt. He was trying to ruin her sister's happiness and she had to know exactly how far he intended to go, so she could warn Jane. Surely after hearing this not even Jane could find anything good about Mr

Darcy. What if Mr Bingley believed him? What if he ended his connection to Jane?

Mr Bingley's response, however, took her by surprise. "Darcy, you're mistaken," he countered, his voice resolute. "Miss Bennet is nothing like her family. She and Miss Elizabeth are refined ladies. I adore Jane and won't hear a word against her."

A smile spread on Elizabeth's lips as she heard this. Mr Bingley truly was a man worthy of her sister's heart.

Mr Darcy, though initially unyielding, seemed to relent ever so slightly. "Very well, I concede that Jane Bennet might be well-bred, through some miracle but the younger sisters? You saw how they acted. And the mother? Announcing to everyone that you'd open the doors or pave the way or whatever, for the younger sisters to get rich husbands? How can you consider such a match?"

So he conceded that Jane was well-bred? That impossible, impossible man, Elizabeth she curled her hands into fists and shook them when her already thin patience wore out entirely. She could not let him continuously disparage her family. She had to speak up even if it was considered improper.

Elizabeth grabbed the door handle and pulled it open. Gathering her breath, she stepped forward, her voice carrying a tone of righteous indignation as she gazed at the assembled group.

"Mr Darcy, your arrogance is astounding," she declared, her eyes blazing with anger. "My family may not be of the highest station and my sisters not as refined as some other young ladies, but we are by no means without connection or pride. As for my sister being a poor choice of wife—I'd like to remind you that we are above Mr Bingley in terms of social standing. My father is a gentleman, while Mr Bingley is a mere trader."

Mr Darcy stared at her with his lips parted as though he were a fish recently extracted from the sea. It appeared her

words had rendered him incapable of speech as he stared at her, eyes wide. Opposite him, Mr Bingley paled.

A sudden worry overcame her, and she turned to Mr Bingley. "I didn't mean to cause offence. I only wished to state the facts, since Mr Darcy thinks the possibility of a match with Jane is such a terrible prospect."

Mr Bingley, evidently embarrassed by the exposure of their conversation, rose from his seat. "Miss Bennet, I apologise for the words you overheard. Darcy can be a bit rigid at times, and I assure you, he does not speak for me. I hold you and your sister in the highest regard. And your family in general, of course."

"You were not meant to hear this," Mr Darcy finally said, though he was utterly incapable of meeting her eye when he rose.

"I know I was not, but I am glad I did. Otherwise, you might have succeeded in disparaging my family entirely. As for the entailment, I can assure you that while it is unfortunate, it has nothing to do with my sister's affections for Mr Bingley. She is a pure, good soul who'd never harm anyone and who doesn't deserve the treatment you've given her." She stared at him as he shuffled his feet.

"I beg your pardon," he suddenly blurted out and hurried out of the room, leaving her alone with Mr Bingley who looked at her sheepishly.

"I do apologise, Miss Elizabeth. You truly were not meant to hear it but since you did, I want to assure you I have no intentions of listening to Darcy. He means well, but he can be—"

"Rigid, you said," she reminded him, and he let out a chuckle.

"High in the instep, is what I was going to say but he has a good heart, like Jane. Truly, I hope in time you will see that as well. And I am certain he will regret his words and actions come morning. Please do not hold his words against me."

Elizabeth wasn't quite sure what to say to that. She hadn't meant to embarrass his friend, but she'd had to defend Jane.

“I did not act as a lady should. It was not my intention to eavesdrop, I was merely retrieving my reticule which I'd left. I do hope you won't hold my actions against me either, Mr Bingley.”

Chapter Thirteen

Darcy

The next morning, in the grand dining room of the manor, Darcy found himself seated alone at an ornate table laden with an array of breakfast items that would normal have made his mouth water, soft-boiled eggs placed delicately in silver egg cups, platters of cheese and meats, freshly baked bread along with lots of marmalade, butter, and honey. A pot of tea sent steamy tendrils upwards. Sugar and milk sat beside it and when Darcy slipped into a seat, he knew he should be hungry.

Yet, amidst this sumptuous spread, Darcy's appetite was minimal.

And he knew exactly why. His guilty conscious had robbed him not just of his sleep but of his appetite as well. He'd spent half the night pacing his chamber, walking grooves into Bingley's fine hardwood floor. The other half he'd spent tossing and turning in bed as shame and regret washed over him in alternating waves.

His thoughts had centred on Elizabeth Bennet's vigorous defence of her family, which replayed in his mind repeatedly—her strength, loyalty, and the fiery conviction in her eyes stirred something deep within him. It was how a person should feel about their family, even if they had their faults. Indeed, he'd seen the flicker of mortification rush across her face when her younger sisters had acted so improperly. Yet, she loved them and was willing to stand by them and defend them against her own better judgement. Wasn't he like this when it came to Georgiana?

She'd acted recklessly and in a manner that would surely ruin her reputation if word of her actions ever got out. Though he'd abandoned Beira, the woman he loved, to rush to Georgiana's aid. He would have done anything for his younger sister, no matter how foolish her actions.

And Miss Elizabeth Bennet was much the same. Those very qualities made it impossible to dismiss her—indeed, he had spent the night reflecting on this. Had he been wrong to attempt to dissuade Bingley? No, he had to protect his friend. Miss Bennet might be passionate, but her passion did not negate the fact that her family would cause Bingley nothing but unnecessary obstacles in his quest to join the gentry and elevate his family.

“Ah, what a delightful spread,” his friend’s voice came from the hall, and he joined him. Bingley appeared as jovial as ever, which gave Darcy pause for he’d expected him to be cross with him about the events of the previous evening.

“Good morning, Charles,” he said and watched as his friend pulled out a chair, sat, and instantly loaded his plate full of delicacies.

“I am quite famished. It must be all the vigorous dancing,” he said and smiled at Darcy.

Darcy shifted in his seat, a frown between his eyes.

“Are you not ... upset?” Darcy began earnestly.

“Because of last night? Not in the slightest. I will admit I was in high dudgeon for a little while but then I realised. I truly love Jane. Her family’s status doesn’t matter to me. I wish to marry her, and I shall ask her father’s permission. Today.”

Darcy stared at Bingley as though his friend had just shared plans to conquer France.

“Today? But—”

Bingley raised a hand. “Darcy, nothing you can say will make me change my mind. Caroline and Louisa have already come to me with the same concerns time and again. Now, at last, I feel confident enough in my feelings to say that I care not what any of you want. Jane is the woman I love. I shall marry her.” Darcy sat back, unsure of what to say. If Elizabeth Bennet had not shown up the day before, he might have put up more of a fight, but she’d pointed out a few truths.

The Bingleys were of lower standing than the Bennets. And her sister was nothing like the rest of the family.

“I do not know what to say,” he admitted at last, but Bingley leaned forward, his fork pointing at Darcy like an extension of his fingers as it wagged in the air.

“I do know what you are trying to do. You want to protect me. I appreciate it. I do. But I love who I love. Besides, I would pose this question to you, what would you do if you discovered that Beira, whom you so dearly admire, came from a humble background?”

Darcy bristled at the notion. “Beira is a lady, Charles. No commoner would be graced with an invitation to my uncle’s ball.”

“I am a commoner and I have attended many balls and dinners I would not usually have received an invitation for because of my connection to you,” he pointed out.

His statement would brook no argument for there was none to be made.

In theory, Beira could have been invited by someone else, she could have been of humble birth. He didn’t think so, after all she carried herself like a lady and spoke like one too. But there was a possibility.

And if she were but a miller’s daughter, would he feel differently? He’d never have asked her to dance, that he had to admit. But now he knew her? No, he would adore her all the same. His heart would not long for her less if she were a governess rather than a lady. The admission was humbling indeed.

Bingley’s words had planted a seed of doubt, making Darcy question his deeply ingrained beliefs. After their meal he decided to take a solitary walk amidst the woods surrounding the manor house.

Once more, he thought of Beira, his mysterious love. The irony wasn’t lost on him. He, who often judged people based on their lineage and wealth, had fallen for a woman about whom he knew so little. She could be of lesser birth than even

Caroline Bingley. It became clear that he owed the Bennet sisters an apology, especially the indomitable Elizabeth.

Darcy was not the sort who enjoyed apologising for his behaviour, indeed, he often did not feel he had to apologise as he was most usually correct in his statements. In this case, however, he'd been wrong. And while he did not cherish the action, he would do what was correct and apologise.

In any case, it was clear now that Bingley would marry Jane Bennet and thus her family would be in Darcy's life as well. If he had any hope of maintaining the friendship, he and Bingley had forged over so many years, he had to be cordial with those who entered his life—no matter who they were.

He returned to the house and caught Bingley just as he was about to set out to Longbourn to speak to Mr Bennet regarding Jane. Delighted to see his friend come to his senses, he invited Darcy to join him—and together, they set off to Longbourn, each with a very different task at hand.

The carriage ground to a halt outside Longbourn and as Darcy exited, he took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet scent of flowers from the garden nearby. He followed Bingley to the front door where his friend stopped.

“Well, do I look like a suitable prospective son-in-law?”

Darcy smiled because he knew that Jane Bennet—and her father—would be pleased to accept Bingley's offer, but the fact that he was nervous was still endearing.

“Of course. Just remember, if he brings up your background in trade, make sure you let him know you are about to become a landowner,” Darcy said, though he knew Mr Bennet would not ask.

Bingley nodded, now having something to focus on.

“Well then, let us go,” he said and stepped to the door, perusing the large brass knocker when Darcy spotted movement in the garden.

He craned his neck and saw a woman pacing in circles around a large oak tree. He squinted and realised he was looking at Elizabeth Bennet, the very person he'd come to see. He parted ways with Bingley who disappeared into the house a moment later and made his way to the garden.

Elizabeth stopped and peered up at the imposing oak, her face marked with evident concern. Curious, Darcy approached and cleared his throat.

“Miss Bennet? Is there something the matter?”

She turned hastily, her blue skirts swaying with the haste of her motion.

“Mr Darcy, I did not expect to see you here,” she said, weariness lacing her words. “And yes, something is the matter.” She pointed upward and when he followed her finger, he saw the cause of the concern. A small white cat was visible between the green leaves, a pitiful meow filling the air.

“She’s climbed too high. I fear she might fall.”

Seeking to alleviate her concerns, Darcy waved a hand, “Cats often find their way into trees at Pemberley. They usually navigate their way down.”

Elizabeth shook her head, “Not this one, she lacks a tail and her balance is rather compromised. I cannot say what happened to her, poor Snowdrop must have been attacked by a dog or a fox when she was but a kitten, but other than the lack of tail, she is quite healthy. Though also rather adventurous.”

“Ah, I see,” Darcy nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. He knew well that a cat needed its tail for balance and lacking one, this one stood in true danger if she fell. And from such a height, the feline was prone to use up all of its nine lives at once. Swiftly, he unbuttoned his jacket, laying it neatly on the grass. Elizabeth watched in astonishment as he positioned himself at the base of the tree. “Mr Darcy, you surely aren’t...”

“Of course, I am. Someone has to get the cat down and I would not expect you to scale the tree. Besides, I have some experience, having climbed a great many trees in my time,” he

said and winked, though the truth was he hadn't climbed a tree in ten years or more and he did not trust his own balance to be much better than a tailless cat's.

Still, without another word, Darcy swung himself up onto the lowest branch. The bark was rough against his palms, and the higher he climbed, the more treacherous the branches became. But with determination fuelling him, he steadily approached the frightened feline.

He glanced down only once, determining this to have been a mistake and focused on the task at hand.

"Here, kitty, come here," he chirped, hoping to coax the cat from the middle of the branch where it currently sat, so he could pick her up.

Failing this, he leaned forward as far as he could. His fingers grazed the cat's white fur though all he received for his efforts was a rather unhappy hiss.

"Do be careful," Elizabeth called up, her voice trembling with worry—if for him or for the cat he didn't know.

Minutes felt like hours before Darcy finally managed to snatch the cat and pressed her against his body. He made his way down with the cat stuffed inside his waistcoat so only her head stuck out and made his descent. The climb down proved rather more treacherous than the journey up, due to the animal which squirmed and cried.

"Almost down, cat," he said and slid off the last branch, feet solid on the ground.

He retrieved the cat and was about to place her on the ground when it hissed at him and dug her claws deep into his right hand.

"Ouch!" he bellowed while the cat leaped away and toward the barn.

"Oh, Mr Darcy," exclaimed and took hold of his hand as if by instinct.

Her hand curled around his felt odd and yet rather pleasant. The last time he had been touched in such a way was

at the ball at his uncle's home when Beira had gently held his hand.

However, there was nothing romantic about this particular gesture as she examined his scratches, both from the tree's rough branches and the cat's claws. The scratches burned and he saw blood running along the back of his hand.

"This will need to be tended to," she declared.

"I'll see about getting some vinegar when I return to Netherfield," he said but she shook her head.

"It cannot wait, Mr Darcy. A wound must be cleaned at once."

He smiled, touched by her firm concern. "I did not know you were an apothecary, Miss Bennet."

She looked up at him, a small smile on her lips.

"My mother might be loud and rude, but she does know a bit about treating wounds. With five children, which comes with the day-to-day tasks. Come, let us go into the kitchen."

Elizabeth Bennet led him into the house. In the quiet confines of the Longbourn kitchen, she soaked a cloth in water and vinegar. Gently, she dabbed at Darcy's wounds, the coolness of the solution providing some relief. As he sat on a stool and watched her work, Darcy could not deny that the closeness felt natural. Indeed, in addition to the vinegar, he smelled hints of bergamot from her perfume.

There was a warmth to the scent that made him feel nostalgic for reasons he could not quite discern.

"I cannot express my gratitude enough, Mr Darcy. It was a brave thing you did," Elizabeth murmured as she worked.

Darcy, watching her careful ministrations, replied, "It was nothing, Miss Bennet. I couldn't stand by and watch."

Their proximity in the quiet room intensified the atmosphere. Changing the subject, Elizabeth remarked, "Snowdrop is quite fond of climbing. Much like the animals at Pemberley, I presume?"

Darcy chuckled softly, “Indeed. We have our fair share of adventurous animals. I remember a particularly spirited Dalmatian I had as a boy. Quite the troublemaker.”

Elizabeth looked up, intrigued. “A Dalmatian?”

“Yes, a gift from my father. I named him Crusoe, after a book my mother used to read to me. He had an insatiable curiosity, not unlike our tree-climbing friend here,” Darcy reminisced, a rare fond smile playing on his lips.

“Robinson Crusoe?” Elizabeth said with a smile. “I enjoyed that book very much, though surely it is not suitable for children?”

Darcy laughed, “On reading once more when I was older, I saw that she had changed the story somewhat, and had omitted parts that were less suitable for young ears.” He realised that he had not considered what interests Elizabeth Bennet may have. He wondered if they shared more in common than a taste in literature.

“I always wanted a dog, but my mother finds them a nuisance. She isn’t fond of any animals but will tolerate the cats as they catch mice.” Elizabeth said, pulling him from his reverie.

Darcy raised an eyebrow. “I’d gladly tell her that terriers make excellent mousers if you’d like. It might nudge her in the right direction.”

She smiled and opened her mouth to reply before closing it again. She looked away at the cloth in her hand and carried it to the side, her back to him. As he watched her, the reason for her change in mood came to him.

“She is not fond of me,” he said. A statement. Not a question.

“No,” she admitted and glanced over her shoulder at him.

“She is not. I dare say, if you did speak to her it would make her more resolved not to allow a dog to set foot on these premises.”

He took a deep breath and cleared his throat. He'd yet to do what he'd come here for, and now was as good a moment as any.

"Miss Bennet, I came here for a reason." He turned, the chair scraping across the floor as it moved with him. "I wanted to apologise. I should not have said the things I said last night."

She turned, facing him once more. "Don't you mean you were sorry that I overheard?"

He smiled at her defiance, for he'd expected it. "No. well. Initially, yes. But I had time to think, and realised that I was wrong to judge your sister by your mother's words and the things I found out by way of my aunt regarding the entailment... I was wrong to think that."

She stood up and walked toward the window. "I am aware my mother can be difficult, and Lydia and Kitty are silly girls. Even my father will admit it. Thus, I cannot judge you entirely for having a poor opinion of them. And I know you care for Mr Bingley a lot."

"He is my dearest friend," he said, quicker than he'd anticipated. "I see him as a younger brother, and I am very protective of him. He is a kind soul, but he can be gullible. He sees the good in everyone, and sometimes that makes him an easy target for those with ill intentions."

This time, she smiled broadly. "My sister is much the same."

Darcy grinned and rose, joining her at the window.

"You and I will have to keep an eye out and ensure nobody takes advantage of them."

"We shall have to," she agreed. Then, her smile faded. "As for the entailment on Longbourn, I assure you it is not the reason Jane wants to marry Mr Bingley. It is an unfortunate burden on our family, but we can manage."

Darcy looked at his shoes and regretted ever making such a suggestion.

“I beg your pardon for what I said in that regard. Although I would like to tell you that entailments can be broken. If your father would like to attempt it, I could perhaps assist in finding a solicitor. Besides, Mr Collins, the gentleman in question, is known to my aunt. Perhaps I could help.”

She opened her mouth, her eyes wide as though he had given her a gift she did not know what to do with, however, whatever she'd meant to say was silenced as a knock on the door interrupted them.

Darcy heard heavy footsteps as the Bennet family's housekeeper went to the door, and muffled voices drifted in. Then, the housekeeper entered.

“Pardon the intrusion, Miss Elizabeth. A caller is here for you. Mr Wickham.”

Darcy's stomach dropped at once, and bile pushed up his throat.

“I will go,” he said quickly and was about to walk out of the front door when he thought better of it. Wickham was at the door—and he was the last person Darcy wanted to see. Swiftly, he turned, bowed, and slipped out of the back door feeling father like a thief in the night.

“Mr Darcy,” she called after him, but he was already strutting around the garden in search of the gate. The last thing he wanted was to see George Wickham. No. The last thing he wanted was to see George Wickham with Elizabeth Bennet.

He knew Wickham's story, he knew what he was capable of. And even though he hadn't known Miss Bennet very long, and even though he had disliked her until this day, he felt a sense of protectiveness over her—a protectiveness he also knew he could do nothing about.

For Wickham already had his claws in the young woman, and sadly, she did not trust Darcy enough to take his advice. Thus, he was forced to do the one thing he hated doing least of all, wait.

Chapter Fourteen

Elizabeth

The expansive grounds of Longbourn were bathed in the soft, golden hue of the afternoon sun when Mr Wickham approached Elizabeth, his typically charming grin in place. “Miss Bennet, might I steal you away for a stroll?” he inquired, extending his arm.

Elizabeth, ever gracious, linked her arm with his, allowing him to lead her away from the house. “I must say, it seems I’ve rescued you from Darcy once more,” Mr Wickham remarked with a hint of smugness.

She looked at him, her expression thoughtful. “Actually, Mr Wickham, I didn’t feel the need to be rescued this time,” Elizabeth replied, a gentle smile tugging at her lips. There had been a change in Mr Darcy, a warmth that she hadn’t seen before. The memory of their easy conversation still lingered in her mind.

Upon mentioning Mr Darcy’s act of rescuing her cat, Mr Wickham’s demeanour shifted. The usual spark in his eyes dimmed, replaced by a distant, contemplative look. He remained silent for a few moments, lost in thought, before abruptly changing the topic.

“Miss Bennet,” he began, his tone more serious than Elizabeth was accustomed to, “There’s something I’ve been meaning to discuss. It’s a tad awkward, but I find that I’ve grown rather fond of you.”

Elizabeth halted, taken aback. She liked Mr Wickham, appreciated his charm and easy conversation. But romantic feelings? She had never truly entertained the thought. Choosing her words carefully, she responded, “Mr Wickham, you’re a dear friend. But there’s a matter of the heart I must attend to. There’s someone I have feelings for.”

Mr Wickham studied her for a moment, his gaze intense. “Is it the gentleman known as Boreas from the Matlock ball?”

Elizabeth gasped as she wondered how he knew of this mysterious man. With a soft sigh, she replied, “Perhaps.”

“Elizabeth,” he began, pausing to find the right words, “I am Boreas.”

The weight of the confession left her momentarily speechless. Her mind raced to the night of the masquerade, the lingering touches, the shared laughter, and the rushed departure. It had been Mr Wickham all along? The entire evening had been so unusual and unreal, could she have been talking to Boreas all this time and have been unaware?

“You?” Her voice barely above a whisper, her wide eyes locked onto his. “But, how is that possible? Why did you not say anything until now?”

A rueful smile crossed Mr Wickham’s face. “I wanted a chance to get to know you. You see, we did not have a chance to exchange our true names that fateful night, but that is what made it so magical. That night, under the guise of Boreas, I could be someone free of history, of judgments.”

“Judgement? What judgement? I would not have judged you then, nor now,” she asked, a little incredulously. Her mind furiously trying to remember details of that evening, things she may have missed.

He sighed deeply, “I wanted to reveal myself as soon as I found you—and it took me a long time to find you. But then I heard you were associated with the Darcys, it was all so complicated. I feared Darcy told you lies about me, made you feel prejudice against me.” he shook his head. “I didn’t want to ruin what we had. I tried to stay away from you, but the same draw I felt to you that night took hold of me again and I could not stay away.”

Elizabeth’s thoughts raced. How could it have been Mr Wickham? Everyone at the ball was either an aristocrat or, at the very least, a member of the gentry.

“I do not understand. I thought you and the Darcys had a falling out. How were you at the ball?”

He dropped his shoulders. “There they are the questions I was afraid of. Well, you do deserve an explanation. As you know, I’ve known the Matlocks and Darcys for years. We’ve shared winters, like the ones we reminisced about, ice skating at Hyde Park. It was a time of innocence, before divisions, before distances. Before Darcy drove a wedge between myself and the family.” He looked out into the distance. “But there are still some within the family who are kind to me. They invite me, year after year. And for one night, I can pretend I am still a part of the family that has rejected me so mercilessly. It is really rather pathetic of me.” He kicked a small rock as if to lend emphasis to his words.

Her thoughts a whirlwind, Elizabeth tried to reconcile the image of Mr Wickham with her memories of Boreas. “You should have told me sooner. You knew I would be searching for Boreas ... for you.”

Mr Wickham looked away, “I wanted you to see me, Elizabeth, as George Wickham, not just as the enigma from the ball. But perhaps I waited too long.”

“I do not know what to say,” she muttered, incapable of expressing anything further. This was too much. Far too much. Her thoughts raced when something came to her.

“But you told me you had a sister. At the ball. You spoke of her with frequency. You told me that is how you knew where the Earl kept his ice skates so....”

“So, we could skate on the Serpentine. I know. And what I said is true. Indeed, while I do not have a sister by blood, I was brought up at Pemberley, as you know. Darcy might never have been like a brother to me, as his father wished, but his sister Georgiana was like a sister to me. She loved me as a brother, until Darcy filled her head with lies and I lost her.”

He sounded genuinely upset about this. Elizabeth wanted to ask him more but did not have the chance.

“I understand this is a lot to think about. Please, take all the time you need. But do know that I adore you as much now as I did that night at the ball. I do hope you can find it in your heart to put aside all you have heard about me and see me for

who I am. Your Boreas, to my sweet Beira.” He took her hand and kissed it, his eyes locked on hers.

Elizabeth stood and stared at his lips kissing her gloved hand—and she realised she felt nothing. Nothing at all. The tingle of delight when Boreas had touched her, even by accident, was absent. The longing, the love—none of it flooded her as she’d expected it would.

As Elizabeth watched Mr Wickham retreat, she could not help but wonder, was everything she thought she knew and felt wrong? Had she been mistaken? Or was it simply the shock of this revelation that stunted her feelings?

Elizabeth’s bare feet patted across the wooden floor, the only sound filling her small bedchamber. The shock of the afternoon continued to bear down on her with all its weight and she could not calm her thoughts. Again and again, she conjured up the events of the evening and tried to insert Mr Wickham’s face into the pictures.

It did not work. Her mind refused to admit that the man she’d dreamt of—the man whom she had conjured up in countless fantasies, was none other than George Wickham. She’d pictured herself face to face with Boreas, without his mask on. She’d imagined how it would feel, the surge of love that would overtake her—yet hearing Mr Wickham’s admission had brought no surge of affection for him. It was all so bewildering.

A soft knock interrupted her reverie. Jane entered, her face aglow with an excitement she tried to contain. However, the moment she set eyes on Elizabeth, her countenance changed, and Elizabeth saw Jane’s jubilation turn to concern. “Lizzy? Whatever is the matter?”

Elizabeth sighed and curled a strand of hair around her index finger. “It’s Mr Wickham. He... he is Boreas.” She dropped onto the bed, got up again, and sat back down.

Jane blinked in surprise. “Are you certain?” She sat beside Elizabeth and grabbed her hands.

Elizabeth nodded despondently. “He told me so himself. Only you and our sisters know of the details. Nobody else would know about him, I didn’t even tell Charlotte.”

“Are you sure? How would he have even received an invitation? He is no longer close to the family,” Jane said.

“I know, but he explained it. And truly, I should not have been there either,” she shrugged and scratched the side of her head. “He has no reason to pretend, after all. He gains nothing.”

“How do you feel about it?” Jane asked, her voice heavy with compassion.

Elizabeth chuckled bitterly. “The irony, Jane! I felt no inclination towards Mr Wickham before and now... discovering he’s Boreas changes nothing. In all honesty, Mr Darcy, with his infuriating ways, evoked more emotion in me than Mr Wickham ever has.”

“Mr Darcy?” Jane’s voice betrayed her confusion.

“He helped me with Snowdrop when she got stuck and ... he apologised and ...” she waved. “It does not matter. Mr Wickham is the one I must think about, not Mr Darcy. Mr Wickham is the one I have longed for all these months—apparently.” A chuckle escaped her, and she shook her head.

Jane rubbed her back as though Elizabeth was still a small child. “Perhaps, given time, you’ll see the man you fell for at the ball in Mr Wickham. Sometimes, feelings need the right circumstances to blossom. But remember dear Lizzy, it is not as if you were betrothed to this Boreas. If Mr Wickham does not inspire the same feelings you had on that night, then you owe him nothing.”

Elizabeth looked at her sister, the pain evident in her eyes. “I wanted a fairy tale, Jane. But now, I’m not even sure what I want. What if it all was a dream? An illusion? For, to tell you the truth, I’d rather have spent more time with Mr Darcy than Mr Wickham and now I must reconcile my dreams of Boreas with the reality. It is impossible.”

“Give it time, Lizzy, which is all you can do.”

Elizabeth nodded and looked out of the window when suddenly, she realised she'd forgotten just how happy her sister had looked when she came here. Her foolish worries had overshadowed what had to be truly delightful tidings.

“Jane,” she said and turned to her sister. “You must tell me, you were beaming when you entered. What has happened? I saw Mr Bingley arrive.”

Jane grinned so broadly her entire face lit up. “He spoke to Father. To ask for my hand. Lizzy, he’s made an offer, I am engaged!”

Elizabeth’s heart leaped with joy, and she pulled her sister closer, inhaling her citrus scent. “Oh Jane, I am so delighted for you. You deserve it more than anyone I know!”

She let go of her and held her hand and in that moment, her worries over Mr Darcy, Mr Wickham, and Boreas lifted and all she felt was true, genuine happiness for Jane.

Chapter Fifteen

Darcy

Late September 1811

Darcy sat in the parlour two days later and examined the scratches on the back of his hand. Oddly, a smile tugged on his lips as he did, and he thought back to his conversation with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. He had been surprised how well their meeting had gone and how open she'd been to accepting his apology.

Of course, having saved her cat certainly went a long way toward earning her forgiveness. Yet, even he could not have imagined how well it would go.

Their conversation had been positively enjoyable. So much so he'd been disturbed to have it come to an end—and especially because of Wickham's arrival.

“Wickham,” he grumbled under his breath.

“Oh, so you heard,” Caroline chirped as she entered. She stepped behind his chair and ran her hand along the edge, as if to touch him, but she didn't quite dare.

“Heard what?” he asked, perturbed by her interruption.

“About Wickham. It seems dear Wickham has made his move on Miss Eliza Bennet.” She slunk into a chair near him, her legs crossed at the ankles as she looked at him rather like a hawk with its eyes on the prey.

Darcy pulled his shoulders back, already alarmed. “And how would you know that, Caroline?”

“Well, I make it my business to get to know the family I am so unfortunately to be connected to by marriage.” She rolled her eyes, making it clear what she thought of her brother's new bride-to-be. “So, I called on them this morning and one of the wretched little girls could not stop talking about it. And Mrs Bennet is rather over the moon as well at the

prospect of having not one but two of her daughters wed. Miss Eliza was a little downcast, however. Not her usual spirited self.”

She shrugged while Darcy’s fingers curled up, and he dug his nails into the leather under his hands.

“Is she not? Perhaps she has seen him for who he is. If she hasn’t, I ought to warn her.”

“Warn her? As you warned Charles off Jane Bennet? I dare say, your words of wisdom fall on deaf ears, Darcy. A shame. I never would dismiss your wise counsel but then, not everyone has common sense.”

He ignored the oddly worded complement she was paying herself and took a deep breath.

Elizabeth could not consider Wickham, surely. He would cause her nothing but upset. Besides, there was always more to his actions than met the eye. He had to want something from her, but what?

The family didn’t have much to begin with, and the house would pass to Collins—unless the family fought the entailment. But Wickham would not know about this, for he’d only just brought the matter up.

Could it be he wished to marry into the family because he’d heard Bingley might join it soon?

That had to be it. Wickham was a simple man when it came to his schemes. He wasn’t a terribly intelligent fellow either, so none of this came as a surprise to Darcy as he considered the matter further.

“Darcy?” Caroline called, a little sharper as if she’d already spoken to him and he hadn’t heard or chosen to ignore her.

“Yes?”

“I asked if you would like to go into town with me later today. Along with my sister, of course. We would not want any impropriety. There’s been enough of that around here, would

you not agree?" she said and blinked, evidently eagerly awaiting his reply.

"I—"

"Sir, a letter has arrived for you," the butler said as he strode in with a silver platter upon which a letter rested. Caroline clicked her tongue and slipped out of her chair, her lips puckered with irritation at the interruption.

At least she knew how it felt now, Darcy thought to himself as he took the letter.

"Thank you, Thomas," he said, and the butler departed, leaving him alone. He frowned as he glanced at the seal—the letter was from his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. He broke the wax seal and unfolded the letter, his lips pursed as he took in the words.

"My dearest Fitzwilliam,

I trust your stay in Hertfordshire is going well. I hope your friend appreciates the great amount of time you are taking to help him in his venture to rise up in society. It is always highly commendable when a young man seeks to better himself and his family. There are too many who are quite the opposite..."

Her letter carried on for some length about the unfortunate changes she'd observed, particularly in Town, the drop in morals and the lack of politeness in society. Darcy knew these complaints well and had heard them a great many times, thus they washed over him rather like a quick summer's rain. He let out a deep breath.

"I do also hope that Mr Bingley finds himself a suitable bride. Please, ensure it has someone of good standing and high morals, we cannot have a young man seeking to rise up among the ranks held down by someone unsuitable. Mr Collins informs me his family, the Bennet's, are in want of several husbands but I must say from what he has told me, they would be most unsuitable. I trust you will keep them away from him."

Darcy cringed at the prospect of having to tell his aunt that Bingley had chosen exactly that family, but that was a problem for another day.

“Of course, not everyone can be as fortunate as my Anne, who stands to become a Baroness. Oh, if my dear husband was alive now he would be so happy. I do know it must be hard for you to let her go. I know you had your heart set on marrying her.”

Darcy rolled his eyes. His aunt had a gift for turning reality on its head so that it suited the narrative she'd created for herself.

He flicked the page over and shook the letter to smooth it out before reading again.

“However, I do know that of late you have been fond of another lady. How fortunate that you met someone the same night my darling Anne received an offer. I do know that you have longed to fill the place left by Anne in your heart with your Scottish lady and I have set out to help you.”

Darcy sat forward at once, his eyes wide. Beira? His aunt had been looking for Beira?

He hadn't told many people about her, but he had asked his aunt if she was familiar with the young woman. She hadn't been at the time, and beyond asking a few questions, she hadn't been terribly interested. However, it appeared that it had changed.

“I have made many enquiries into the matter. Your cousin Richard has been most helpful when it comes to providing information. Please, do not be upset with him, he means well. And he was wise to come to my aid for I have found your Lady Beira. Of course, her name is not Beira, but Catriona. Anyhow...”

She'd found Beira? Darcy leaped out of his seat and paced the room. His aunt had found Beira? And her name was Catriona? How ... he raised the letter again, eagerly drinking in the words.

“She is the daughter of a Scottish lady and an English gentleman, they live in Newcastle. Now, I am not familiar with them as they are friends of your Aunt Matlock. However, I have already arranged with her to have the young lady come for a visit. Unfortunately, the family are about to depart for Cornwall and will not return until December when they will be in Town for an extended period. I invited her to Rosings the week before Anne’s wedding—which I am sure she has already written to you about, thus I shan’t bore you with details. Suffice to say, I am expecting you to visit us the first week of December for Anne’s wedding, as well as to meet your young lady whom I have invited to dinner. You may express your gratitude in person.”

He dropped the letter, his thoughts swirling rapidly. She was found. Lady Catriona. His Lady Catriona. And he would meet her. He had so many questions he could hardly sort them in his head.

The timing was, of course, dreadful. For of course, as soon as she’d been found, she had to leave for a journey with her family. He wished he could see her right now, or at least write to her but it would not be proper. And writing to her father, which would be the correct thing to do, was out of the question. For what could he say? That he’d spent time with his daughter alone at a ball? That he’d taken her ice skating and was now utterly moon-eyed over her and could not wait to see her again?

He’d be declared utterly bird-witted and would never see her again. No, it would not do. Not at all. He would have to bide his time—but he knew that doing so would be all the harder now that he knew he had found her and would see her again.

“Darcy,” Bingley said as he entered, a wide smile on his lips. “You left before I could tell you of my success,” Bingley beamed and slipped into his seat.

“Success?” Darcy asked, confused for a moment. Then, he remembered. “The hunt went well, I imagine?”

“Wonderful indeed. Mr Bennet shot a pheasant and was exceedingly proud of himself and Mr Phillips likewise. Wickham missed several times and left rather red-faced. I wish you’d been there, it was rather amusing,” Bingley said with a smile, but Darcy only nodded his head, not terribly interested in the matter. The less he heard about Wickham the better. Indeed, hearing that he had been included in the hunt made him think back to what Caroline had told him about Elizabeth Bennet and Wickham appearing close.

Despite himself, he looked at Bingley. “Pray, have you seen Miss Elizabeth Bennet? How does she fare? Did she wait for the party to return with bated breath?” he asked, the bitterness in his tone surprising him. Bingley shook his head, blond hair falling into his face.

“She did not. And I dare say, Wickham appeared a little unhappy about this. He looked around for her, but she was not to be found. Indeed, it turned out she’d gone into town, knowing fully well he was about to return.” He shrugged. “I am uncertain what the connection is between them, but I dare say it is all rather peculiar.”

“I’ll say,” Darcy grumbled under his breath.

“Will you warn her off him?” Bingley asked and Darcy looked up.

“Warn her?”

“Tell her what sort of man he really is,” Bingley finished. Darcy hadn’t considered telling Miss Bennet the truth about Wickham’s character. He’d attempted to imply it and she’d rebuked him rather severely. He was not eager to earn such a reaction again. And yet, it had troubled him to know she was keeping his company. He wanted to warn her, to tell her to stay away but what right did he have?

“I fear it would not be well received, Charles. Not after what she overheard me saying about her sister.”

“I thought you had made peace with one another,” Bingley replied, his forehead creased.

“We did. Indeed, we get along rather well but I do not want to risk ...” Risk what? He didn’t know for sure. He’d enjoyed her company and if things were different, he might have even considered spending more time with her—as improbable as that might have seemed days ago. But he liked her company, he enjoyed it. There were not many women he enjoyed being with as much. She challenged him, she ... Darcy shook his head, chasing away the notion.

He’d been entertained by a woman, challenged by one in much the same fashion Miss Bennet did. Beira. His Beira. She’d captured his heart and mind one evening. It didn’t matter if Miss Elizabeth Bennet was charming, clever, and managed to captivate his attention. She wasn’t Beira. Nobody was.

He’d found the woman of his dreams. Miss Elizabeth Bennet would never be anything but the sister of his best friend’s wife. And that would be that.

Still, he could not help but worry about her, especially with Wickham about. Indeed, every part of him wanted to do the one thing he ought not, protect her.

Chapter Sixteen

Elizabeth

Two weeks later

Elizabeth stirred her tea in the dainty porcelain cup, plumes of steam rising up from the hot liquid.

“Sugar, Miss Eliza?” Caroline Bingley asked in a syrupy tone that reeked of fakery. Now that Jane was to be married into the Bingley family, the sisters had to show more respect toward her and her family—the very family they had been so easy to dismiss—and it stung, Elizabeth could tell.

“Of course,” she replied in a similar tone and held out her cup. “Two lumps, please.” She watched as Caroline fiddled with the silver tongs and dropped in two lumps.

“Thank you,” she replied and looked out of the window. It was a lovely day, the heavy clouds that had ruined the view earlier in the day had now cleared. The sun was high up in the sky and birds soared. It was what Mary liked to describe as picture perfect.

Yet, Elizabeth felt no joy. Indeed, she’d not felt joy since the day, a fortnight ago now, that Mr Wickham had declared himself to be Boreas. They had spent more time together and he’d sought to ask her father to court her, but she’d so far resisted. She’d declared herself rather shocked by his revelation and he’d agreed to not make their courtship official until she could adjust. However, he had attempted to ingratiate himself with the family, something he hadn’t asked Elizabeth about first. This rankled her almost as much as his being Boreas.

Yes, there was no denying it. She did not like George Wickam’s revelation one bit. Heaven knows, she’d tried. She’d imagined herself ice skating with Mr Wickham, dancing, talking—but it had done no good. She’d in fact attempted to avoid him as much as was socially acceptable. A day or two after he’d made his confession, he’d gone to hunt

with the family and Mr Bingley—his attendance facilitated by her mother. She'd purposely not waited for the men to return alongside her mother, aunt, and Jane. They had all greeted the gentlemen with beverages and praise ready on their lips. Elizabeth had ensured she was delayed in town, so she did not have to play the part of doting wife-to-be.

She shuddered at the thought, realizing just how bad a sign that was. What was even worse was the fact that instead, her thoughts travelled back to Mr Darcy. It was almost inexplicable, but she truly wanted to spend more time with him, to learn about his childhood, his dog, his interests. Oddly, these feelings had only intensified since she'd discovered that Mr Wickham was Boreas. This in turn begged the question, were her feelings for Mr Darcy only now accelerating because she was so disappointed about Boreas' identity? Or was there more to it? She remembered her sister Jane's words, that she did not owe Mr Wickham anything, and sighed. While she may not owe him, surely she owed herself time? Perhaps she would come to love him...

"Cold, Miss Bennet?" A warm voice came to her ear, and she looked around, seeing Mr Darcy standing by the window behind her, his teacup held between his index finger and thumb as was proper. His face showed genuine concern, but she forced a smile.

"A little chilly."

"As is expected in such a large home," he said. "Pemberley is rather—"

"Such a splendid day for tea!" Her mother's voice tore through Mr Darcy's attempt at conversation and Elizabeth seethed inside as she flashed an apologetic smile at Mr Darcy, who looked likewise perturbed. "We shall have a great many more now that we are to be one family. Don't you think that is all rather grand, Mrs Hurst?"

The lady in question smiled but with the sort of expression one might have after biting into a lemon. "Such wonderful news!"

“Oh, Mr Bingley, you’ve made our Jane so very happy! Hasn’t he, Mr Bennet?” Her mother asked.

Elizabeth noticed that her poor father was trying to keep out of the conversation and was in the middle of taking a bite of his plum cake. “I believe our daughter has a mouth she is capable of using,” he replied after swallowing the bite down whole.

Jane beamed and nodded her head. “I am indeed.”

“She is fortunate, indeed,” their mother added.

Mr Bingley replied with a modest smile, “It is I who am the fortunate one, Mrs Bennet.”

Her mother waved a hand dismissively, her eyes twinkling, “Nonsense! A fine man like you? I wager all the young ladies in London are aggrieved that you are unavailable now,” she said with a gleeful tone that betrayed no sympathy for those poor souls now robbed of Mr Bingley’s company. “But we are grateful, of course.”

Her father interjected, his voice dry, “Indeed. Now if only we can set a date. It will ensure my wife’s poor nerves are not overly stretched.”

“Oh, Mr Bennet,” her mother cried with delight. “You are a good man, and I appreciate your concern for my poor nerves.”

“They have been my companions for a very long time,” he replied, ignoring her revelry by taking another bite of his cake.

Mr Bingley laughed heartily, “We were considering spring. The gardens at Netherfield bloom beautifully around that time.”

Jane nodded in agreement, “I think spring would be perfect.”

The chatter continued, and her mother voice led the conversation, full of ideas for Jane’s wedding. The way she went on, it sounded like the wedding was entirely her mother’s, rather than Jane’s. Elizabeth glanced up at Mr Darcy,

remembering her conversation with him not long ago about how similar Jane and Mr Bingley were and how prone to letting other people take over their plans because they were too amiable to stand up.

Mr Darcy met her glance and smiled as though he, too, remembered the same thing. The smile they exchanged was warm and genuine, and she wished he'd sat closer so they might converse a little, for it would draw her mind away from the ever-repeating rotation she was stuck in.

"Bingley," Mr Darcy said then. "Do you not think it would be beneficial to write down what you and Miss Bennet want for your wedding day? that way, you can see what truly matters to the both of you."

Mr Bingley looked up and smiled while her mother's face turned a little sour.

"Mr Darcy, I did not know you were such an expert when it came to planning events. Do you host a great many weddings as your ... What is it called? Pecklebey Estate?"

"Pemberley," Elizabeth said, a little sharper than intended. She had to admit, her temper had been short these past few days. Usually, her mother's purposeful mangling of the name Pemberley would have vexed her slightly, but she would have let it go. Not today.

Mortified, her mother glared at her. "Elizabeth! Do not correct me. We are in company."

Elizabeth wanted to retort but Mr Darcy, evidently sensing the switch in mood, stepped forward.

"I do indeed host a great many balls and dinners at Pemberley," he said. "But that is not the point I attempted to make. Rather, I wanted to make sure the bride and groom have the wedding day they envision. It is all well and good for us all to enjoy the day, but primarily it is about them."

"Hear, hear!" Caroline said and nodded her head, soon joined by her sister and even her father. Her mother's nostrils flared, and she sat back, sipping on her tea while glaring at Elizabeth, who likewise looked past her mother and nodded

appreciatively at Mr Darcy. He was a good man indeed, who genuinely worried for his friend.

“Jane always dreamed of a wedding breakfast outdoors,” she added, and her mother’s head snapped up.

“Outdoors? Surely not,” she exclaimed, but then she glanced at Mr Darcy, who blinked at her, his mouth pursed, and somehow, this simple look silenced her mother.

The conversation moved from there, and Elizabeth once more sunk into her state of semi-melancholy. She sighed deeply, drawing the attention of Mr Bingley.

“Are you unwell, Miss Bennet?”

She shook her head, not wanting to disrupt the afternoon now that it was less contentious.

“Just a megrim, Mr Bingley.”

“Megrim?” her mother pounced. “Is that why you have been in such a sour mood? Really, Elizabeth, given your good fortune of late, you should have no megrims.”

Elizabeth did not have the energy to explain to her mother that headaches did not take into consideration someone’s perceived good fortune—in her case, a dashing officer who wanted to court her.

Fortunately for Elizabeth, Mr Bingley cleared his throat.

“Perhaps Miss Bennet needs some fresh air. The grounds of Netherfield are quite refreshing at this hour. Why not take a turn about the gardens?” He smiled at her, all kindness and care, and Elizabeth felt a surge of happiness for her sister. This man would make her happy, she knew this without a doubt.

Grateful for the escape, Elizabeth nodded, her voice soft, “Thank you, Mr Bingley. I believe I’ll take you up on that.”

And with a brief nod to the gathering, Elizabeth retreated from the room, seeking solace in the tranquillity of the Netherfield gardens.

Elizabeth inhaled deeply. The gardens of Netherfield, with their sprawling flowerbeds, shrubs and meadows, were indeed the perfect escape. In the distance, she saw the clouds gathering again, signalling impending rain, but Elizabeth barely noticed.

Her mind drifted back to the same tangle of memories that had bothered her for days now. She recalled the magic of the evening at the Matlock ball, the masked gentleman named Boreas, with his enigmatic charm who had left an indelible mark on her heart. How could such a man and Mr Wickham be one and the same?

She longed for the months of mystery before she'd known his identity. Back then she still had the dreams of possibility before her. She'd cursed the question mark that had hung over her for so long, but now she wished for it back.

As she wandered deeper into her thoughts and further into the gardens, the memory of their dances, the laughter, the shared secrets of that night, played vividly in her mind. Yet, overlaying them with her interactions with Mr Wickham created a jarring dissonance.

Distracted, Elizabeth grazed her finger against a rough wooden trellis, when an errant splinter stuck in her finger. "Oh! Perdition," she muttered under her breath and inserted her finger into her mouth. The taste of fresh blood overpowered her senses, the metallic taste filling her mouth. When she extracted it, she saw a small splinter lodged in her fingertip, and she cursed herself for having taken off her gloves once she got outside. They might have protected her against this, but they were sticking out of her reticule, utterly useless.

She turned back just as droplets of rain fell, a sudden change from the earlier lovely weather. It was only a light summer's rain, but she was still unenthused about the possibility of getting drenched, so she gathered her skirts with her non-injured hand and rushed to the house.

As she approached, she spotted a familiar figure walking nearby.

Mr Darcy? What was he doing out here? She paused where she stood and watched as he adjusted his direction upon seeing her and came her way.

“Miss Bennet,” he said with a small smile. “I came out to see how you are feeling. I ...” he stopped as he looked at her bloody finger. “Goodness, what has happened?”

“A splinter. I took off my glove, foolishly, and ran it along the trellis.” She raised her finger and grimaced. “It is stuck, and I can’t bring myself to extract it.”

“Miss Bennet, you seem to have a talent for finding yourself in precarious situations.” He held out his hand to examine her finger, oblivious to the rain that was falling in a steadier fashion now.

Elizabeth chuckled weakly. “It seems to be a recurring theme, doesn’t it? One of us always seems to end up injured in some way when we are together.”

“Indeed. We ought to be more careful when in each other’s company, lest one of us faces a more grievous fate.” He smiled at her as he led her to the house. “Let us see if we can’t get this splinter out. Should I fetch your mother once we are inside?”

“Goodness, no!” she exclaimed. The last thing she wanted was to have her mother with her now. “I am certain she is still cross for what I said earlier.”

Mr Darcy smiled a little as he guided her up the stairs to the house. “I did appreciate your defence of Pemberley’s proper name.”

“And I your interference when it comes to Jane and Mr Bingley’s right to a wedding they enjoy, instead of one my mother might like.”

Mr Darcy knocked, and upon the butler opening the door, they made their way toward the servants’ staircase.

‘Your mother reminds me of my aunt, Lady Catherine. She is planning my cousin’s wedding at present, and I am certain it will be the wedding of my aunt’s dreams, rather than my cousins.’

“Your poor cousin,” Elizabeth said and shook her head.

“I am certain she is glad she can at least marry the man she wishes to marry. If my aunt had her way, I’d be the groom.” He wriggled his shoulders as if to shrug off this fate.

“You?”

“My aunt had it in mind that my cousin Anne and I are the perfect match. She claimed she and my mother planned it, but my mother never mentioned it to me, so I cannot put too much stock in Aunt Catherine’s word.”

Once they had made their way into the still room, Mr Darcy requested a pair of tweezers, along with some vinegar.

Once a rather surprised cook had a maid fetch them, he sat Elizabeth on a stool and set out to extract the splinter from her finger.

Taken aback, she blinked at him. She’d expected him to get a maid or servant to do it. Never had she thought Mr Darcy would do so himself.

Noticing her confusion, he smiled. “My sister Georgiana frequently had splinters as a child. After my mother’s death my father was often inconsolable, and I was tasked with tending to her.”

Their close proximity, combined with the gentle pressure of his touch, created a rather charged atmosphere. Elizabeth looked into Darcy’s eyes, seeing not just the proud man she knew, but someone caring, protective. The more she got to know him, the more she saw how wrong she’d been in her judgments of him.

Elizabeth’s heart raced. There was an undeniable pull towards Mr Darcy, a warmth she couldn’t ignore. Yet, the ghost of Boreas, now known to be Mr Wickham, loomed in her thoughts. Torn between her memories and the palpable connection she felt with Mr Darcy, Elizabeth was once more plunged into a storm of emotions.

“All done,” he said and held up the splinter between the tweezers. She looked up, realizing she hadn’t even felt him extract it because she’d been so caught in her thoughts.

“A little vinegar now,” he said and dabbed a little on her fingertip and she winced.

“You are very attentive,” she said. “I appreciate it, as I am sure your sister does.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I think at times she is, but most of the time she despairs at my attentiveness. Overall, she thinks I am rather a bore.”

Elizabeth looked up, her mind flashing back to a conversation she’d had with Boreas. He had a sister who called him a bore.

“... difficult at times, especially when they are as spirited as yours,” Mr Darcy said, drawing her back to reality.

Elizabeth smiled, “That’s one way to put it. But truly, I often worry about them. Jane and I, we do our best to guide them, but the younger ones have an inclination for mischief.”

Mr Darcy nodded. “It’s both a burden and joy, ‘tis it not? Wanting to protect them yet allowing them the freedom to grow and make their own choices.”

His visage darkened then, as if an unpleasant thought had crossed his mind. “My sister recently made some unfortunate choices that were difficult to deal with.”

He wetted his lips, drawing his tongue over his mouth so that it left a shimmer.

He sat back and faced her, biting the inside of his cheeks, something she hadn’t seen him do before. When he spoke again, it was with a gravity to his voice that demanded her attention.

“Miss Bennet,” he began, choosing his words carefully, “I know it may not be my place and I have grappled with myself when it comes to speaking up but I feel I must. Wickham... he isn’t the gentleman you might think he is. I urge you to be cautious.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows furrowed, taken aback by the sudden change in topic and the gravity of his warning. Still, where once she might have mounted a stern defence of Mr

Wickham, she found herself more intrigued than angry. “Why do you say that? What do you know about Mr Wickham?”

Mr Darcy hesitated. “There’s much to be said, but now isn’t the time.”

“Please, do not leave me wondering,” she said and dipped her head to one side. Alas, just then, an almighty ruckus sounded from the kitchen as something heavy hit the floor, interrupting their conversation. A flurry of footsteps followed, and Mr Darcy rose, making his way to the kitchen to inspect the source of the commotion.

As she followed, Elizabeth discovered that the cook had dropped a large pan filled with hot drinking chocolate, which had flooded the kitchen.

A number of servants hurried forth to help clean up the mess. The activity was such that Elizabeth realised their conversation had to come to an end. They were in the way, for one. And for another, they had been gone for far too long. Thus, there could be no other option. Their conversation about the true nature of Mr Wickham would have to wait for another time.

With a nod towards Elizabeth, Mr Darcy turned to make his way out of the kitchen, the weight of unsaid words hanging heavily between them. Elizabeth watched as he retreated, the mystery surrounding Mr Wickham deepening in her mind.

Chapter Seventeen

Elizabeth

11th November 1811

Netherfield stood out like a beacon of light against the night sky as Elizabeth looked out of the carriage window.

Mr Bingley had spared no expenses to make the place truly remarkable. Every window on the lower floor glowed with candlelight, and music spilled out of the windows and front door as their carriage drew closer. She knew he'd only agreed to hold yet another ball to appease his new family, as did his sister Caroline, who'd grown more sullen the closer the wedding date approached.

Martinmas, the day that honoured the death of St. Martin of Tours, always coincided with the end of the harvest. Thus, feasting and dancing were traditional. Truly, it was a perfect way to ring in the coming Christmas season.

"Pity it was not a masquerade ball, eh wot?" Mr Wickham said beside her as the carriage turned into the driveway where it lined up behind several others. He had insisted on travelling with the Bennet family, yet another thing that had annoyed her. As they waited their turn to exit, she looked at him. He was a handsome man, there was no denying it. With his black hair and strong jaw, he looked striking, especially in his black tailcoat and green waistcoat. Still, her stomach failed to leap at the sight of him.

For the past two weeks, she'd tried to feel excitement, affection, any sort of emotion in the general realm of romance, but none came. At least not when looking at him. The image of a certain northern gentleman swam to the forefront of her mind, but she chased it away.

Since Jane and Mr Bingley were now officially engaged, she'd spent more time at Netherfield these past two weeks and more often than not, she found herself in Mr Darcy's company. They'd played chess or engaged in card games with others.

She'd thoroughly enjoyed it but their coming together had always been social, not romantic. After all, whenever she was invited to Netherfield, he was likely to be there. It was thus only natural they would converse, walk, or play chess. And the fact she enjoyed these activities surely only meant they were getting along.

At least so she told herself.

“Do you know why?” Mr Wickham prodded, flashing his teeth.

“No, why do you say that?” she asked, wishing for Mary to wake up. Thanks to Mr Wickham's imposition, the Bennet family carriage was not large enough to hold the entire party so she had been obliged to travel separately with him—Mary serving as a chaperone of sorts. However, she'd failed miserably in her duties as she'd fallen asleep almost as soon as they'd left Longbourn.

Mr Wickham cleared his throat. “Had it been another masquerade, I would have gladly donned my Boreas attire once more. It brought such fortune, after all.”

It took all her strength to smile back at him. Once upon a time, the name Boreas had elicited butterflies in her stomach. Now, it evoked dread. All those exciting memories she'd clung to all these months had been sullied by the realisation that they had been an illusion.

Whatever she'd felt for Boreas, she did not feel for Mr Wickham.

How could this be? How could she feel nothing? Recalling the conversation at the ball that fateful night she dipped her head to one side.

“It was a spectacular outfit indeed. And remind me again, who was it that inspired the Boreas outfit?”

Mr Wickham hesitated momentarily, but gave a casual shrug as he responded, “Oh, it was an officer friend of mine. He once described such a costume after attending a masked ball in London.”

Her brow furrowed, her suspicion roused again.” But at the ball, you mentioned it was your sister’s idea. Or rather, the lady you regard as a sister? Georgiana Darcy?”

Caught off guard, Mr Wickham laughed awkwardly. “Well, I couldn’t possibly reveal too much then, could I? It would have given away my identity.”

Elizabeth studied him, her doubts growing. He’d spoken disparagingly of Miss Darcy, until she’d asked him who the sister was that he spoke of at the ball. Then she’d suddenly been like a sister to him. And now this.

“Mr Wickham, you seem to have an answer for everything.”

He responded with feigned indignation, “Miss Bennet, ever since our revelation, you’ve been interrogating me at every turn. One would think you’re trying to uncover a mystery.”

She paused, reflecting upon her actions. Indeed, over the weeks, she had been nitpicking, looking for inconsistencies in Mr Wickham’s words, for reasons to pull away. She hadn’t even been aware she was doing it, but every time an inconsistency revealed itself, a flicker of hope ignited—as if she truly did not want to believe Mr Wickham was Boreas, even if he had an explanation for everything.

At the same time, she realised she had been gravitating towards Mr Darcy. Their chess games at Netherfield had become a cherished ritual. Their conversations, deep and meaningful, were something she eagerly anticipated. The contrast between her relationships with the two men was becoming starkly apparent. Already she dreaded Mr Darcy’s imminent departure.

He was to travel to Kent the following morning to help prepare for his cousin’s wedding. He would not return until after the New Year. She already missed him even though he hadn’t yet gone. Did that make her an awful person?

Here was Mr Wickham, a man who did his best to charm her family, and who genuinely wanted to court her and she had

no interest in him. Yet, the man who would soon leave and who had not outright attempted to court her at all, was the one she thought about more and more.

Pulling herself from her reverie, she responded, "Perhaps there are mysteries that need unravelling, Mr Wickham."

"There are a great many mysteries that need unravelling indeed. Such as why our charming host keeps such poor company," Mr Wickham said just as the carriage door was opened. Elizabeth followed the direction he was looking in and there, at the top of the steps, she spotted Mr Darcy.

Her heart leaped the second she saw him, and she let out a small groan.

"That is the Elizabeth I know and adore. We despise the same people," Mr Wickham said and climbed out so he could hand her out.

She smiled at him though not without tearing her eyes from Mr Darcy who nodded at her but then diverted his attention to her parents, who just now climbed the steps to be greeted by Mr Bingley and then Mr Darcy. Elizabeth sucked in the evening air and held her breath, eager to steady herself as they made their way toward the steps, Mary now groggily stumbling behind them.

Chapter Eighteen

Darcy

Standing tall beside Bingley, Darcy greeted the arriving guests with practiced politeness. He wasn't the host of this ball, but since Caroline and Mrs Hurst were both rather put out by the prospect of another ball attended by the Bennets and their brethren, they'd decided to forego the custom.

Being a good friend, Darcy had volunteered to greet guests alongside Bingley, who was utterly oblivious to his sisters' apprehension.

Or rather he did not care. He was besotted with Jane Bennet, Darcy knew this. Nothing and nobody would be able to part them. He had accepted this, and sooner or later Bingley's sisters would have to as well—or they would risk losing their brother.

"Ah, look. There he is," Bingley muttered under his breath and nodded his chin toward the carriage. The Bennets were presently making their way up the steps with their two younger daughters while behind them, Elizabeth and Mary walked their way—and on Elizabeth's arm was none other than Wickham.

Darcy swallowed down bile as he greeted her parents and sisters, one eye always on Wickham.

He had to admit it gave him a flicker of hope when he saw the way Elizabeth looked at the man. There was no affection, no admiration. Instead, she looked as though she'd rather be anywhere but here.

Surely, he could not be the only one who noticed?

When Wickham and Elizabeth approached, he felt his expression tighten momentarily but recovered quickly, not wanting to give Wickham the satisfaction of seeing him out of sorts.

He watched as Bingley greeted both, marvelling at the audacity Wickham possessed to show his face here. He'd had the good sense to sit out the prior ball, knowing he'd not be welcome. Since his involvement with Miss Bennet, however, he had grown bold.

"Darcy, so we do meet again. It is rather unfortunate we haven't crossed paths since we've both been in this little town, isn't it?" he said and extended his hand.

Darcy's nostrils flared and he kept his arm firmly at his side.

"Wickham," he greeted Wickham with a curt nod, while offering a genuinely warm smile to Elizabeth.

"And Miss Bennet. It is lovely to see you again."

"And you," she replied. Beside her, Wickham shifted, his smile frozen on his lips.

"Perhaps we can find time to finish our game before I leave tomorrow," he said in a low voice. They had started a chess game the week before but hadn't found occasion to finish it. Indeed, He had hoped by involving her in a game, it might open the opportunity to talk to her again about Wickham, but they had been interrupted each time they were in one another's company over the past fortnight.

Before she could answer, Wickham gently pushed her toward the door. "Excuse us," he said, decidedly less cheerful. Darcy looked after them as they disappeared into the ballroom, his heart heavy. He should not care about Miss Elizabeth as much as he did. So, what if she regretted her choice to be courted by Wickham—if indeed she was, for he'd heard conflicting reports.

Did it truly concern him? He was to leave for Kent in the morning to help with wedding preparations. Or rather, to help his cousin Anne keep her mother from turning the event into the wedding of the century. He'd received a pleading letter from Anne who had requested that both he and their cousin Richard come early so their aunt might be a little distracted.

Then, his aunt had written and informed him that Beira and her family would be calling on Rosings for a weekend before going on to London and thus he could meet her sooner than expected.

So he had no choice but to agree to come early. Still, he no longer felt that pull to see Beira. he wanted to see her, if for no other reason than to reignite that passion he'd felt, but somehow, his thoughts were occupied more and more by another—and she was presently walking away from him on the arm of another man.

Chapter Nineteen

Elizabeth

The music was gentle and rhythmic, echoing the heartbeat of every individual in the room. As she danced with Mr Darcy, they moved in harmony, their motions fluid and synchronised. The dim candlelight caught the sparkle in his eyes, casting flickering shadows around them. She imagined that she looked similarly entranced.

“So, Miss Bennet,” Mr Darcy began with a playful glint in his eyes, “are you ready to admit defeat in our ongoing chess match? I fear I was only a few moves from victory.”

Elizabeth let out a hearty laugh. “Mr Darcy, the game isn’t over yet. And you underestimate my tenacity.”

He chuckled, “Indeed, I’ve come to recognise and admire it. However, I do hope we can finish our game before I leave.”

The mention of his imminent departure faded her smile from her lips momentarily and she took a deep breath.

“It may not be possible, unless we find a moment this evening, so I can claim my victory,” she blinked and raised her eyes. “Or is there a chance you might yet return to complete it in due time?”

She saw the small twitch in his cheeks when she asked, but then his eyes filled with regret.

“I fear I shall be gone for some time. I am visiting my aunt, and my cousin will be married, and then there is Christmas and I must eventually return to Pemberley,” he paused. “As well as the matter of my—” he broke off and shook his head, giving Elizabeth pause. His what? What was he not telling her?

“That is a shame, for I was glad to have a partner with whom I could battle—on the chess board, that is,” she said thought she had enjoyed their battles of wills more than she’d wanted to admit. Eager to ease the suddenly heavy mood,

Elizabeth decided to ask after his estate, Pemberley. Speaking of it always appeared to cheer him immensely. Alas, this evening, she did not have the chance to so much as utter the question.

Mr Darcy's gaze shifted, and when she followed it, she caught Mr Wickham's watchful eyes from across the room.

"Miss Bennet," he said, his voice taking an even more serious tone, "I do not wish to be impertinent, but may I ask about the nature of your relationship with Mr Wickham?"

Elizabeth's eyebrows arched in surprise. His words were filled with a touch of concern, rather than a demand to. That alone made her more amiable to answer his query.

"It is an unusual friendship. He and I were friends but circumstances—" She looked over at Mr Wickham. "We are not betrothed or courting, I can tell you as much."

Mr Darcy exhaled, seemingly relieved, "I'm glad to hear it. Still," he continued, his tone cautious, "there's something you should know about him."

Elizabeth's curiosity piqued, "What do you mean?"

Mr Darcy looked around, noting the prying eyes and whispered gossip around them. "Perhaps, we could continue this discussion somewhere more private."

She knew she should not allow herself to be open to hearing unpleasant things about Mr Wickham, but she could not help herself. Something about Mr Darcy intrigued her, and the way he spoke, with such seriousness, truly drew her to him even more.

She nodded in agreement, and Mr Darcy led her to the balcony, where the serenity of the night welcomed them. She peered through the large windows into the ballroom where couples merrily danced and saw that Lydia had asked Mr Wickham for a dance, distracting him from Elizabeth.

Good.

She did not want him to know she was out here, with Mr Darcy, all alone. It was quiet on the balcony, peaceful

compared to the crush of people inside the busy ballroom, from where chatter drifted out still but muffled by the windows and balcony door. Below them, coachmen gathered and were waiting for their employers to finish their revelries, while above, stars adorned the sky's inky canvas, evoking memories in Elizabeth's heart of another moonlit night.

"I do thank you for giving me the opportunity to tell you what sort of a man Wickham truly is. Pray, what has he told you? Anything besides my supposed dastardly deeds?"

She took a deep breath and nodded. "He told me you took his living from him, that he was greatly favoured among your family and—" His scoff told her this was not so, but he did not interrupt her further.

"He also informed me that he and your sister, Miss Georgiana, are very close. Or rather, they were until you poisoned the connection between them. Mr Wickham speaks of her fondly, like a sibling. Is that true?"

Mr Darcy's face tightened, a storm brewing behind his eyes. "No, Miss Bennet. He never shared any such bond with my sister. Nor was he favoured by my family. Not now, not ever. He never shall be anything but despised." The words came out sterner, tinged in bitterness and venom.

A frown creased Elizabeth's forehead as she recalled Mr Wickham's words about Georgiana being like a sister to him. A wave of nausea overcame her, the weight of deceit evident. If he had lied about this, what else had he lied about? Again, she thought about how odd she'd felt when he revealed himself as Boreas. Could it be that he had lied about that too? But if so, why?

"Wickham has certainly never been a friend of my family. He was my father's godson, that much is true. He liked him but he always saw the best in everyone, not unlike your sister Jane," he paused and looked at her. "Miss Bennet, what I am about to tell you can never leave this balcony."

Elizabeth looked up at him, a shiver running down her back. "Of course," she agreed and took a deep breath, holding it in until she slowly let it out again.

“Last summer, Wickham sought to ingratiate himself with my sister. He visited her when I was away, convinced her that he loved her and that she loved him. She was only fifteen then, a mere child,” he said with all the disgust of a father who’d seen his daughter scandalised.

“He was aided by a trusted family employee, a grave mistake and entirely my oversight. He sought to spirit her away and marry her, for her fortune of course, not love. Something he readily admitted when I found out about the plan and put a stop to it.”

Elizabeth let out a gasp and looked inside at the man in question, who now danced merrily with her sister.

“He never loved her, you are certain?”

‘I am,’ he growled. “He admitted as much to me, Miss Bennet. Indeed, he gladly took a sum of money with the promise never to return. Of course, men like him never keep their word, and I had to chase him off my property again earlier this year, but that is a story for another time.”

He wetted his lips, a sheen appearing on them illuminated by the moonlight.

“Faith, I do not know what to say. That does not sound like the man—” she stopped speaking, unsure of what she was going to say. Who was Mr Wickham? She had to admit she did not know him well. They had bonded over their shared dislike of Mr Darcy and now ... over their night at the Matlock ball.

“If you do not believe me, ask Bingley. He knows all about it. I suppose it is because he knows that he chose to forgive my attempt at separating him from your sister,” he admitted, his voice a little incredulous.

“I do not doubt you, but it is a shock. As for my sister ... It was because of my connection to Mr Wickham you sought to part them?”

Mr Darcy buried his hands in his pockets. “In part, yes. Also, because I mistook your sister’s quiet nature for disinterest, but I have been absolved of that notion now. In any case, the idea of my dearest friend being connected to

Wickham by way of marriage, by way of you... it was impossible.”

She looked at her dancing slipper and wriggled her toes, unsure what to say. Everything made sense now. Indeed, as she stood there, her perspective of the world around her shifted—everything she’d thought she knew had been turned upside down, and nothing, she knew, would be as it had once been.

“I understand. Oh, Mr Darcy, I am grateful for you telling me what must have been a difficult tale.”

“I only ask that you not repeat it lest you must, my sister is fragile and must be protected,” he said, and she nodded, eager to appease his fears. However, before so much as another word could be exchanged, Caroline Bingley stepped onto the dancefloor and whispered something to the master of ceremonies who swiftly banged his staff on the ground.

“The games are about to begin!” he announced, and Elizabeth knew no matter how much she wanted to, she had to return. This most intriguing conversation with Mr Darcy had to come to a rather abrupt end.

“Lizzy,” Lydia shouted when she and Mr Darcy re-entered. “There you are. You almost missed Bullet Pudding, you silly girl. Come,” she said, then spotted Mr Darcy behind her. “Oh, Mr Darcy. Will you play?”

“I do not think a distinguished gentleman like Mr Darcy would play something as silly as Bullet Pudding. beneath his touch, I say,” her mother said in a snide tone, and Elizabeth closed her eyes with irritation. Why did her mother have to be so loathsome all the time? She’d never admit it, but something she saw was Mr Darcy’s point when it came to his concerns about her family. To her surprise, he stepped forward.

“I rather enjoy Bullet Pudding, where is the table?”

Elizabeth’s mother looked at him, lips pursed, and nodded her chin toward the drawing room. All around the room, small round tables had been set up upon which a cake formed out of flour rested. Knives had been put up all around

and on top of the flour, a coin sat—rather than the usual spent bullet. Elizabeth joined the table when Mr Wickham appeared beside her.

“Darcy is playing? I would pay good money to see his face covered in flour,” he said and chuckled, though Elizabeth found no humour in his words, not with everything she’d just discovered. A conversation was in order, for she realised now that even if Mr Wickham was Boreas, she could never love him, could never want to be with him.

However, for now, she pushed the thoughts aside and instead focused on the game before her. Aside from herself and Mr Darcy, a small group had gathered among them Jane, Bingley, Lydia, and Kitty.

Lydia, with her typical recklessness, went first. “Watch and learn!” she declared, making a bold cut. The crowd gasped, but the coin held firm.

Jane’s turn was marked by graceful precision. She examined the flour mountain, dipped her head from one side to the other before making a cut which did not shift the coin even a little bit. As she made her cut, Mr Bingley cheered, “Well done, Miss Bennet!”

“Very good, it is all in the hands, keeping them steady is the key,” Mr Darcy said and Elizabeth smiled, glad he did not appear too upset after having to repeat Mr Wickham’s wicked deeds to her.

When it was Elizabeth’s turn, she exchanged a playful glance with Mr Darcy. “Any advice, sir?”

“I am afraid I have none, but I do wish you luck,” Mr Darcy replied with a smirk.

“But not too much, lest you end up with a face full of flour, eh wot?” Mr Wickham said and laughed loudly, with Lydia joining him, though everyone else remained rather quiet. Elizabeth took a deep breath and made her cut, mastering it perfectly.

The game continued amidst laughter and playful banter despite Mr Wickham’s presence making her—and

undoubtedly Mr Darcy—uncomfortable. Each slice brought the coin closer to its floury doom. When it was Mr Darcy's turn for the second time, the mound had been cut down significantly, with the coin balancing precariously on top.

Lydia called out, "Mr Darcy, do try not to spoil your immaculate attire!"

"I have no intention of doing so, Miss Lydia," he said and bent forward to examine the situation at hand. Elizabeth bit her lips when he held out the knife and carefully made his cut.

Alas, despite his best efforts, the flour mound collapsed, and the coin disappeared into a crater that sent flour spilling into the room.

"Darcy, looks like it is you," Mr Bingley said and laughed as Mr Darcy undid his cufflinks and rolled his sleeves up, thought Elizabeth was certain this was more for the amusement of the others than any care for his attire, given it was bound to get covered in flour at any moment.

"Very well, I am a man of my word, and I shall retrieve the coin," he said and folded his arms behind his back. A chorus of laughter filled the room as Mr Darcy leaned down, his nose and mouth disappearing into the flour as he searched for the missing coin. Then, the laughter turned to a ringing orchestra of glee and joy when he emerged with a face blanketed in white flour.

When he rose to his full height, his eyes sparkling from behind a layer of white flour, Elizabeth wanted to laugh. However, as she studied him, her heart began to race.

For as she looked at him, his kind eyes, his face partially obscured by the flour—there was no doubt. The flour-masked Mr Darcy bore a striking resemblance to Boreas. The thought was fleeting but left an imprint on her mind.

"Look, Mr Darcy's donned a mask for the evening!"

Elizabeth chuckled, but inside, her heart was racing. She knew in her heart she did not want Mr Wickham to be Boreas, but could it be that he truly wasn't? Could it be that Mr Darcy had been the one all along?

But no... he had said that he did not attend the ball, and no matter how much she wished that Mr Darcy and Boreas were one and the same, it simply could not be so. What was she to do?

Elizabeth had longed to be alone with her thoughts, alas she did not get the chance. While Mr Darcy and the others who'd lost at their assorted games cleaned themselves up, she made her way back into the ballroom.

The music enveloped the room as Elizabeth, still reeling from her earlier revelations, found herself facing Mr Wickham again. Offering his hand with a knowing smirk, he asked, "Miss Bennet, why the hasty departure? Did the sight of a flour-covered Darcy dismay you as much as it did me?"

"No, not at all," she said coldly and Mr Wickham's eyes twitched.

"Remind me again, Mr Wickham, why did you not wish to play Bullet Pudding at the Markham's ball?"

Mr Wickham looked momentarily stunned, but quickly regained his composure, "I didn't wish to soil my costume."

Elizabeth nodded, those were not Boreas' words nor reason.

"Miss Bennet, must we stand here all night talking? We have yet to dance. May I have the pleasure?"

Reluctantly, she placed her hand in his, and as they began to dance, Elizabeth's thoughts were consumed by the many questions that swirled in her mind. Dancing with Mr Wickham now, every step felt off-kilter, every touch lacking the connection she had felt with Boreas. It was going to do no good. She had to know for certain if Mr Wickham was telling her the truth or if he was playing some sort of game, as he had done with Georgiana Darcy. She cleared her throat and pretended to smile, happy to be here dancing with him.

"I have a secret," she said, trying her best to sound impish.

“Oh?” he replied, eyebrows raised.

“I am growing rather tired of Hertfordshire,” she said and watched his eyebrows raise.

“Ah, it is a lovely place, but I must agree, it can be tedious at times. You ought to travel, Derbyshire is lovely if one stays away from a certain estate called Pemberley,” he said with a wink that made her feel nauseous.

“I have no desire to visit it, I am afraid. Though, I’ve been contemplating a visit to the Scottish Highlands soon. Such wild, breathtaking beauty. My aunt and uncle may take me on their next visit,” she said and watched his reaction.

Mr Wickham scoffed lightly, “Oh, I never cared much for the Highlands. If you want to see true beauty, I could take you to the Welsh valleys.”

Elizabeth heart pounded as her suspicions were becoming more and more confirmed. She frowned. “That’s strange. You told me at the masquerade ball that you had such a deep love for Scotland, you were speaking so fondly of it. Both the country and the folklore that inspired my costume.”

Mr Wickham’s brow creased, a bead of sweat forming. “I might have exaggerated my affection to impress you since you were dressed in a Scottish theme.”

Elizabeth felt her heart beat faster. Trying to corner him, she chuckled, “Ah, I see. That is rather a shame. It was our conversation about Scotland that made me long to visit,” she said and saw him swallow nervously.

“Well, let us not worry about it anymore,” she said easily. “Oh, there is Mr Darcy, all cleaned up,” she said and nodded in his direction when the next idea came to her.

“Ah yes, looks rather like his old self,” Mr Wickham said without adding anything snide, a drastic change for him.

“Mr Darcy was quite the sight tonight with his face covered in flour, did you not think so? It reminded me of the poor lady dressed as a snow queen at the Matlock ball who met a similar fate. I wonder if her family were mortified?”

He laughed, albeit nervously. “Oh, I imagine they were! I wish I knew who she was, for I would have loved to see her family’s reaction, alas it was a masked ball, and we shall never know now.”

Elizabeth’s stare turned piercing. She had him. She had him at last! “But you mentioned you knew the lady at the ball. How was she related to you?”

Visibly sweating now, Mr Wickham stammered, “Well, I might have met her a few times, but I can’t truly recall her name. The masks, as I just said...”

“But you explicitly told me she was a relative,” Elizabeth’s voice was steely, her eyes demanding truth.

Mr Wickham’s facade crumbled, his voice barely a whisper, “I might have embellished our connection.”

Elizabeth pulled her hand away and she came to a stop on the dance floor, her chest hot with rage.

“I am to believe you referred to a woman who is not your sister as a sister, you told me you loved Scotland on account of my costume, even though you do not like it and now you do not know who the lady was—despite telling me she was a relative of yours? Oh, and the lady in question was dressed as a swan, and not a snow queen. No, Mr Wickham. You lied. Admit it. You are not Boreas.”

Mr Wickham gulped, his confident demeanour shattered. “I... I may have been untruthful, but...”

“Enough,” Elizabeth interjected coldly as she took him by the arm and dragged him to the corner of the room. Once they were away from the “Why did you lie, Mr Wickham? Why lead me to believe you were someone you were not?” Elizabeth’s voice was a mixture of anger and hurt.

Mr Wickham ran a shaking hand through his hair. “It was Lydia who told me about your encounter with the mysterious man. She thought it was a romantic tale, but I... I saw an opportunity.”

Elizabeth’s brow furrowed, “An opportunity? To deceive and toy with someone’s affections?”

He looked away, avoiding her observation. "I thought if you believed I was Boreas, you'd see the folly in waiting for a phantom, and turn your affections towards someone real, someone like me."

A flash of disbelief crossed Elizabeth's face. "You are shameless. And what did you hope to gain from this charade?"

Mr Wickham shuffled uncomfortably. "Your hand, Miss Bennet. I believed if you saw me as your masked admirer, you'd be more inclined to accept me."

Elizabeth shook her head in dismay. "You played with my emotions, hoping to trap me into a match? You have proven yourself more deceitful than I ever imagined."

Before Mr Wickham could respond, a shadow moved across the entrance of their secluded corner. Mr Darcy, his face a mask of calm, had entered their area of the ballroom. Their eyes met briefly, and Elizabeth detected a hint of concern in his gaze.

Mr Wickham saw him too, and the tension in the air grew palpable. "Darcy has always been too righteous for his own good," he muttered, a bitter edge to his voice.

Elizabeth, however, was not about to be distracted. "This isn't about Mr Darcy. This is about you and your lies. You have lost any respect I might have had for you. I want nothing to do with you from this day forth."

Mr Wickham tried one last plea. "Elizabeth, please, can't we just forget this ever happened? I truly do care for you."

But she was resolute. "That may be, but trust, once broken, is not so easily mended. Good day, Mr Wickham."

She left him in the dim corner, a figure of dejection, and headed towards the centre of the ballroom. She had to get as far away from him as possible.

Chapter Twenty

Elizabeth

Elizabeth hurried across the ballroom toward Jane, whose face shone both from the exertion of dancing and the attention Mr Bingley bestowed on her all evening. However, when she saw Elizabeth, her features darkened at once. Elizabeth hated to pull her sister out of her happy state, but she had nobody else to speak to but Jane. She was the one she always took into her confidence and would do so today.

“Whatever is the matter, Lizzy?” Jane asked, concern evident in her gentle voice.

“It is Mr Wickham. He lied to me. I was right not to feel what I felt for Boreas with him for he is not Boreas. Jane, Lydia told him of my night at the Matlock ball and he decided to pose as Boreas,” she spoke so fast her words tumbled out one over the other.

“What?” Jane exclaimed. “Are you certain?”

“He admitted it all himself. I thought I was befogged for all this time, I felt nothing for him. I could not reconcile my feelings, but now it all makes sense,” she said, shaking her head.

Taking a deep breath, she recounted the entire conversation with Mr Wickham, explaining the deceit and manipulation. Jane’s blue eyes widened in disbelief. “Oh, Lizzy! That is most shocking and very unlike the Mr Wickham we thought we knew.”

Elizabeth nodded, her lips pressed together as she saw Mr Wickham slinking out of the ballroom, his head held in shame.

“He is not at all the man we thought him to be. Indeed, I feel a fool for ever believing him, but I am grateful to have seen his true character before any lasting harm was done. If Mother had her way, we’d be engaged.”

“She has been telling everyone that Mr Wickham wants to court you and wishes to make you, his wife.”

Elizabeth’s stomach dropped. “That is why Mr Darcy asked—” she shook her head. “These past two weeks have been by far the strangest of all my life. To be so ill-used and lied to.” She crossed her arms around herself like armour. “What a fool I was.”

Jane gently took Elizabeth’s hand. “You are not a fool, Lizzy. You were simply misled by a cunning man. But what will you do now?”

Elizabeth straightened up, her determination evident. “I’ve resolved to attend the Matlock ball this December. If Mr Wickham was not Boreas, then perhaps the real Boreas is still out there, the one I cherished and thought of all this time.”

“But are you certain? What if the real Boreas turns out to be someone worse than Mr Wickham? Perhaps it is best to let it all go,” Jane’s voice carried a grave tone that gave Elizabeth pause.

She had been so disappointed to find out Mr Wickham was Boreas, it had almost broken her heart. She thought she’d been wrong about her feelings, her draw to him, this man whose true name she did not know. And she had to admit, even now, when she knew that Mr Wickham was not the one, she didn’t feel the same sense of excitement she had when she’d dreamed of seeing Boreas again.

Could it be Mr Wickham’s lies that have tainted her hopes? Or was it because she had been spending more time with another man over the past few weeks who had kept her mind occupied.

She glanced around the room, searching for Mr Darcy. She had to tell him that he had been correct all along about Mr Wickham. Suddenly, his concern for her weighed more than before, his care for her well-being impacted her in a stronger fashion than she’d ever imagined it could. He cared for her, about her—and she’d been nothing but rude in return.

At the very least, she owed him an apology for her earlier actions and judgment. And what of Boreas? What would he say if she told him she'd been misled into thinking someone else was him? Should she tell him? Would she even see him again? Focusing on her conversation at hand, she faced Jane.

"I need to put this matter to rest. If he is there, I hope to meet him again, to see if the feelings are real. And if he isn't... well, at least I tried. In any case, Aunt Gardiner is speaking to Lady Fraser regarding the invitation and once it is secured, I shall do my best to meet him."

Jane smiled understandingly, "I support you, Lizzy, no matter what. But remember, sometimes, the heart finds love in the most unexpected of places. And with people one did not expect it with. I will say, you do not sound as happy as you used to when talking about the Matlock ball."

Elizabeth, touched by her sister's words, hugged her tightly. "Perhaps it is the vexation of the past few weeks and the vexation I will have to suffer when Mother finds out that her daughter will not, in fact, marry an officer. In any case, my merriment will only increase as the ball draws closer."

Yet, as she spoke the words, she couldn't deny the hollowness they carried. From the corner of her eye, she once again spotted Mr Darcy, and as her eyes followed him across the ballroom, her pulse quickened. There was something so commanding about him, a presence that drew her in. She couldn't help but wonder about the moments they had shared, the tenderness he'd shown her, and their conversations.

These strange feelings that had blossomed in her had confused her the entire time she thought of Mr Wickham as Boreas, and even now they would not abate. Why not?

"Will you tell him what you found out about Mr Wickham?" Jane asked, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"What?" Elizabeth blinked, returning to the present.

"Mr Darcy. You're looking at him with such puzzlement, are you thinking about if you should tell him about Mr Wickham or not?" Jane asked.

“I think I ought to. After all,” Elizabeth mused, “Mr Darcy has every right to know. It was his sister Mr Wickham sought to manipulate into falling in love with him, and now he has done it again. Besides, I owe him an apology. I was terribly rude to him based on what Mr Wickham said to me. Indeed, I wonder if I had not acted the way I did, based on false information, things might have been different.”

Different, how?” Jane’s eyes were wide as she waited for an answer.

Different how indeed ... Elizabeth shook her head and waved a hand at her sister.

“Never mind. I am ... my mind is not where it ought to be.” she said while looking at Mr Darcy again. “For a moment this evening, when Mr Darcy lost at Bullet Pudding and had to look for the coin he... His face ... With his face covered in flour ...” she stopped, letting her words trail off.

“What? Lizzy?” Jane asked, looking between her sister and Darcy.

“He looked like Boreas, is that not silly?” Lizzy said, finally looking at Jane, who stared at her, head dipped to one side.

“Did he really? Or is it because you had certain feelings for him you did not want to acknowledge?”

Hang Jane and her perspective nature, Elizabeth thought. “How can you say that?” She felt caught out and wondered if anyone else had guessed her secret feelings for the man she had proclaimed not to like.

“I know you better than anyone, Lizzy. I can tell when you harbour feelings,” Jane said quietly.

“I do not have feelings for Mr Darcy. He is a gentleman with who I share a friendship. For the sake of you and Mr Bingley. After all, we will be spending time with him now and then, so I ought to be friendly. Which, if I recall, you encouraged me to do.”

Jane said nothing for a moment and just watched her. Then, however, she cleared her throat. “I did say that. And I

am glad you are friendlier. It is just that ...” Her sister bit her lip, hesitating, “Lizzy... there’s something you should know.”

Elizabeth, sensing the gravity in Jane’s tone, steeled herself. “What is it?”

Jane took a deep breath. “Mr Bingley mentioned in passing that Mr Darcy is leaving for Rosings Park.”

“I know. For his cousin’s wedding. He is going to help plan it and spend Christmastide in London with his sister. Everyone knows. Mr Collins wrote about it in his last letter. The same letter in which he threatened to visit us again,” she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

“It is for a wedding but there is more,” Jane said and dropped her voice. “He’s to meet a lady, one he intends to marry.”

The room seemed to blur for Elizabeth. The music, the chatter, all faded into the background. “He’s... to be married?” She could barely get the words out, her voice a mere whisper. Suddenly, she recalled his hesitation when she’d asked him about his expected return. He’d appeared different, quieter. He was more withdrawn, as if he hadn’t wanted to tell her. Why? Why had he kept this from her? It certainly was no secret if Mr Bingley knew it.

Her stomach turned as she thought about the romantic feelings, she’d allowed herself to have, the very same feelings she’d denied to Jane and herself. She chided herself that she’d even for a moment hoped he was the real Boreas. How foolish was she? And how unkind to Boreas. Not only had she almost courted someone who pretended to be him, but now she’d allowed feelings for yet another man to cloud her senses. Was it her feelings for Mr Darcy that had stemmed her excitement about Boreas’ once more shrouded identity?

Surely, she did not even deserve Boreas, did she? And Mr Darcy ... How dare he act as he had. How dare he ... she shook her head. He had done nothing. It had been her own foolish desires, her silly heart. Her father always considered her the cleverest among his daughters, immune to foolish

notions, but it seemed she was not. She was just as silly as her younger sisters.

Jane nodded, her eyes filled with sympathy. “It appears so. I thought you should know.”

The weight of the revelation pressed down on Elizabeth. All the interactions, the companionable moments they’d shared, played in her mind. She felt a strange mix of confusion and hurt. Why hadn’t he told her? Why had he been so lovely to her, so caring?

“I... I don’t understand,” Elizabeth murmured, her brow creased. “He never mentioned any such commitment. We... I ...”

Jane reached out, squeezing her sister’s hand. “You do care for him, Lizzy. Oh, Lizzy.” Jane took her by the arm, but Elizabeth pulled away.

“No, I do not. I am simply surprised. I thought we had a connection, but I must have been wrong. It seems to be somewhat of a theme at the moment for me,” she forced a chuckle out of her throat, but it sounded hollow and false. “Do you know anything about the lady?” Elizabeth asked, and instantly chided herself for showing an interest.

Jane’s eyes reflected an emotion Elizabeth hated to see, pity.

“Only that he has been eager to meet her,” she said almost apologetically. “Perhaps, or perhaps it’s an obligation, or a family expectation. With Mr Darcy, it’s hard to say.”

Elizabeth took a moment to compose herself, drawing in a deep breath. “Thank you for telling me, Jane. I do hope he finds his happiness. He has been wronged by many.”

As she rejoined the festivities, her heart was in turmoil. The dance, the laughter, it all seemed distant as she grappled with the revelations of the night. She’d meant what she said. She wanted him to be happy. But that did not take away from the fact that she felt as though she had been somehow deceived for a second time that evening.

Chapter Twenty-One

Darcy

The morning light streamed through the canopy of trees, creating a dappling effect as Darcy walked the three miles between Netherfield and Longbourn for what would likely be the last time for some while.

He'd always enjoyed walking, but he had to admit, today, he didn't quite feel the same relief that usually flooded him when he went on his walks.

Sure, the air was crisp and carried the hint of approaching winter. The birds chirped overhead, likely the last few stragglers before they too would fly south to escape the cold. He always loved this time of year, with Christmastide around the corner and months of nights in front of the fireplace quietly reading ahead. But today, he did not feel that contentment, for today he was walking with a purpose, not for relaxation.

And the purpose of his journey had robbed him off his sleep. He wanted to turn back, to abandon his plan but knew he could not. He had to see Elizabeth Bennet one more time before he left, for the next time he saw her—with any luck—he'd be a married man.

He frowned then, envisioning himself and Beira—no Catriona—at Netherfield. Why did the idea of introducing her to Miss Bennet trouble him so? And why wasn't the knowledge that soon he would be meeting his Beira filling him with joy. He let out a sigh. Elizabeth Bennet was a lovely woman, and if they had met under different circumstances, perhaps they might have found commonality, and maybe even something more than that. Alas, they had not.

He'd met Catriona first. He'd fallen in love—and besides, Elizabeth had some sort of entanglement with his arch nemesis. Or did she still?

He'd seen her leave the ball with her family, Mrs Bennet had looked especially perturbed. And Wickham? According to

Caroline, he'd slipped away into the night at some point without bidding anyone goodnight. Not that this was unusual for Wickham. Still, he'd wondered what this meant for his connection to Elizabeth.

Had his words born fruit? Had he perhaps done what he'd longed to do? Had he protected Elizabeth? Perhaps the next few minutes would reveal it, or perhaps he'd be left wondering. But in any case, he'd understood that before he left Hertfordshire, he had to see her and bid her farewell.

He'd intended to do so at the ball but hadn't had a chance to speak to her again before she left.

Seeing Elizabeth Bennet had become the highlight of his days, and now, the idea of leaving without seeing her was inconceivable.

As he neared the house, he spotted her in the garden. Her dark curls caught the sun's rays, making them shine with an auburn hue. Her dress, a lovely shade of blue, swayed with each step. Beside her walked Jane. The two were deeply engrossed in a conversation, and he felt as though he was interrupting a serious discussion. Still, he could not allow himself to procrastinate.

He opened the metal gate to the garden and stepped onto the grass. As he closed the gate behind him, it let out a squeak. At once, the two ladies turned to him.

"Mr Darcy," Jane said as she curtsied, along with Elizabeth, who eyed him curiously.

"Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth," he greeted, his baritone voice carrying a formal edge which always crept in when he felt nervous. Though why he should feel nervous, he did not know. He was here to bid farewell to a friend, which was all. Wasn't it?

When she rose from her curtsey, Elizabeth's expression was inscrutable, her eyes searching. "Mr Darcy," she replied, her tone polite but cool.

"Good morning," Jane greeted warmly, sensing the tension. "Did you walk from Netherfield?" She looked past

him as if to search for a carriage.

“Indeed, I did, Miss Bennet.” His gaze lingered on Elizabeth. “I wished to bid you both farewell before my departure.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened just a touch. “I thought you had already left,” she said. Was there a hint of accusation in her tone? Or was he mistaken?

“Ah, yes. Well, the carriage is being loaded as we speak but I felt it prudent to come and see you and...” Darcy cleared his throat, but before he could speak again, Jane once again looked past him. When he turned, he spotted a curricle pulling in. Sitting on top, next to the driver, was a familiar face.

“Is that Mr Collins?”

“You know him?” Elizabeth asked, and he nodded.

“My aunt’s vicar,” he said, and she nodded in acknowledgement.

“The one who told you about our troubles regarding the entailment,” she said, and Darcy felt the sting of her words, for they conjured up the most unpleasant conversation that had taken place between them, back when he’d been so eager to part Jane and Bingley.

Why would she say it like this? Was she upset? Or was he reading into things?

Darcy realised that today, his skill at understanding her intentions was severely lacking.

“The very same,” she said. “Apparently, he and our father have been writing back and forth about a possible visit, and Mr Collins decided now was the best time, since he had to be in Town and it is easier to travel here from London than from Kent. But you would know.”

Again, the sharpness of her tone surprised him.

“Jane—” Mrs Bennet’s voice rose, then faltered when she spotted Darcy. “Jane, come!”

“If you will excuse me,” Jane said and hurried away. Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open as if she wanted to stop her sister’s departure, but it was too late.

“Oh, well,” he started, his cravat felt uncomfortably tight, and he tried pulling it loose. “Would you take a turn about the garden with me?”

She hesitated, reminding him of the Elizabeth he’d known at the beginning, the one who’d disliked him intensely. Not the one who’d cleaned his scratches after he saved her cat, not the one whom he’d danced with. Darcy wracked his brain, trying to decipher what had changed since last night.

“Very well,” she said and then looked up. “So, the purpose for your visit is the wedding?”

“Indeed,” he said and swallowed, contemplating if he should tell her about Beira. No, he dismissed the thought. What if things did not work out?

He pondered this thought. Why was he considering it may not work out? It was odd, but lately, this had crossed his mind. For months, he’d known with certainty that he and Beira would be a perfect match, but now he had doubts.

“Miss Anne de Bourgh, she is your cousin?” Elizabeth asked, her voice carrying a strange note.

“Yes,” Darcy replied, somewhat relieved at the shift in topic. “She is getting married to a baron and has requested my assistance in reining in my aunt’s desire to have it rival a royal wedding.”

A smile flashed across her face. “As you did when my mother attempted to commandeer Jane and Mr Bingley’s union.”

“I hope I will be as successful. My aunt is not unlike your mother when it comes to strength of character.”

For a split second, he felt the heaviness between them lift, as if things would yet be alright. Alas, silence settled between them again.

Darcy tried to bridge the distance. “Last night’s ball was a delightful event. Bingley truly outdid himself.”

Elizabeth nodded, her lips curving into a faint smile. “Yes, the games were especially memorable.”

“Ah yes, I must have left a lasting impression. Actually, the night my cousin received her offer from her soon to be husband, she lost a game of Bullet Pudding as well, it was rather memorable too. And certainly, a story to repeat many a time,” he said and watched her.

Her eyes widened and she looked up in surprise. “Is that so? When—” She waved a hand, as if dismissing whatever her thought had been.

“Anyhow, so that is where you are going. Will you be returning?”

“I will, eventually. I ... Say, is that the cat I rescued?” He stopped and pointed at the feline presently rushing after something in the tall grass.

“It is.”

“Is she well?” he asked, hoping to steer the conversation to less treacherous grounds.

“She is.”

“Wonderful, that is wonderful indeed. Right, so ...” his words trailed off as he felt a chill radiate off her.

He couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that she was upset with him. Her responses were curt, and her usually sparkling eyes seemed distant. Darcy replayed their recent interactions in his mind, searching for a misstep or a mistake that could’ve offended her. Then it came to him. Wickham.

Had he told her further lies about him?

“Pray, Miss Bennet, if I’ve done something to upset you, please do tell me.”

She looked away, her voice barely audible. “It’s not you, Mr Darcy. It’s just... I’ve had a lot to think about since last night.”

He took a step closer, yearning to bridge the gap between them.

“Is this regarding Wickham?” he asked cautiously, not sure how he would react if she’d fallen victim to his vile tales again.

“In part, yes. He ... I ... he lied to me, as he did your sister. Not that I held feelings for him, but he attempted to endear himself to me by telling me things I was foolish enough to believe,” she said and scoffed as she spoke. It was clear that whatever had happened troubled her greatly.

“I am very sorry this happened. I ... I should have warned you sooner,” he said, but she shook her head.

“No, you tried to do so, but I did not listen. I appears I had to learn my lesson the hard way. But in any case, I am grateful for your advice, and I shall always think kindly of you for it.”

Think kindly of him. He knew the words sounded friendly, but the undertone and implications made him feel as though he was nothing to her but a passing stranger. Someone she might think of once in a while if the occasion called for it.

Why did this bother him? It should not. They were nothing to each other. Where they?

Elizabeth did not give him a chance to consider the circumstances further. “I ought to go and greet my cousin. Mr Darcy, I am glad you came so I could tell you I was sorry for misjudging you and being unkind to you.”

Darcy looked down at her, realising that their time together had come to an end. She wanted him to leave.

“Very well,” he said. “I am glad to have been of assistance, Miss Bennet.”

Their farewell, like their conversation, was awkward. A handshake that lingered a moment too long, eyes that spoke volumes but mouths that remained silent. As Darcy walked away, he couldn’t help but glance back. Elizabeth stood there, watching him leave, a curious expression he could not place in her eyes. Their parting had come upon them so suddenly, he

hadn't had a chance to say anything further. Though given the chance, what would he have said? he didn't know. What he did know was that with each step, Darcy felt the weight of the choices he'd made, the paths not taken, and the future uncertain.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Darcy

Rosings Park

Mid November 1811

The fire crackled in the fireplace, filling the air with the sweet scents of cedarwood which mingled with the odour of the many beeswax candles that had been lit all around Rosings' opulent drawing room. In addition, pots of tea and platters of biscuits and sweetmeats stood on the table. The selection was so vast Darcy could not help but think it was a little over the top. Still, this was his aunt's usual manner. He knew he ought to be grateful, for this was for his benefit. After all, the person Lady Catherine meant to impress was Lady Catriona—and her family.

Unable to contain his nerves, he got up and walked into the hall. The walls were lined with portraits of the de Bourgh ancestors, each appearing more regal than the next. Darcy examined them, trying to make sense of the cacophony of emotions whirling within him. He should be elated, yet a sense of foreboding and unrest had troubled him from the moment he'd left Hertfordshire.

Lady Catherine's voice, unmistakable in its commanding tone, echoed down the corridor. "Darcy, she shall arrive soon. Make haste!"

His stomach clenched and he straightened his jacket, as Anne came down the stairs. He had to admit, his cousin's countenance had greatly changed, now that she was engaged to be married to a man she truly loved. With her regal attire and beaming smile, she looked every bit the part of an English noblewoman, but her eyes, keen and intelligent, shone with curiosity. "William," she teased, "you seem as nervous as a schoolboy before an examination. The moment you longed for is here."

He smiled weakly, grateful for the diversion. “It’s just... this feels quite strange. After months of searching, of hoping...”

Anne took his arm, leading him to a more private alcove. “I heard the tale of your night with Beira from Richard, but to be honest the way he described your enthusiasm, I’d expected you to be more elated at the thought of meeting her. Has something happened?”

Darcy wanted to be vexed that Richard—one of the few who knew about Beira—had told not just their aunt but their cousin, but instead all he could do was sigh, knowing his cousin’s gabster ways all too well. Besides, he knew Richard meant well.

“Anne, have you ever met someone who, despite all logic and reason, just captivates you? Challenges you in ways you’ve never been challenged before?”

Anne’s eyes softened. “You know I have. And I am marrying him soon. I take it you too have met someone like this—and it’s not the lady my mother has rushed forth to welcome?”

He nodded slowly. “Yes, I can’t explain it. Every conversation, every debate... She’s spirited, intelligent, and challenging. She’s awakened something within me. Yet, we are incompatible. Or so I thought. She is like a whirlwind, and I am like ... “

Anne placed her hand on his. “You are steady and strong. No wind can blow you over, but it is not bad to be a little wind-whipped at times. It makes life exciting. Likewise, a sturdy anchor will slow a wild wind which is also needed sometimes.” She paused and dipped her head to one side. “And yet you’re here, awaiting Catriona.”

Darcy paced in a frustrated manner. “The night with her was... it was... magical. But ever since I met Elizabeth, the lines have blurred. I find myself thinking of her, even in moments meant for Beira. I mean, Catriona.”

Anne watched him, her lips pursed in thought. “Elizabeth? Is it Elizabeth Bennet you speak of? Mr Bingley’s future sister-in-law? Caroline wrote to me as she sometimes does and told me about her.”

At the sound of her name, Darcy’s heart thundered and he bit his lip, nodding.

“The very same.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I don’t know what to do, Anne. I made a promise to find Catriona, but now...”

She squeezed his hand reassuringly. “Sometimes, Fitzwilliam, the heart knows before the mind does. You must listen to it.”

Before Darcy could respond, Lady Catherine’s voice rang out again, signalling the arrival of the guests in the courtyard. Darcy pulled his shoulders back and stood up straight while Anne likewise positioned herself to greet the guests.

Lady Catherine marched into the room, looking as regal as ever, and walking beside her was a tall lady with greying brown hair, and beside her was she. His Beira.

He looked at her as she entered, her hair a reddish brown that had been concealed on the night of the ball by her wig.

Her eyes were brown and almond-shaped, while her lips were curled up in a small smile.

“Lord Wexler, Lady Wexler and Lady Catriona,” Lady Catherine announced with a flourish, “may I present my nephew, Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, and my daughter, Miss Anne De Bourgh.”

Darcy stepped forward, the weight of the moment bearing down on him. A rush of memories flooded his mind as he took Lady Catriona’s hand. Images of their dance, their conversation on the balcony, and their adventure on the frozen river re-emerged and his heart pounded for a moment.

Alas, as he looked into Lady Catriona’s eyes, expecting to find the same spark, the same connection, he was met with a polite, detached gaze.

“It is good to see you again, Mr Darcy,” she said. He smiled as she did, but something did not feel right. He could not quite decide what it was, but something felt terribly odd.

Her voice didn’t sound as he remembered, for it lacked the smoothness that had made him feel so warm inside whenever he thought of it.

“Shall we take tea?” Lady Catherine asked and, without waiting for an answer, ushered the group into the drawing room. For the next hour, Darcy made polite conversation with Lady Catriona and her parents—who were rather curious about how they had met.

His aunt, he realised, had left things vague, although he wasn’t sure exactly how much she knew. How much had Richard told her? The parents—who had not been at the ball with their daughter, who had been accompanied by a family friend—seemed pleasant enough.

Truthfully, so did the young woman. Still, their conversation lacked the depth he remembered with Beira. Her laughter didn’t have the same melodic quality, and her voice, while pleasant, missed the inflections he remembered so vividly.

“... grand estate,” Catriona said, and he looked up, drawing from his reverie.

“I beg your pardon?” He felt awful for not having listened to her, and yet it was another indicator that all was not right, for on the night of the ball, he had not been able to stop talking to her.

“I was asking after your estate. I heard Pemberley is rather grand,” she said and smiled over the rim of her teacup.

“Ah, yes. It is. I am rather proud of it, if I may say so.” He wetted his lips and dropped his voice. “I longed to tell you more about it at the ball, but I did not want to give away my identity.”

She smiled politely, her eyes somewhat dull. “Of course. Indeed, I was worried my outfit would betray my origin,” she said with a chuckle. Darcy frowned.

“Well, you are not really Scottish, so that was not really a danger. Indeed, all this time I thought you were ...” he waved a hand. “It does not matter. I am only grateful to have found you.”

“Indeed,” she replied when Lady Catherine spoke up.

“It is such a lovely afternoon. Why don’t you show Lady Catriona the garden, Darcy?”

Darcy looked up. He had no particular desire to be alone with Catriona, but at the same time, he realised his aunt might have given him an opportunity. If he went out with her, there was a chance she would open up more, act like the woman he’d know at the ball.

Thus, he rose and proffered his arm. The young lady took it, though there was no spark as he had imagined. Instead, they walked outside together like the strangers they were, keeping a polite distance. Even as they made their way through Rosings’ large gardens, the atmosphere did not change. Desperate to reignite what they had seemingly lost, Darcy cleared his throat.

“It seems we were destined to meet one another again sooner than we had arranged,” he said. “I must beg your pardon for the way I left that night. And if it hadn’t been for the wind taking your note, I would have found you sooner. I tried.”

Her eyebrows raised slightly, and she replied with a nonchalance that took him aback. “Is that how it happened? The details have become somewhat blurred over time.”

Darcy felt a pang in his chest, the sharp contrast of their memories causing him pain. He had clung to every detail of that evening. Yet, she had forgotten?

“I must say it all remains vivid in my mind. I looked for you, of course, hoping to see you before the year was up.”

She glanced at him, her eyes devoid of the warmth he yearned for. “Oh, I thought of you often as well,” she said, her voice distant. But before Darcy could probe further, Catriona swiftly changed the subject.

“Tell me more about Pemberley. How large is it? I’ve heard tales of its vastness and the number of staff you employ, my mother says it has almost two hundred rooms.”

Darcy, taken aback by the sudden shift, replied, “It’s a considerable estate with a rich heritage. We have numerous rooms, and the grounds are quite extensive. There are many servants, of course, to maintain the property.”

“I heard it is the grandest in Derbyshire.” she said and smiled, though he heard the calculation in her voice. “You told me so little about yourself at the ball, I was rather surprised to hear you were *the* Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

He swallowed a lump in his throat. “You had heard of me, then?”

“Of course, the richest man in Derbyshire? Of the Darcy fortune? Who has not?”

Darcy’s heart sank. The woman he remembered from the ball had been genuinely interested in him, not his wealth. The disparity between Beira and Catriona became even more glaring.

Choosing his words carefully, he replied, “We are comfortable, yes.”

She nodded, seemingly satisfied with his answer. But the weight of their conversation lingered heavily on Darcy’s mind. The enigma of Beira and the reality of Catriona were worlds apart. As they continued their walk, Darcy found himself grappling with the dawning realisation that perhaps the woman of his dreams and the woman beside him were not one and the same.

Perhaps the woman he had built up in his imagination had not been the person he’d thought her to be. Suddenly, an image flashed in his mind of another young lady. One who had been genuinely interested in him, who’d cared for him when he was hurt in his quest to save her cat. Who had made his heart ache when he’d parted ways with her—seemingly forever.

Elizabeth.

Suddenly, he could not stop wishing that in this moment, the woman walking beside him was not Beira unmasked, but rather Elizabeth. And that, he had to admit, was a thought that shook him to his core.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Elizabeth

6th December 1811

“Mary! Can’t you play something more cheerful?” Lydia complained as she stood on a stool and attempted to affix mistletoe to the doorframe.

“It is meant to be contemplative, Lydia. You dolt!” Mary shouted back and continued playing the gentle carol she’d been immersed in before the interruption.

“Now, now, that is not language becoming of a young lady, surely,” Mr Collins said and shook his head at Mary, who flushed an alarming shade of red. Elizabeth, meanwhile, rolled her eyes at the display, wishing to be anywhere but here. However, it was St Nicholas’ day, the first day of the Christmas period and as was customary, the family were gathered together to decorate the home as well as exchange gifts.

The family, with the addition of Mr Collins, that was. To her dismay, her cousin had been with them for almost three weeks now and showed no signs of leaving. On the contrary, he had declared his desire to stay for a further two weeks, news that had taken the entire family—save for her mother—by surprise and caused much alarm.

In his last letter, Mr Collins had informed them he could only stay for a brief visit as he was expected to officiate the wedding of Miss Anne de Bourgh and the young baron she was to wed. However, it appeared Mr Collins had been rather perturbed when he’d been cast aside in favour of an uncle of the groom. Thus, they had been graced by his visit for much longer than they’d been comfortable with.

What was even worse was the obvious design Mr Collins had on her. It had been clear from the very first evening when he’d asked to be seated next to her. His ministrations had continued and Elizabeth had barely a chance to escape him.

Winter had arrived, and thus, long walks were out of the question. There were only so many hours she could spend with her Aunt Phillips or Charlotte before she made a nuisance of herself. The only respite she'd had was when Mr Collins went to Town for several days to tend to business. Alas, he had returned two days previously, and thus, she was trapped with a man who clearly was more interested in her than she was in him.

Presently, he was fortunately busy talking to her father, who looked miserable at having been trapped by the insufferable man.

Just then, Hill appeared at the door, with a tray of freshly baked mincemeat pies in hand. "Ma'am," she said, looking at Mrs Bennet. "You said to bring the pies at five."

Mrs Bennet got up, dropping the fir branches she'd been in the process of hanging up.

"Goodness, yes! Time has flown. Come, come everyone. it is time to exchange gifts," she clapped her hands in a way that would have Mr Darcy roll his eyes and Elizabeth smiled at the thought. It had been nice to have him around, in fact, she missed him rather more than she'd wanted to admit.

In the weeks since his departure, she'd thought about him often, and at times even imagined what conversations with him would be like, what his views on certain topics might be ... of course, this was all silly. He was bound to be engaged by now.

"Right, I shall go first," Mr Bennet said before handing out carefully selected gifts to each of his children—sheet music for Mary, a subscription to Ackermann's Repository for Lydia and Kitty, and novels for Elizabeth and Jane. To his wife he gave a lovely shawl which sent Mrs Bennet into an excited rapture that even touched Elizabeth's heart.

"Now me," Mrs Bennet called and passed out embroidered handkerchiefs to each of her daughters. "Now see, Jane, I used your new initials, JB."

Elizabeth looked up at once, and if it had not been for her father, who gently shook his head while suppressing a grin that stopped her from pointing out the obvious to her mother ...

Jane, always the gentle one, thanked her mother profusely, also not pointing out that her initials would be the same whether she married or not.

Elizabeth was about to pass out her gifts—pressed wildflowers she'd been working on all year—when her mother smiled broadly at her.

“And I’ve left a space on yours for your new initial,” her mother said, looking exceedingly pleased with herself.

Elizabeth stared at her and then looked down at her handkerchief. Indeed, it showed only an E with space left for whatever her new last name would be.

“Mother ...” she started, but her mother waved a hand.

“It is a wise decision to leave a space, Mrs Bennet,” Mr Collins spoke up with a smile that could be described as sycophantic. “One never knows what will happen.”

“Indeed,” Lydia said loudly. “But you’ve not left a space on mine. How do you know I won’t be the next to wed?”

Mrs Bennet frowned. “Silly girl, you are the youngest, please do not be foolish. Your time will come, Lydia. There will be other Christmases and other handkerchiefs.”

“You have no idea what—” Lydia started but before the situation could get out of control, Kitty leaped from her seat and rushed to the window.

“Mr Bingley is here,” she called, and Jane got up at once.

Elizabeth smiled as she watched Jane greet her fiancé at the drawing room door while everyone else rose to greet her guest.

“Well, hello,” Mr Bingley said cheerfully. “It seems I’ve come just at the right time,” he said, nodding at the assorted gifts. “I have brought something myself,” he said and handed out small boxes of sweetmeats to the family before presenting Jane with an elegant hair comb set with pearls. Lizzy smiled as

her sister slid it into her hair under the watchful eye of a beaming Mr Bingley.

As the gift exchange continued, accompanied by the sounds of lips smacking as the family indulged in their sweets, Mr Bingley leaned over. “I have another gift for Jane. It was meant to be for Christmas, but I cannot wait to give it to her. Will you come outside with me and tell me if you think she will like it?”

Elizabeth smiled and nodded. “Of course, let us slip out while everyone is occupied.” She motioned to her father, letting him know they were leaving, and then quickly made her way down the narrow hall, followed by Mr Bingley.

The cold early December air was crisp, but she hardly noticed it as they approached the stables.

“Mr Bingley, why are we going to the—” she stopped as they entered into the space and she spotted a beautiful mare, its coat a shimmering brown in the box in front of her.

“She’s for Jane,” Mr Bingley declared with pride, “I mentioned that we ought to go riding together but Caroline was reluctant to let her have her horse, and I know you only have the one so thought this might solve the problem. Do you think she’ll like it? Is it not too much? I was certain she’d like the horse but the closer I came here, the more doubtful I grew.”

“She will love it, Mr Bingley. You are engaged, not merely courting and this gift shows you plan for a future,” she said, meaning every word. The care and concern Mr Bingley showed her sister, truly touched her—though it also evoked another feeling, this one less pleasant. Longing.

Would Boreas do things like this for her? She knew Mr Darcy would. She wasn’t certain how she knew this, but her gut told her so, and her heart tended to agree.

She wondered how he was and where he might be. Was he now engaged? Did he ever think of her? Turning to Mr Bingley, she cleared her throat.

“Mr Bingley, have you had any news of Mr Darcy recently?” she inquired.

Mr Bingley appeared visibly taken aback by the sudden change in topic and shook his head. “I haven’t, I’m afraid. Last I heard, he was still at Rosings. Miss Anne’s wedding is in two weeks’ time.”

“I see.” she said and nodded. “I only wondered because ...” She shrugged, and Mr Bingley took a deep breath.

“He was very fond of you,” he said. She understood he meant this to be a balm to her, but it wasn’t. The opposite, in fact. It stung.

“Not fond enough,” she said quietly but then waved a hand. “It does not matter. I should not have brought it up. The horse is a lovely gift, and Jane will be delighted. However, what will you do for Christmas to top this?”

He let out a small laugh. “That is a problem for another day,” he replied and proffered his arm. Elizabeth took it, and they walked slowly back to the house. However, as they turned the corner, Elizabeth’s heart sank.

There, at the door, was Mr Wickham. She hadn’t seen him since the night of the ball and had no desire to reacquaint herself with him. Her family had been informed that he was not the true Boreas, news that had caused some friction between the family members.

Most had understood her desire to be as far from Mr Wickham as possible. Most, but not her mother. It had taken her several days to convince her mother this was for the best. Indeed, she was certain the only reason her mother had eventually capitulated was because Mr Collins had made his interest in her clear. The last thing Elizabeth needed now was for Mr Wickham to return. It was bad enough to hold off Mr Collins without Mr Wickham around.

“Oh my,” Mr Bingley said beside her as they watched Mr Wickham head inside. “Would you prefer to stay outside for a while?”

“You are very kind, but I think I must see what he wants,” she said with dread in her stomach. She wrapped her hands around herself, and together, she and Mr Bingley headed back inside.

“... my dear Mr Wickham, I knew you’d come,” Lydia’s voice echoed off the walls as Elizabeth walked toward the drawing room. She stopped, her eyes wide.

“Lydia and Mr Wickham?” She glanced at Mr Bingley who pressed his lips together, his eyes narrowed.

“My sister Caroline said she had seen them together in town more than once, but I dismissed it as her usual instigation,” he said, looking crestfallen. “I should have listened.”

“This is not your fault,” Elizabeth replied quietly, then turned her attention back to the door.

“Mr Wickham, to what do we owe the honour?” her father asked, his tone making it clear this was no honour at all.

“Well, Mr Bennet, I am here to ask for your permission to court your daughter.” There was an awkward pause during which nobody spoke, and then he added. “Lydia, that is.”

Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open and she stared at Mr Bingley, whose face reflected the same.

Not able to stay in the hall any longer, she rushed into the room.

Lydia’s face was flushed with excitement, her eyes shining brightly, believing this to be her grand romantic moment. But the reactions around the room were far from joyful.

Her father’s face was a study in disbelief and concern.

“Lydia!” Elizabeth exclaimed, her voice dripping with disbelief and urgency. “You cannot be serious about marrying this man!”

Mr Wickham turned to her and opened his mouth, but before he could so much as utter a word, Lydia's defiant gaze met Elizabeth's.

"And why not? Just because you cast him aside, doesn't mean he's not good enough for me!"

Elizabeth's anger flared. "This isn't about me, Lydia. It's about the fact that he deceived me, lied about being someone he wasn't, and you helped him in his deceit!"

Lydia's chin jutted out stubbornly. "I only wanted to see you settle with a decent man. When you foolishly pushed him away, I saw my opportunity."

Elizabeth's voice cracked with emotion. "He's not who you think he is, Lydia. He's not the honourable man he pretends to be."

Mr Wickham jumped in, his voice oozing faux concern. "Elizabeth, I know we had misunderstandings, and I know Darcy has told you the worst about me, surely more so after my little scheme was uncovered, but..."

At this moment, Mr Bingley, who had been quietly observing the scene from the hall, stepped in.

His usually genial face was firm, and his tone left no room for debate.

"I've kept silent about this matter for too long, but I can't let it go on. Everything Elizabeth has said about you, Wickham, is true. I do not know what happened between you and her, but I know this, you attempted to elope with Georgiana Darcy for her dowry. You scorned the church living offered by Darcy, instead demanding money. Your character is far from respectable."

The room was silent, the weight of Mr Bingley's words sinking in. Lydia's face turned pale, realizing the gravity of her actions and the man she thought she loved.

Mr Wickham glared at Mr Bingley. "You'll regret this. What do you think your friend Darcy will do when he finds you revealed his sister's shame? Trollop that she is."

“Get out of my house,” Mr Bennet bellowed then, and Elizabeth knew he had to control himself, lest he drag the man out himself.

With a final, resentful glance at Mr Bingley and Elizabeth, Mr Wickham stormed out of the house.

Mrs Bennet, overwhelmed by the revelations, fainted onto the couch, while Lydia sobbed uncontrollably, her dreams of a romantic union shattered.

Mr Bingley turned to Elizabeth. “I’m sorry, Miss Bennet, but the truth needed to come out. I just hope Darcy can understand. I was taken into his confidence—”

“I am certain he will understand.” Elizabeth said hurriedly.

Mr Bingley continued, “Besides, it could not remain a secret forever. And perhaps, if others knew about Miss Darcy, then it may save another poor young woman.”

Elizabeth nodded slowly, her mind racing. The evening’s events had turned their world upside down. The coming days would undoubtedly bring further difficulties, but for now, her family had to pick up the pieces and carry on with life.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Darcy

Anne and Darcy stood together on the landing, looking down over the banister as they watched the flurry of activity below. Servants were darting to and for, ensuring that everything was perfect for Anne's wedding.

"Not in here, the roses need to go into the chapel," Lady Catherine called loudly, and Anne rolled her eyes.

"There she is, commanding everyone around," she shook her head. "I love my mother, but I cannot wait to have a home of my own."

Darcy smiled. "I dare say the servants will miss your quiet nature."

"I shall be a good mistress to Hartley House," Anne said and then, with a nod toward Catriona, who stood a little bit away from them added, "Will she be Mistress of Pemberley?"

Darcy shook his head. The latter had just returned from her trip to Town the previous day. To say he was glad would have been a lie. She'd been gone for several days, and he'd spent the time wondering what he ought to do about the situation, though he reached no conclusion. Darcy took a moment before responding, his gaze unfocused. "In truth, I found myself hardly noticing her absence. My thoughts have been elsewhere, and I certainly have not pictured her as Mistress of Pemberley."

Anne, knowing her cousin well, probed gently, "Is it Elizabeth Bennet who occupied your thoughts?"

"I cannot seem to escape her presence in my mind. Every corner I turn, every sensation I feel, it's as if she's there, reminding me of what I might have lost.

Anne placed a comforting hand on his. "Then perhaps you should heed what your heart is telling you. Happiness is a precious thing, Darcy. I've learned that with my own wedding.

Defying Mother was difficult, but I know I'll be truly content with my chosen husband."

"I know you will. Your face lights up each time you look at your fawn." His cousin smiled remembering the outfit that her intended wore at the masquerade ball. Darcy continued, "I only wish I could—" he shook his head. "I felt so strongly about Beira and now..." He let out a puff of air. "Let us not speak about the matter anymore. Instead, I have a question. I know that Mr Collins will not be officiating at your wedding. However, I thought he would have long since returned from his trip to Hertfordshire."

Anne nodded, a hint of amusement in her eyes. "Mr Collins, I believe, has decided to spend Christmas with the Bennets." She smiled at him. "It seems you truly cannot escape mention of them."

"It appears so. Had he intended to stay that long?"

Anne shrugged. "I think not. He meant to go to Town, then call upon them, then return. But it may be that learning his services would not be required has made him decide to stay away longer. I do hope his feelings are not too hurt." She turned to him, a smile on her lips. "I ought to go. Remember what I said. Listen to your heart."

Darcy watched as Anne gracefully made her way downstairs, leaving him to ponder her words. He would have to make up his mind, and sooner rather than later for if he waited too long, it might all be too late.

He could not lead Catriona on, it would not be fair. Likewise, he could not continue to plan a future with her, or indeed any woman if he could not forget Elizabeth Bennet. Yet, he also could not forget what she had said, and the manner in which she'd acted toward him, so cold and unfeeling. It didn't seem to matter what Darcy did, he was brought to point nonplus.

Later that morning, the lavish dining hall echoed with clinking glasses and spirited conversations. The wedding

ceremony was lovely and the meal mouth-watering. However, despite being surrounded by the celebratory atmosphere of Anne's wedding breakfast, Darcy felt distant. He would rather have left to return to his chamber, but he did not want to miss Anne's wedding day. Richard had already been forced to miss the wedding due to a sudden emergency that required his attention. He'd hoped to see his cousin to get his advice on this impossible situation, but alas, he was alone again with his thoughts.

"Mr Darcy," Catriona's now familiar voice began, leaning in slightly, her bright eyes shimmering in anticipation.

"Lady Catriona," he replied and motioned to the seat beside him. She'd sat there earlier but had left to talk to other guests. When she sat, he watched her take a sip of wine and then turned to him.

"Will you be taking part in the games later?"

He nodded absently. "I'm not certain. I do not care to play with people I do not know. And you?"

"I simply adore games! They are a wonderful way to get to know others." Catriona exclaimed with a broad grin.

Darcy frowned, remembering their conversation at the ball. "I thought you also did not like to play games with strangers, you mentioned it at the ball."

She looked at him, her eyes slightly wide. "Did I? Well, I have changed these past few months, I suppose. Don't we all?"

Darcy did not know what to say. Surely people changed, but this much? It seemed rather odd. He still remembered the curl of her lips as she'd expressed how she preferred to play games with people she knew. How similar they were in that sentiment. He'd felt bonded to her more because of this.

He wanted to question her further, but before he could, Lady Catherine's voice rose above the fray.

"... Collins is at Longbourn. He was upset I would not let him officiate. But what a silly notion to begin with. Certainly,

he has to see that it would be best if someone more distinguished did the honours.”

“Ah yes, he always struck me as a clever fellow, and now this? What is he doing in Longbourn anyhow? Is he seeing the property he is to inherit?” Another man said, and his aunt responded at once.

“He is, and he’s looking for a wife. He has his heart set on marrying one of those girls.” She clicked her tongue and Darcy looked up, his attention caught. “Darcy’s friend, Bingley—the trader—is marrying one of them and Collins wants to marry another. I thought it was a dreadful match for Bingley, given he seeks to rise up, but for Collins?” she shrugged and sipped her wine.

“How many daughters are there?” the man asked, and Lady Catherine let out a chuckle.

“Five. He’s looking to marry the second oldest, Elizabeth is her name. But the chit is obstinate, won’t have him. I got a letter from him yesterday. He will be returning here this week, as the dolt of a girl has asked for a few weeks to consider the proposal. Isn’t that silly? With five daughters it seems to make sense she’d agree, but no. She needs time.”

Darcy’s face paled, his fingers gripping the edge of the table so hard his knuckles turned white. The thought of Elizabeth, vibrant and independent, being pursued by Collins was nauseating, though to hear she’d refused him gave him hope.

“Darcy?” Catriona said beside him. He looked at her and spotted genuine concern in her eyes. “Are you unwell?”

“I am ... I ... Excuse me,” he said and got up, hastening away as quickly as he could to digest this latest news. Elizabeth was to marry? He knew this ought not to bother him, for he had decided to leave Longbourn to meet Catriona, thus letting go of any chance of a connection with Elizabeth. Yet, to hear she had even considered another—it almost broke his heart, and that was more frightening than even the prospect of a future with Catriona.

As carriages drove away from the estate following the celebrations, Darcy sought comfort in the quiet of Rosings' gardens. The entire estate was blanketed in a delicate layer of white as the first snowflakes began their slow descent from the sky. It was truly perfect for Anne's wedding. She's always loved winter and shared with him a dream that it may snow on her special day. Darcy stood amidst the quiet beauty, the bittersweetness of the moment washing over him. It was reminiscent of the previous winter, a time when he had watched the snowfall with Beira. Alas, the sweet memories did not warm him from the inside out as they had before, for Beira had been unmasked—and she was not who he thought she was. Meanwhile, images of Elizabeth haunted him at every turn.

The sound of hooves crunching in the snow drew him from his thoughts, growing rapidly louder. Darcy turned to see the familiar figure of his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. His forehead was in a frown and his jaw clenched as he looked forward toward Darcy. What in the world was he doing here? He'd already missed the wedding, so that could not be the reason for his haste.

“Richard,” Darcy called, his surprise evident. “What brings you here so urgently? The wedding is over.”

His cousin leaped off his horse and rushed to Darcy. “I know. And I shall apologise to Anne, but Darcy, we need to talk. Have you already made an offer of marriage to Lady Catriona?”

Darcy's brows furrowed in confusion. “No, I have not. What is the matter, Richard?”

Richard's expression was grave. “As you know, I shared my desire to help you find your mysterious masked lady with our aunt. It might have been foolish, but she expressed a need to find a wife for you, since Anne had found another. She had talked of finding a suitable lady, and I felt I had to tell her there was already one taking charge of your heart.”

Darcy frowned. He'd wondered why Richard had involved himself in the affair but now that he knew, it made sense. He hadn't truly been upset with his cousin, knowing that despite his tendency to talk freely about personal matters, he was always well intentioned.

"Thus, I told her about Beira and she vowed to find her, assuming her to be a high-born lady, of course. Imagine my surprise when she informed me that she had been successful."

"Go on." Darcy crossed his arms as snow gathered in his black greatcoat.

"Anne wrote to me and told me about Lady Catriona's arrival and your doubts, your unhappiness. Knowing our aunt, I knew that I could not blindly trust her. I knew I would never forgive myself unless I made sure that Catriona was indeed Beira. In addition, Anne told me your heart beats for another ..."

"I ... I cannot I made a promise to Beira, and if Catriona is here then I Perhaps my feelings and thoughts are clouded. Perhaps I am foolish to be so in doubt," Darcy started but before he could add more Richard shook his head.

"No, Darcy. You are not wrong. That is why I am here. I am here to tell you that Catriona is not Beira. Cannot be Beira. In fact, she was not in London at the time of the ball, nor were her family. She was staying with relatives in Shropshire."

Darcy's heart pounded in his chest. The revelation sent shockwaves through him—and an odd glimmer of hope. "Are you certain?"

Richard nodded solemnly. "I made thorough enquiries, and there is no doubt. My source is the hostess of the Matlock ball herself, my mother. She told me Lady Catriona's family were invited but sent their regrets. Indeed, she was not pleased to hear you were considering a union with her. Let me say Lady Catriona has a less than stellar reputation."

Darcy looked at his cousin in shock. "What do you mean?"

“He is referring to my romantic attachment to a trader,” a voice came from behind them, and Lady Catriona stepped out into his line of sight from behind a snow-covered bush.

“Your ... What?” Darcy asked, shaken by her appearance and the truth he’d just discovered.

“I followed you here,” Catriona began, her voice steady but tinged with regret, “because I can see that you do not harbour any real affection for me. And I must confess, I feel the same. I wanted to tell you the truth, but it seems your friend here came before me. I can only confess what he said is true, and that I am sorry for the deception. “

“I do not understand. You were never at the ball?”

She shook her head. “I was not. And Colonel Fitzwilliam is correct. I have a less-than-stellar reputation at home. There are rumours that I have a secret romance with a wine merchant, and I must admit, it is true. I love him, Mr Darcy, much to my parents’ dismay.” Darcy looked at her, utterly lost for words.

“My parents found out about our relationship and realised they needed to find a husband for me as soon as possible before the rumours were out of control, and before my beloved and I might have the idea to elope. That is why my mother and Lady Catherine hatched a plan.”

Darcy’s brows furrowed in confusion. “A plan?” He already dreaded to find out more but with his aunt involved, he should have suspected there was something more sinister at play.

Catriona took a deep breath. “You see, they knew of your desire to meet Beira, and they saw an opportunity. They decided to deceive you, to make you believe that I was Beira. I did not want to go along with it, I did not and do not want to marry you but the pressure from my parents... I relied on them, and I hoped in time they would see how silly their plan was and let me marry Jack.”

The truth hung in the air between them and even though she had attempted to trick him Darcy could not judge her. He

knew how difficult a young lady's position was. Anne had been in a similar one not long ago.

"I understand, Catriona. I am grateful you told me the truth and I assure you, I will not allow this charade to continue."

She looked at him, a hint of remorse still in her eyes. "Thank you, Mr Darcy, for your understanding. I know I have wronged you in this, and I am truly sorry."

Darcy's expression softened, his compassion for her evident. "You had no easy choice, Catriona. I hold no ill will towards you. In my heart," Darcy confessed, "I knew you were not Beira. There were too many inconsistencies."

"It is no wonder. We had very little information other than the costume your companion wore and whatever you shared with ..." she looked at Colonel Fitzwilliam. "I suppose you are the cousin who shared the information with Lady Catherine."

Richard gulped and shuffled his feet in the snow. "I only meant to help," he said but Darcy raised a hand.

"We have covered this, I know you meant well. In any case, now that I know the truth, I suppose I must decide what to do."

Catriona wetted her lips, "I do wonder if you might tell me about Beira, for I know so little considering I was meant to be her."

Darcy smiled and told her of the night he'd met the woman he thought was the love of his life. He looked from her to Richard as he concluded and shrugged, his cold hands buried in his pockets.

"I must confess that I have begun to doubt if Beira was truly the one. I have developed feelings for another woman."

"This Miss Bennet I heard about?" Catriona asked and Darcy looked at her, shocked.

"I saw the way you reacted when Lady Catherine spoke of the vicar's desire to marry her. I also overheard a

conversation between Anne and the Baron where she was mentioned. Anne seems to think you love Miss Bennet, rather than Beira.”

“I cannot deny it is so. Indeed, I wished ... I wished Miss Bennet and Beira were one and the same, but that is clearly impossible.”

“Is it?” Catriona asked. “There is no chance Miss Bennet might have been at the ball? I know I sound as though I have read one romance novel too many, but is there no possibility at all?”

Darcy was about to reply and say that there was none at all, when Richard’s eyes grew animated, “During my research, I discovered a discrepancy on the guest list. Lady Fraser and her daughter Morag were meant to attend, and according to the list, they were present. But when my mother spoke to Lady Fraser, it turned out they were not. She mentioned this when I questioned her on the guest list, trying to see if I could identify your mystery woman. I think the clue to the real identity of your Beira lies in unravelling the matter of who attended the ball as the Frasers.”

Lady Catriona looked surprised. “Oh, I know Lady Fraser, she is a good friend of my aunt’s. I also know that last Christmas they were in Town staying with a friend,” she paused, and appeared deep in thought. “Margaret Green? Something like that. Gardiner, that was the name. She intended to stay longer but the laird had an accident and she and Morag had to return early.”

Gardiner? Darcy blinked, the name sounded awfully familiar. He racked his brain, trying to recall where he had heard it before. Then suddenly it struck him then, “The Bennets have relations in Town, Cheapside. I believe Gardiner is the name. Bingley always likes to tout the Gardiners whenever anyone questions the suitability of ...” he waved a hand, realizing it didn’t matter right now. Could it be? Could Elizabeth be the one he had been searching for?

“So Lady Fraser was in town with Mrs Gardiner. Lady Fraser was not at the ball, yet the invitation list says they

attended. So, someone attended. Would it not make sense that it was Elizabeth?" Catriona asked.

"I cannot believe it. Even if it was Mrs Gardiner who took Lady Fraser's place, could it not have been someone else in place of the daughter? One of Mrs Gardiner's daughters?"

Richard placed a hand on his arm. "You won't know until you ask. In any case, it seems that this Miss Bennet has a place in your heart regardless, even if she is not Beira. You already know what your heart desires, Darcy."

"But Elizabeth is to marry Collins," he pointed out, the glimmer of hope he'd felt extinguished again.

"But you also heard that Mr Collins is returning because Miss Bennet has not yet agreed to the match, that does not sound like a woman who is keen to wed." Catriona pointed out. Looking at Richard she added "It was discussed at the wedding breakfast."

Richard nodded and looked at Darcy. "I dare say, Darcy, you must decide. What will it be? A return to Hertfordshire? A visit to the ball to see if your Beira returns?"

Darcy wetted his lips and ran a hand through his hair, shaking off the snow.

"I will wait for Collins' return and ensure Elizabeth has not changed her mind. Then, I will go to the ball. If Beira is Elizabeth all will be resolved, and if she is not ..." he gulped down the dread. "Then I will tell Beira that I cannot see her again as my heart belongs to someone else. And then, I shall propose to Elizabeth and hope that she will have me."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Elizabeth

Longbourn

Christmas Eve, 1811

The halls of Longbourn were aglow with the warm, flickering light of candles, casting dancing shadows on the walls. Garlands of evergreens adorned the banisters, filling the air with the scent of pine. From the kitchen, the smell of the dinner feast wafted, and Elizabeth's stomach rumbled as she entered the drawing room.

The family was already gathered, and Mary sat behind the pianoforte, her fingers gliding over the instrument as the sounds of *God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen* filled the room. Her father smiled at her as he looked up from the armchair, a newspaper in hand. Beside him, engrossed in her embroidery, was her mother who only glanced up for a moment without saying anything.

Elizabeth's decision not to accept Mr Collins—at least not yet—had created a rift between them. However, the rift with her mother was nothing compared to the one that had opened up between Elizabeth and Lydia. While never close the two had been like strangers to one another these past three weeks.

Indeed, as she entered, she did not see Lydia present. While Kitty sat by the fire and read, and Jane likewise worked on embroidery, the youngest Bennet sister was absent. Elizabeth slipped into the seat beside Jane and was about to ask her where Lydia was—though she suspected she already knew—when her father rose from his chair.

“Well, I think all of us who want to be here, are,” he said and looked around, prompting Mary to stop playing.

“Lydia is not here,” her mother said and looked at Elizabeth with a frown.

“She has made it clear she does not wish to participate in the festivities,” Mr Bennet replied and took charge of the yule log.

“She is still shut in her chamber?” Elizabeth whispered to Jane who nodded.

“She will not come out until you’ve gone to London,” Jane replied quietly. “I am ever so grateful to be able to visit Netherfield this evening, for I am sure she will have another dramatic night of crying.” Elizabeth’s eyebrows rose for this was the harshest comment Jane had ever uttered but she could not blame her. Lydia’s dramatics were rather too much for everyone, except for their mother.

Elizabeth let out a puff of air. Lydia blamed her for ruining her chance at love with Mr Wickham. The man in question had swiftly departed Meryton, and as far as Elizabeth was concerned could stay away for good.

“Lydia is suffering a broken heart,” her mother said, her ears having caught on to the conversation.

“Do not be silly. She knew Wickham for a very brief time, and we are all better off without him. That man only showed a true interest in any of our daughters after it was clear Jane would marry into money. That is the only reason he attempted to get close to Elizabeth and then Lydia,” her father said as he placed the yule log in the fireplace.

They had come to this conclusion some time ago, one that was agreed upon by all but Mrs Bennet and Lydia who chose to still see the best in Mr Wickham.

“Well, I hope you are pleased Mr Bennet, now neither of them will marry. Lydia has been robbed of her chance and Elizabeth,” she clicked her tongue and wagged her head. “Elizabeth has spurned two decent suitors.”

“Now, now. Elizabeth asked for time to come to her decision,” her father said and smiled at Elizabeth. Indeed, she had agreed to consider Mr Collins’ proposal—for the sake of her mother and a peaceful Christmastide—but only if she was allowed to go to London and visit her aunt and uncle. She had

confided in her father about the events at the Matlock ball, and while he was reluctant—having already dealt with the flighty Lydia—he relented, telling Elizabeth that he trusted her judgment. If Boreas turned out to still be the man she'd dreamed of, she would decline Mr Collins' request to court her. If he was not ... Elizabeth had not decided what to do if that was the case. Naturally, Mr Collins did not know anything about Boreas or the ball, nor indeed her visit to London. He had only been told she needed time to think, following her near disaster with Mr Wickham.

Her father cleared his throat. "Shall we?" he asked and nodded at the yule log. The log, carefully chosen and was an emblem of continuity and warmth, a tradition they all held dear. As it caught fire, the room was bathed in a golden glow, and the flames danced with an almost ethereal grace. Elizabeth stood and watched the ballet in the fireplace as sensation of temporary peace fell over her.

The quiet was soon interrupted when Mary returned to the pianoforte and filled the room with music, and soon thereafter the festive feast that followed in itself was a sight to behold. Roast goose, spiced ham, fragrant mulled wine, and an array of delectable side dishes adorned the table. A festive cheer filled the room, marred only by Lydia's absence. However, to Elizabeth's relief, her sister changed her mind midway through the meal, the sound of the family laughing and the smells of the food likely to have roused her out of her spite, at least for a few hours.

Still, the two did not exchange more than a brief greeting and Elizabeth knew that it would take some time for her sister to truly get over what had happened. However, Elizabeth hoped it would not be too long, and that Lydia could see that in the end, Elizabeth had done her a favour by chasing Mr Wickham away.

Later that evening, as the family recovered from their sumptuous meal, Jane prepared to leave for Netherfield. Elizabeth accompanied her outside to the waiting carriage, feeling the weight of the impending parting. It would be weeks

before she saw her beloved sister again, and the days in between would be difficult. At the carriage, Jane turned and took Elizabeth's hands.

"Are you certain about going to London, Lizzy?" Jane asked, concern etched in the lines of her gentle face.

Elizabeth nodded, determination and uncertainty coursing through her. "I believe it is what I must do, Jane. Perhaps time away from the family will also allow me to decide what it is I am to do with my life—and with whom I wish to share it with."

"Speaking of sharing one's life," Jane said and looked down before raising her eyes. "Charles received a letter from Mr Darcy."

Elizabeth's heart pounded in her chest at the sound of his name, afraid to hear he was to marry. "Pray, tell me, what have you heard?"

"Mr Darcy is in London for the New Year as well," Jane revealed.

Her heart quickened its pace. London. The two of them would be in the same town, would he attend his uncle's ball? The thought was both exhilarating and daunting.

"And is he... engaged?" she enquired, her words hesitant yet filled with anticipation.

"No," Jane said. "Not as yet. He sounded confused, is how Charles put it. Oh, Elizabeth. Do you not think that maybe you and he?" she didn't finish the sentence. She didn't need to. A rush of unexpected joy washed over Elizabeth, leaving her momentarily breathless. The news was a peculiar mixture of relief and guilt, for while her heart leaped at the prospect of seeing Mr Darcy, she had to remind herself she was going to London for Boreas.

"I do not know, Jane. I am vexed. I ... Until the ball I shall not know what I ought to do. I have never been so confused in my life," she said only as she spoke the words, she knew them to be hollow.

“Are you? Or do you simply think you are?” Jane asked. Then, the coachman came around the carriage, interrupting them.

“Ma’am?”

“Yes, I am ready,” she said and stepped closer, enveloping Elizabeth in a tight embrace. “Write to me, Lizzy. Often. And tell me all about what you experience, I cannot wait. And I wish you all the happiness in the world.”

Jane stepped into the waiting carriage, and as it pulled away, the gentle snowfall seemed to cloak her departure in a soft, white veil. Elizabeth stood and waited for the vehicle to disappear around a corner and then, she made her way back to the house, arms wrapped around herself. From the distance, the strains of music and the familiar sound of Christmas carols reached her ears from Longbourn village, a reminder of the shared celebrations that echoed through the neighbouring homes. The air held a sense of magic, the kind that only this season could bring. She’d felt the same last year, the promise of a new year, the possibilities —and what had it brought her? A year of upheaval.

But perhaps, just perhaps, the magic of this Christmas Season would spill over and even the path for a truly wonderful Twelfth Night ball.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Elizabeth

Matlock House, London

5th January 1812

The grandeur of the masquerade ball once again startled Elizabeth as she entered the home of the Earl of Matlock. Just like the year before, the rich splendour of the house enhanced the charm of the night. If she hadn't been so nervous, she would certainly have taken it all in with a more appreciative eye. She tugged on her Beira costume, the same as the year before and took a deep breath when her aunt placed a hand on her arm.

“Remember, my dear, you are not alone in this. I am here with you, and I stand by your side.”

Elizabeth nodded, grateful for the steadfast presence of her aunt. Aunt Gardiner had heard the whole story, everything from Mr Wickham to Mr Darcy and whatever else Elizabeth could think of. As always, she hadn't judged and simply offered a sympathetic ear. Having her around certainly helped Elizabeth calm her nerves.

“Thank you, Aunt. I ... I suppose I ought to go look for him,” she said, and her aunt squeezed her hand. As Elizabeth stepped into the crowd, her senses were overwhelmed by the display of colours the masked revellers were wearing, the strains of the music, and the merry conversation. Her heart raced with anticipation and trepidation, her eyes darting from one masked face to another in search of her Boreas. How would she feel when she saw him? Would her emotions become clear at once? And why could she not stop thinking about Mr Darcy?

She scoffed. Was it possible he was here? She'd considered this since she'd learned he was staying in Town over Christmas and New Year. She remembered Caroline's

lamentations over Mr Darcy's absence at last year's ball, but a part of her had wondered about his presence this year. Surely, he would attend his uncle's ball? She was ripped from her thoughts when she looked toward the balcony where she'd stood with Boreas the previous year.

He was there. Waiting.

A tall figure, clad in the same costume as the year before, stood with his back to her looking out into the night. Her heart quickened as she walked toward him, her legs shaking as she pressed on.

As she drew closer he turned, and their eyes met. For an instant, she was robbed of her breath and she looked at him, eyes wide and her heart racing. The moment she'd waited for all year had arrived. And yet, the image of Mr Darcy popped up in her mind's eyes. Why? Why now? Was it because she could not shake the image of his flour-covered face? How much he'd reminded her of Boreas? Yes, that must be it for as she looked at him now, she saw the same image before her. Was it a coincidence?

"Boreas," she said, remembering to use her slight fake Scottish accent again. She wasn't quite sure why, but it somehow made her feel more secure, more in control.

"Beira," he replied, his voice deep and rich—and so familiar. She forced the thought away, realizing she had to do what she'd come here for and not allow herself to be distracted.

"I did not think I would see you again," she said, as he moved aside, allowing her to step past him. Once on the balcony, her breath was visible against the cold, and she looked up at him. A trace of the old magic remained, the attraction, the pull—it was all still there and yet, changed. It did not feel as urgent, it did not feel as powerful. She knew why. Her heart was not with Boreas anymore. Somehow seeing him had clarified this in her mind.

"Neither did I," he answered, his voice tinged with regret. "I searched for you for a long time. I thought I had found you once but ..."

“So did I,” she said quickly. “I ... I thought I had found you, but it was not ... it was another. I was fooled and ...” She fell silent as he nodded.

“Beira, I came here tonight because I wanted to see you,” he said and cleared his throat. At once she knew there was something important he had to say—and something that might change the trajectory of their tale. “I meant every word I said last year, and I longed to see you, to be with you again but ... I cannot start this evening on a lie. I must confess that I ... I must be honest with you,” he said, his eyes never leaving hers. “I have fallen for a woman this year, a woman I wish to propose to. It took me a long time to admit it to myself because I was committed to finding you, to being with you when I did, but—” He shrugged. “I cannot help my feelings. I do not mean to hurt you, and I know I have already hurt her and do not know if she can ever forgive me, but I cannot proceed with what was between us.”

His words hung in the air, heavy with meaning. A strange mix of relief and sadness washed over Elizabeth. At once, she felt compelled to share her own secrets, to unburden herself of the weight she had carried.

“Do not fret, Boreas. I too have fallen for someone,” she admitted, her voice trembling. “But it is a tangled web, for he may soon be engaged to another. It is a mess of my own making. So, do not feel bad. You and I are in the same position.”

He looked at her, his lips curling into a smile.

“Well, we are one of a kind, are not?” he said, sounding bemused, and his voice evoked images of the man she now knew she truly loved. Mr Darcy. Thinking of him hurt her heart as she knew it would never be and yet, she could not help it.

“It seems that way,” she said, glad in a way that it had all been over so quickly.

They stood across from one another as the sounds of the waltz drifted toward Elizabeth’s ear.

“Perhaps this is our farewell, then,” Boreas murmured, his voice carrying a note of resignation.

Elizabeth nodded, her heart heavy with the weight of their shared decision. “Indeed,” she said, surprised by how anticlimactic their parting had been. She just arrived here, so filled with anxiety and fear. And now? Now after just a few minutes they were to part? It felt ... wrong. Thus, she did not move and instead only looked at him as he looked at her. She saw something in his eyes. She knew those eyes, knew that voice with its hint of a blunt northern accent...

“Perhaps one last dance?” she suggested, and he smiled at her, proffering his arm.

“Of course,” he said and led her to the dance floor.

As their hands met to begin the dance, a shiver of familiarity coursed through Elizabeth. She looked into the masked stranger’s eyes, and suddenly, she knew without a shadow of a doubt who he was, who he had always been.

In that moment, Elizabeth’s voice trembled, breaking the silence. “Mr Darcy...”

Mr Darcy’s eyes met hers, a reflection of the emotions that pulsed between them. He took her hand in his, and the feeling of warmth spread through her at a rapid pace.

“Miss Bennet...” he whispered.

They stared at one another as around them, the dance commenced, and the grumbling of other attendees pulled them from their trance.

“Come with me,” he said hastily and led her away toward an alcove nearby. There, he stopped and looked at her and then, slowly, his hand rose up and he carefully removed her mask. She reached up at the same time, and pulled down his fake beard, revealing his visage—though his eyes were still masked, he was unmistakable.

“I cannot believe it is you. I had hoped for it, I wished for it, but I did not dare believe it,” he said, his voice thick as he lifted his eye mask.

“The truth is, Mr Darcy, that I had hoped you were he as well, but I did not think it possible. I knew of course you were a relation of Lord Matlock, but I did not think you were here last year, you told Caroline you were not.” Elizabeth muttered, her voice quivering.

His eyes held her, solid. “I was. I informed Caroline I was not attending because she’d expressed an interest in getting an invitation out of me, I knew she’d seek out my company, so I told a fib and said I was not attending, to divert her.” Elizabeth took a deep breath.

“I wish I had known you were here. I might have put it all together. As it was, I searched for you and then Mr Wickham claimed he was you ...”

Mr Darcy’s eyes widened and he shook his head. “I should have suspected as much. That weasel.”

“I was suspicious from the start but could not allow myself to accuse him. I knew in my heart it wasn’t right.”

“Why did you not tell me?” he asked, head dipped to the side.

“I might have but I heard you were leaving for Rosings to meet a woman you were to wed, and I thought that... I felt betrayed, as foolish as it might seem.”

He flinched but nodded. “I too was fooled. My aunt heard about Beira and decided to set me up with a friend of hers who had a daughter with a shall we say, a questionable reputation, in want or rather in need of a husband. It took me a while to discover the truth as well. Yet even when I was with her, I thought of you. The woman I told you earlier I wanted to propose to, is you.”

Elizabeth’s heart skipped a beat. “Oh, Mr Darcy, I adored Boreas and dreamed of him, but then I met you and I doubted the sincerity of my feelings. I thought I was quite duplicitous and flighty with my feelings.”

His eyes grew wide. “As did I.”

A shared, awkward laughter bubbled up between them, a release of the tension that had held them captive.

“Well, then it is fortunate we found one another, and now can make sense of what we felt,” he said finally, his hand still in hers. Elizabeth, I must confess, I had hoped... in my heart, I had hoped it was you. My cousin Richard and Lady Catriona ...” he paused. “I shall explain who they are later. But they helped me figure out that you might have been Beira because of your aunt’s connection to Lady Fraser. So, when I came here, I had hoped it would be you, but I doubted it still. I thought I could not possibly be so fortunate.”

“It would appear that we are both fortunate,” she said gently, running her gloved thumb over his hand. Then, suddenly, his words came back to her. She was the woman he’d wanted to ... propose to?

“Mr Darcy what you said earlier that you thought you had wounded the woman you love ... You meant me?”

“I did,” he said gently. “I thought if ever there was a chance of us being together, then it was surely ruined by my leaving and lying to you. I could not bring myself to tell you why I really had to go. Telling you I was to wed another woman felt so wrong. And yet, I know it upset you that I lied, for that is the only reason I can imagine now you were so distant and cold.”

She inhaled before answering. “It is true. I did and yet I felt terrible for I had been allowing Mr Wickham to get close to me. I had no right to judge you.”

Neither said anything for a moment, then Mr Darcy said. “I received word of a possible marriage between you and Mr Collins. I know he is back at Rosings Park but ...”

“We are not engaged,” she said hastily, not wanting to risk losing another moment with him on misunderstandings. “He wanted to court me, but I told my father I needed to come here first. To see Boreas, to find out what I wanted. Although I knew it all along, I just wasn’t willing to acknowledge it.”

He hesitated with a smile playing around his lips. “I am glad to hear that it allows me to do this.”

Before she could say anything, he dropped to one knee. He looked at her, holding her hand and then, as those in their vicinity looked up, beamed at her. “Elizabeth Bennet, will you do me the great honour of becoming my wife?”

Tears shimmered in her eyes as she looked down at him, her heart pounding as her voice declared a resounding yes. Mr Darcy rose, cupped her face and when Elizabeth closed her eyes, she felt his breath against her face once more. As their lips met in a tender, passionate kiss, the world around them faded into insignificance. They were together, at last, bound by a love that had weathered trials and crossed paths with destiny.

Epilogue

Pemberley

Christmas Day 1812

The grand halls of Pemberley were adorned with greenery and twinkling candles gave a warm festive glow, adding to the spirit of the season.

Elizabeth looked out over the peaceful scene in front of her and smiled as she saw her gathered friends and family all around them. In one corner, Jane and Mr Bingley stood together, their hands entwined, a picture of happiness as her sister caressed her rounded stomach. Very soon, they would be a family of three and Elizabeth could not have been happier for her beloved sister.

Not far off, Mr Collins and Charlotte engaged in animated conversation, their faces aglow with the excitement of their impending nuptials. The news of their engagement had come as a surprise to many, and Elizabeth had been more than taken aback. However, Charlotte had assured her it was what she wanted, and she knew that like so many women, her friend was reaching an age where love had to be set aside for practicality. Although as she watched them now, she could see a genuine affection in their eyes and perhaps, this would mean her friend would find her happiness as well, in her own way.

Lady Catherine, ever the beacon of high society and propriety, watched the proceedings with a sharp eye, her disapproval of her nephew's choice of bride still evident. Mr Darcy hadn't wanted to invite her, on account of her actions leading up to their union, but he'd done so for the sake of Anne, who hadn't wanted her mother to miss out on her first Christmas as a grandmother.

Anne, more radiant than ever, entered with her husband, their smiles reflecting her contentment. Elizabeth did not know her well, as they lived far from one another, but she had always liked the young woman and hoped they would one day

be firm friends. As her husband made his way toward Richard and Jane, Anne joined them.

“William,” she said. “You told the truth, it is a splendid celebration indeed. And Lizzy, how do you feel? First time hosting Christmas dinner as Mistress of Pemberley.”

“It was daunting,” Elizabeth admitted. “But I am glad everyone is enjoying themselves. It is quite wonderful indeed.”

Anne smiled but then her eyes lit up. “I almost forgot. I saw Catriona and her husband. They send their very best and thank you both for your good wishes on the birth of their son.”

Mr Darcy smiled at Elizabeth, and she squeezed his hand. The woman who had almost stolen him from her had become one of Anne’s good friends, and neither Elizabeth nor Mr Darcy minded. After deciding to accept her family wrath, she eloped with her wine merchant and even though she remained estranged from her family, the young woman appeared happy.

“I am glad to hear it,” Mr Darcy said, his tone warm. “It seems everyone is getting married. I dare say, our cousin will be next.”

He nodded towards Colonel Fitzwilliam, dashing and full of charm as always. Presently, he was in a spirited conversation with Kitty. Their connection was palpable, a promise of a future yet to unfold.

“Would it not be funny if she married Richard?” Anne said, her hint of mischief in her tone. “Then all of William’s dearest friends will be brothers by law though the Bennet sisters.”

The group chuckled but then Anne turned serious. “Although not Mr Wickham, that is a blessing indeed.”

The story of Mr Wickham’s attempt to ingrain himself with the Bennets had spread and the man had been thoroughly shamed. So much so, he’d left Hertfordshire and returned to Derbyshire, only to be arrested after cheating the Earl of Dartmouth out of gold at a card game.

“No, indeed,” Mr Darcy said. “I am glad Bingley stepped in. Though I would have rather not spread Georgiana’s troubles in such a way.”

“How is she? I’ve not seen her yet.” Anne asked.

“She went out to ice skate with Mary, Lydia and Mr Denny,” Elizabeth explained. Anne frowned.

“Mr Denny?”

“An officer in the militia. He just asked for Lydia’s hand, and Mary has an officer interested in her as well. I dare say, my mother might get her wish and see all her daughters wed by next Christmas.”

“A very merry Christmas will be,” Mr Darcy said. The conversation continued for some minutes but then, Anne excused herself to seek out her husband.

“Shall we take a turn about the garden?” Mr Darcy asked, and Elizabeth nodded, taking his proffered hand. They stepped outside, the air so cold it temporarily robbed her of her speech. “Allow me,” he said and took off his coat, wrapping it around her shoulders. Warmth from within, as well as from his jacket, she smiled at him. They walked hand in hand through the snow-covered gardens of Pemberley, the world hushed in the hold of winter.

Under the canopy of the night sky, Mr Darcy stopped, and his eyes met Elizabeth’s.

“I am so happy to have this moment alone with you. I adore our families and I am interested to see how your mother will fare when we play bullet pudding, given she has been imbibing a rather copious amount from the wassail bowls—but I wanted some quiet with you.”

“As did I,” she agreed. And then, as the snowflakes gently fell around them, he held her close, their hearts beating in perfect rhythm. Elizabeth closed her eyes, feeling his warm breath against her cold skin, and the snow settled on her hair.

“Fitz?” she said quietly.

“Yes, my love?”

“I have a gift for you, one I wanted to share later but I can’t wait.”

She waited for him to look down at her before raising her head. And then with a smile she shared the precious news she’d held so close to her heart.

“I am with child,” she said, her breath turning into fog as she spoke.

“You are?” he smiled and cupped her face. When she nodded, he leaned forward and kissed her passionately. “My darling Elizabeth. You have made me the happiest man on earth. I love you more than any words could ever say.”

“And I you, my love,” she replied and then she rose on her tip toes and kissed him once more. In the quiet beauty of the winter night, they were reminded that love was a force that could weather any storm, and that their hearts were bound together for all eternity.

THE END

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