

YALD



E.A.B.

**MEET
YOUR**

Mark

ELIZABETH ADAMS

Meet Your Mark

Elizabeth Adams

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Contents

1. Prologue

2. Chapter 1

3. Chapter 2

4. Chapter 3

5. Chapter 4

6. Chapter 5

7. Chapter 6

8. Chapter 7

9. Chapter 8

10. Chapter 9

11. Chapter 10

12. Chapter 11

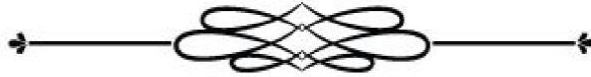
13. Chapter 12

14. Epilogue

Books by this Author

About the Author

Prologue



It is a truth universally acknowledged that pride never serves one so ill as in matters of the heart. This fact was so well established in England that for centuries, pride was removed entirely from the choosing of one's spouse.

There had long been a tradition of having one's partner in life chosen for one—not by parents or well-meaning relatives, but by Fate herself. It was a remarkably simple process. When a person reached their thirteenth year—an age of supposed reason and responsibility—said person would wear their best clothes and be taken to church by their parents where they would undergo a simple ceremony. The vicar—or priest or rabbi or some other holy vessel—would congratulate the child on surviving his or her tender years, bless the child with a few words and gestures, and if desired, beseech the heavens for a mark. A mark that would appear on their person, often on the arms or shoulders, gradually over the next months. At the same time, an identical mark would be etched upon their soul's true mate.

Marks varied greatly in style and coloration. Lady Alton famously had a beautiful purple iris on the back side of her right shoulder. It was so intricate it took an entire year for it to be completed on her skin. Etched delicately along one of the petals was the name ‘John Anthony.’ She had several gowns specially made to show off the elegant mark and was the envy of more than one lady with less eye-catching embellishments.

Luckily, Sir John Anthony Alton had a matching flower on his right thigh—an usual place for a mark, to be sure—though the size of the flower and the fact that purple looked dreadful with his complexion made him grateful it was in such a discreet location. His lady’s name was written in a delicate script along the largest petal, just as his name was on hers.

He also happened to possess an estate with a fabulous garden, famous for its irises. The couple were ridiculously happy together, and their gardens—and their elegant marks—were the envy of many.

Others were not so lucky.

Miranda Whitney had an anchor on her left bicep, a large chain snaking around it and the initials ‘JF’ conspicuously placed alongside the shaft. She was so embarrassed by the crude drawing and the dull grey color that she wore longer sleeves all year round, even on hot summer days and long after short sleeves had come into fashion. Her particular mark was popular with sailors of all sorts, and the initials ‘JF’ were entirely too common. Her mother energetically pursued Mr. John Franklin, Sir Jerome Frederick, Mr. Josiah Farnsworth,

and to Miranda's great embarrassment, a vicar named Jedidiah Fockney.

She had all but given up on meeting her mate when she was five and twenty and accompanied her cousin to Lyme where she met Jeffrey Fuller, a naval captain destined for success and equally relieved to have met his elusive 'MW' after years of searching for her.

Thus the tradition continued, with lords and laborers alike receiving their blessings at the tender age of thirteen and watching in anxious anticipation as their marks took shape on their persons. That is until 1742 when Lord Banning, the fourth earl of his line, matched with the daughter of one of his tenants.

It was thought to be a unique situation and while disconcerting, not enough so to change a habit of centuries. But then one of the king's cousins matched with a knight in his majesty's service, creating a great scandal. Though it should be said that neither gentleman objected to the pairing per se, they only wished it had been less public in nature. This was followed in 1750 by the Marquis of Tarkington matching to a maid at a neighboring estate—an Irish maid at that—and after this third and devastating strike, the nobility lost their faith in soul marks. Clearly Fate was toying with them, and they were too proud to be played with like mice at the mercy of a cat. They would steer their own ships, master their own destinies, and choose their own wives.

It goes without saying that the next generation of marriages saw a drastic increase in separate bedchambers, mistresses kept in cozy cottages, and babes born on the wrong side of the blanket. There were even a handful of scandalous divorces, but it could not be helped. After all, it was better to divorce a Lady than to marry a scullery maid.

The working classes, of course, maintained the old tradition, as did the rising merchant class, though it was thought they likely continued to receive their marks in the hopes of capturing a title or a grand dowry. The lower gentry were occasionally marked as well, the practice being more popular in the country and with those who did not frequent Town and therefore did not hear the derisive comments made about those who chose the archaic practice of soul marking and true matches over the modern custom of ruthless practicality.

The upper classes consoled themselves that though they may be less happy in their unions than their poorer counterparts, their coffers were fuller and their bloodlines unpolluted. There was the odd case of a mark appearing on a wealthy gentleman after he had married a well-dowered bride, and though everyone knew a mate without their match would suffer loneliness and ennui, forever dissatisfied with every woman who was not her, it was considered a small price to pay for doing one's duty to one's family and class.

The young lady so foolish as to undergo a marking ceremony and doomed to be matchless forever was not considered in this equation, of course.

In the north of England, the Fitzwilliam family had ceased the practice of marking after their cousin's unfortunate alliance — the Marquis of Tarkington may be shockingly happy with his Irish maid, but his Fitzwilliam cousins could not stomach such an indignity. Other noble families followed suit, as did the wealthy landowners, including the Darcys of Derbyshire.

Frederick Darcy, who was of an age to be marked in 1742, was frightened off the process by the story of Lord Banning's scandalous match earlier that year. Combined with having seen his father waste slowly away after his mother's death in childbed, and a more than usual desire to have things ordered just so, he decided to forego the mark altogether. It was an unusual choice at the time, but Darcys were known for doing as they wished and not caring a whit for society's approval. In this case, young Frederick Darcy was thought to be wise indeed, for within a decade, the process of marking had all but ceased in the upper classes.

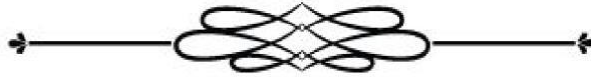
Thus Frederick's son, George Darcy, did not receive a mark, nor did George's eventual wife Lady Anne Fitzwilliam. It was a practical match on all sides. Her dowry and noble blood plus his fine estate and extensive property (nearly half of Derbyshire!)—not to mention an excessively pleasing countenance—made for happy parties amongst both their families.

Their son, Fitzwilliam Darcy, having more than his fair share of the Fitzwilliam pride and the Darcy independence (and his father's good looks), also chose to forego a mark. In possession of an intelligent mind and a clever turn of thought,

he could not comprehend how Fate could choose a wife better for him than he could choose himself.

It was simply not possible.

Chapter 1



Longbourn, Hertfordshire

Thomas Bennet was a practical man. He was also a lazy one. He knew this about himself and like many lazy men before him, accepted it without much question. After all, fretting took entirely too much energy and he had none to spare.

At the tender age of thirteen, and already an astute observer, he had no desire to receive a soul mark. His parents had been marked and his younger sister had begun showing a mark a few months earlier, but Thomas did not like the idea of having to search far and wide for the particular lady he was destined for. His father had told him the story of his search for Thomas's mother—something the older gentleman likely thought romantic but which Thomas found mildly horrifying.

Thomas had cut his teeth on tales of his father traveling all over England in search of his match, only to find her at a dock as she disembarked from a ship that happened to also have his cousin on board whom he had come to meet. He was thirty

years of age by the time he accidentally ran into the love of his life, and Thomas was not interested in a similar pursuit.

It sounded exhausting.

So believing he knew what was best as young men often do, he forewent a mark, much to his parents' chagrin, and happily attended school and university, secure in the knowledge that he was the master of his own fate.

As Thomas grew into maturity, he began to wish for a wife. His eye was caught by young Francis Gardiner, a comely lass in the nearby town of Meryton. Her father was a country attorney, but he had managed to give his daughter a respectable dowry. Francis was cheerful and pretty, and most importantly to Thomas, nearby. A lazy man will not go searching abroad for what can be found closer to home.

A discreet inquiry revealed that she did not have a soul mark and Thomas began his pursuit. In less than a month, he had courted and proposed to the lively Miss Gardiner, and another month after that saw them married. A year later, they welcomed their first daughter, Jane. She was everything lovely and the calmest baby anyone could ever remember. Unfortunately, the same could not be said for her mother.

Francis, now Mrs. Bennet, was not exactly what Thomas had thought she was. He had assumed, quite naturally he thought, that Francis's qualities displayed during their courtship would continue into their marriage. She had been a wonderful listener when they courted, happy to hear all about the latest discoveries he had read of, but by the sixth month of

marriage, she was entirely uninterested. She had not grown up on an estate and therefore knew little of their management, and a man of Thomas's indolent nature was not best suited to teach her. He did put forth a half-hearted effort in the beginning, but when she became overwhelmed or showed her disregard and began speaking of something else, he gave up.

By the time little Jane was a year old, Thomas Bennet was utterly disappointed.

Where he had thought to find a curious mind, he was met with vacuous disinterest. Where he had needed a helpmeet, he got little more than a girl in a woman's body. And perhaps most disappointing of all was that her vivacity had not translated to the intimate side of their marriage. Their shared bed was the one place in their home where Francis was utterly silent and motionless, and the one place he desperately wished for the opposite.

What Thomas Bennet had not known, and what he would not find out for many years to come, was that Francis was more than a little avaricious, and always had been. She was as romantic as the next girl, but stronger than her desire for love was her desire for fine gowns and a carriage of her own.

Her sister had begun sporting a mark at the age of eight, and when she was sixteen, Priscilla Gardiner had met Mr. Phillips, a young clerk with a matching mark. His prospects were decent but not yet realized, and their engagement lasted the better part of two years. Even after several years of success, he

would never be a wealthy man. Priscilla may be happy with her partner in life, but Francis wanted more.

When she stood at the altar on her thirteenth birthday, being blessed by the vicar, she surprised everyone by calmly declining the offer of a mark. The vicar had already begun speaking the fateful words and stopped mid-sentence, his mouth hanging open. Her mother gasped audibly, and her father rushed to the altar, thinking she had misunderstood the question. Francis had looked her father in the eye and told him that it was no mistake; she did not wish for a mark. Seeing the stubborn look in her eyes, no one had pressed the issue.

Had her mother known what was truly going on in Francis's mind, she would have stopped her daughter from making such a momentous mistake. Alas, Mrs. Gardiner had no idea, and a new destiny was set in motion by Fate, who was none too pleased to have to rewrite all of her plans.

Francis was uncommonly pretty. She had been thus since she was a tiny girl. She had been the object of attention from children and adults alike for years. Lately, she had seen the way the men had begun to look at her. Her young mind decided her face was her ticket to the life she craved—the gowns, the parties, the jewels. She would rise above her station and not be held back by any mark. She would be the author of her own destiny.

Little did young Francis know that Fate was never wrong, and manipulating destiny seldom worked in favor of the manipulators.

When Thomas Bennet began to pay her attention, Francis sprang at the opportunity. He was dull and bookish, but not unpleasant to look at, and most importantly, he came with Longbourn, the largest estate in the area next to Netherfield. He would make a fine husband and she would make a fine wife, she was sure of it.

When she fell with child so quickly after her wedding, she thought it was Fate smiling on her for making such a good choice. She would have a son, tall and strong, and he would take care of her into her old age. When the babe was a girl, she knew a moment of concern, but soon talked herself out of it. It was her first babe, and she was young. Only nineteen! There was time to bear a son.

The second child was another girl, though she was nothing like little Jane. Elizabeth was loud and energetic and playful—and utterly exhausting. For some reason, Thomas took a particular interest in this child, though Francis could not understand why. He did not do the same with their third, another girl, or their fourth, yet another daughter.

When Fanny was pregnant with her fifth child in seven years—her husband had stopped calling her Francis nearly five years ago—she took a fall on the stairs. She was great with child and likely would have been delivered in a few weeks if not days, but the fall caused her waters to break and her wrist to twist and swell painfully.

Thomas rushed out of his bookroom when he heard the commotion, sweeping Fanny up in his arms and rushing her to

their chamber. He sat beside his wife as they awaited the midwife, holding her uninjured hand and speaking soothing words. Calmed by his presence and pleased with his attention, Fanny did not wish for him to leave. When the midwife arrived, Thomas leaned over and kissed her forehead and Fanny's hand fell to his shirt where it gaped open at his neck. She had meant to grab the collar, but her hand slid inside the opening. He had not buttoned his waistcoat or put on a jacket in all the commotion, and when she moved to pull her hand free, the loose collar opened further to the side. Fanny froze, staring at a tiny glint of red beneath the dark hair. She quickly forced the shirt open further, ignoring the pain in her wrist as she raised it to hold open the fabric.

There, on her husband's chest, just over his heart, was a soul mark. A soul mark that had not been present on her wedding night, nor the last time she had seen him without his shirt on in broad daylight.

To her chagrin and dawning horror, she could not remember when the last time she had seen him thusly was. She jerked her attention to his face and was met with his ashen expression.

"Thomas," she whispered.

He gave her a look of resigned guilt, his lips falling down at the corners.

"When?" she asked.

"Just after Elizabeth was born."

Her eyes widened. "She is nearly five years old!"

He winced at her words.

“How could you not tell me?” Her expression was filled with shock and confusion, and beneath those emotions, betrayal.

“What good would it have done, Fanny? There is nothing to be done about it. I am married to you!”

He had meant to say that he would not leave her and his decision had been made many years ago, but she took him to mean he was trapped with her when he would rather be with someone else.

Her body took that opportunity to remind her that she would soon be having a babe, and Thomas was whisked out of the room by the midwife.

Throughout her labor and pains, and after the babe was born and latched to her breast, Fanny’s mind continued to focus on one thing: her husband’s soul mark.

Somewhere out there, an eighteen-year-old girl was looking for her future husband, her soulmate. And she would never find him, because he was here, with her. She did not know how she felt about that. When she was younger, she would not have worried at all. But now that she had five daughters of her own, daughters who might have marks, she could not help but feel a stab of pain for that unknown girl.

This was quickly followed by worry. What if Thomas met her eventually, as soulmates inevitably met? What would he do? Would he set her up in a cottage somewhere, right beneath

Fanny's nose? Would he sneak away to meet her at odd hours? Take her to the seaside? Go carousing in Town with this unknown woman?

Is that why he had grown so close to Elizabeth? In the wake of a mark appearing, had he clung to whatever was sweet and simple in his life to avoid his confusion? Or was she simply the last child he had desired with his wife?

Now that Fanny thought about it, the appearance of his mark coincided with a cooling of his ardor. It was well known that marked men were not interested in women who were not their soulmates. They did not even look at other women. They saw only her. They lived for her. Breathed for her. Desired only her.

And Francis Bennet was the person standing between her husband and his soulmate.

Is that why Thomas came to her so infrequently? Why the room was always dark and the coupling always swift? Had he been hoping she was her? Imagining it was so?

Suddenly, Francis felt sick. She called for her maid to bring her a basin and there on her marriage bed, a new babe in her arms, she retched and retched and retched, feeling all her vaunted tenacity, all her determination to better herself, seeping out of her with each heave.

Fate had had her say after all. Fanny was never meant to be Mistress of Longbourn. She had stolen that title from its rightful owner and Fate had punished her by denying her a son. Thomas Bennet would be the last Bennet at Longbourn,

all because Fanny was a greedy upstart who did not wish to wait for her soulmate.

She lay back on the pillows, spent and miserable. Hot tears tracked down her cheeks, fueled by exhaustion and wild emotions she could not contain.

Thus disturbed, she ordered the room next door to be made up and for the first time in eight years of marriage, she moved her things out of the master's chambers and into her own rooms. She would no longer share a room with Thomas Bennet. She would not remain in the bed of a man who wished she was someone else.



As Francis settled into her new chamber a few days later, she looked around proudly. All her scheming and planning had gotten her exactly where she wished to be. It had only taken a few hours for her altruistic feelings of sympathy and guilt to fade into anger. She was the wronged woman, after all. Thomas Bennet had married her in good faith. She had accepted him with the understanding that neither of them were marked. He may have not had a say in the changing of that fact, but he certainly could have told her when the mark began to appear.

They might have been able to work out the problem together. Even had they not come to a solution, at least he would have been honest with her. They would have faced the situation side by side, like a husband and wife ought to do.

Instead, he had let her continue on in ignorance, sharing her bed, filling her with children, and sating his baser needs with her while wishing she were someone else.

Well, no more. She was Francis Gardiner Bennet, the prettiest woman in Meryton. She was second to none, and she would not be treated like a shoddy replacement.

She was no man's consolation prize.



Thomas Bennet stood in front of the mirror as he removed his shirt, staring at his chest. He was still a young man—only two and thirty—but he felt old in his bones. Fanny had moved out of their shared chamber; the one they had lived in together for the last eight years. For the first time, he felt the full weight of his arrogance, his hubris.

What had he been thinking? That he, a thirteen-year-old boy raised on a middling estate in Hertfordshire, would know better than Fate? The conceit! The sheer stupidity!

Even with a fine education and an intelligent mind, he had chosen poorly. Oh, Fanny was a perfectly decent woman, but after their fourth babe was born, he finally saw her as she truly was. A woman who had married him solely to improve her station, not because of any particular fondness for him. He was sure she liked him at least a little, or she had before she saw his mark, but he had no place in her heart. She had never longed for his company; he doubted she was even attracted to him. Questions he had long had about his marriage and his

wife's behavior were suddenly answered once he realized she had married him for Longbourn and Longbourn alone.

He sighed. What a fool he had been. His soul mark had come in when he was seven and twenty—only four years after he had married Fanny. He could have waited. What were four years compared to a lifetime of happiness? He could have begun truly searching for her when he was thirty. He could have done it. It would not have been such a very great hardship.

He stared at the red camellia over his heart, wondering who bore the matching mark. Had he already met her? Was she in Meryton? Hertfordshire? He thought she must have a knack with flowers for he had never done anything in the garden beyond walking through it. He felt a throb of pain for her, whoever she was. She was likely going to assemblies, or even going to Town for the Season, searching for the man who bore a matching mark, but she would never find him.

He would make sure of that. He knew himself enough to know that he was an indolent man. He had not had the stamina to search out a soulmate, but neither did he have the strength to resist one were she to cross his path.

He traced his fingers over the initials on one of the petals.
ARD.

Sometimes late at night, when he was alone in his bookroom and staring at the flames in the fireplace, he would imagine what her name might be. Alice Rose? Arabella

Rosamund? Perhaps she was foreign like his mother had been and her name was Amandine or Anita or Anya.

Thomas had never been a romantic. He had never daydreamed about a lady's eyes or her hair or the shape of her mouth. But he found himself wondering about his mysterious soulmate. Picturing her smile, imagining her laugh.

It was Fate, he knew. He had tried to out-manuever her, but she had had her way in the end. Fate would not be denied.

Now here he stood, alone in his room, his wife and new babe down the corridor, and his head filled with a woman he would never know.

Fate was cruel, indeed.

Chapter 2



Longbourn, Hertfordshire

Young Jane Bennet was growing into all that was lovely. Francis Gardiner had been a beautiful young woman, but she paled in comparison to Jane. Jane's face was a perfect oval, her chin ending in a delicate point. Her eyes were a bright, sparkling blue, framed with thick dark lashes. Her skin was milky white with the slightest touch of pink over her cheeks. Her lips were a perfect rosebud, darker than all her sisters, and when she smiled, the sun shone brighter. Her hair was a golden halo, her neck graceful like a swan. She was tall enough to be elegant but not tall enough to intimidate. Her figure was beginning to form in an enviable fashion, and her nature was as sweet as her smile.

She was her parents' greatest source of pride and the envy of her neighbors.

Francis watched Jane growing, saw her beauty, and debated how she should advise her daughter. To mark or not? To choose for herself, or to let Fate decide? If she chose a mark,

there was no guarantee that her soulmate was not already married. Then she would be an old maid, forever pining for a man she could not have. But if she did not receive a mark, there was no guarantee she would be happy in marriage. Her husband might be cruel or dull or receive his own mark when it was too late.

Francis pondered all of these questions, wondering what she should do about her girls. After speaking to her sister at length, they came up with a rough plan. If the girls received their mark before their thirteenth birthdays that would mean their mates had chosen to be marked and their futures were secure. The girls could come out at sixteen or seventeen as was the norm and begin looking for their husbands. After all, neither Francis nor Mrs. Phillips had ever heard of an early-marked girl not eventually meeting her soulmate. It simply did not work that way.

Alternatively, if the girls did not receive a mark before their birthdays, she would encourage them to get the mark, but she would accompany it with a stern warning. There was a chance they would never find their mates, and they may end up living with their married sisters. They must be very sure they were willing to endure that before choosing to get the mark. And if one of her daughters chose not to be marked, Mrs. Bennet would advise her to marry a little later if she could. Not so old she would be on the shelf, but old enough that the man she was marrying would have had plenty of time for his own mark to appear, and she would be less likely to be disappointed when it was too late to do anything about it.

Francis changed her mind about her plans more than a dozen times before Jane, shortly after her eleventh birthday, awoke with a tiny blue mark on her upper back, just below her neck. Francis could not be sure, so she checked it each day for a week until one day, Jane complained that her neck had been itching horribly, and Francis told her she was likely coming into a soul mark. Jane's younger sisters rushed to see, and then held mirrors for Jane to observe it herself. It took six months for the mark to be complete, but eventually, the image of a grand house emerged. On the front door of the house, in tiny letters, were the initials CHB.

“We are saved!” cried Mrs. Bennet when the mark was complete. Everyone knew that marks bore some connection to the wearers, and the sight of a grand house had Mrs. Bennet sure Jane's future husband was a wealthy man.

They knew Jane's soul mate was only two years older than her, so Mr. and Mrs. Bennet decided it would be best to wait for Jane to come out until she was eighteen, though Mrs. Bennet argued for seventeen. Mr. Bennet stated that if the young man was a property owner, he would likely go to university, and if Jane went husband hunting too early, she would miss him for he would be in Oxford or Cambridge, and Jane would be left disheartened and disappointed.

Mrs. Bennet reluctantly agreed and began watching her other daughters like a hawk. With any luck, they would all be marked early and her prayers would be answered.

To everyone's surprise, the next Bennet daughter to show a mark was seven-year-old Kitty. She was sitting on a blanket on the south lawn of Longbourn, playing happily with a doll while Jane and Elizabeth attempted croquet nearby, when five-year old Lydia pointed to her sister's leg and said, "Horsey!"

Sure enough, on Kitty's left leg, just above her stocking, was the faint outline of a horse. The image was incomplete, but it was clear it had been growing for some time. An angry Mrs. Bennet asked the nurse why she had not been told about her daughter's mark, and the young woman had shrugged and said she thought Mrs. Bennet knew.

While the adults were arguing, the sisters gathered together and looked at Kitty's mark, their curiosity piqued.

"Perhaps your husband will be a soldier in the cavalry," said Jane.

"Or he could have a very large stable," added Elizabeth.

Kitty frowned at the mark on her leg, not sure whether or not she liked it.

That night, Elizabeth stole into Jane's bed and snuggled beside her sister.

"Janie," she whispered, "do you think I will ever get a mark?"

"Of course you will! You are but ten years old. Perhaps your husband is younger than you. Mrs. Long is six months older than her husband, and they are very happy together. And there is still time before you thirteenth birthday."

Elizabeth sighed and stared at the ceiling. “I suppose. Though...Kitty is three years younger than me and she has a mark.”

Jane squeezed her hand. “Do not fret, Lizzy. Fate does not make mistakes.”

Elizabeth nodded, feeling better already. “You are right. I will trust Fate.”



The ensuing years saw Elizabeth becoming more romantic instead of less. Kitty’s mark had come in beautifully, and the detail of the horse’s mane and eyes showed great artistry. She was the envy of several of the younger girls whose marks had not yet come in, and of those who had, Kitty’s was by far the most intricate.

Mrs. Bennet insisted on horse riding lessons for Kitty, as she would clearly need them, and the regular instruction in combination with the admiration of her neighbors made Kitty more confident than she otherwise would have been, a fact that made Fate smile smugly. Why all these silly humans thought they knew better than anyone else, she did not know, but Fate spent an inordinate amount of time cleaning up their messes.

As Elizabeth’s thirteenth birthday approached, she still had no mark. Her little sister—a full three years younger than she!—had a mark, but Elizabeth’s body remained woefully bare. Every morning she would look herself over in the mirror,

searching for even the smallest change, but nothing was ever there.

In an odd moment of motherly affection—for Elizabeth often felt that her mother was not particularly fond of her—Mrs. Bennet sat Elizabeth down for a serious talk.

“Elizabeth, have you thought about whether or not you will take a mark next month?”

“I have thought about it, but I have not decided,” she answered hesitantly.

Mrs. Bennet nodded. “You are a vivacious girl, Lizzy. Strong. Lively. I do not think you would be happy with a man who did not love you completely. Mary could, and even Jane, I think, but not you.” She took Elizabeth’s chin in her hand and looked her in the eye. “I advise you to get the mark, Elizabeth. For a girl like you, no husband is better than one who does not truly want you.”

Elizabeth could only stare at her mother, not comprehending everything that was being said or why her mother was telling her such things, but she understood that her mother was being very serious, and that a mark would likely mean a happy marriage or life as an old maid. Either choice was better than an unhappy union.

As she lay in bed that night, Elizabeth made her decision. She would get the mark. She would rather have a great love or no love at all. Her mother was right. She could never live with someone who merely tolerated her. There was risk inherent

with getting a mark, but she was willing to take it. It would be better than the alternative.



As her thirteenth birthday loomed closer, Elizabeth was again sat down by one of her parents, but this time it was her father.

“Do you plan to take a mark, Elizabeth?” he asked, his features carefully neutral.

“I do, sir.”

Mr. Bennet swallowed and looked around the room, searching for answers in corners that remained silent.

“I advise you to be careful, my dear.”

“What do you mean?” asked Elizabeth.

“You will be thirteen in less than a month. Most men are older than their wives. If your intended husband wished for a mark, he would have gotten it already, and yours would have shown up accordingly.”

Elizabeth bit her lip and looked at the carpet, blinking to dispel the sting in her eyes.

“I do not wish to hurt you, Lizzy,” her father continued gently. “I merely wish to prepare you. It is possible the man you are matched with is already married and will therefore not be able to wed you. You may not ever meet. Or he may have chosen not to get the mark for other reasons.”

Elizabeth thought about what he said. She thought it unlikely her husband would be more than ten years older than herself, which meant he could only be three and twenty now. Most men did not marry until they were five and twenty at least. Many waited much longer, or so her aunt Phillips had told her. Her own observations supported this idea. Her cousin Letitia married a man when she was nineteen and he was eight and twenty. David Long married at nine and twenty, and Sir William said he did not marry Lady Lucas until he was over thirty.

Elizabeth hated to disagree with her father, but she did not think it likely her soulmate was already married. Besides the logical arguments, would she not feel it if he was? Would her heart not whisper the truth to her?

She was quiet another minute, then asked, "What other reasons do you suppose he has?"

Mr. Bennet sighed. "He may come from a wealthy family that does not approve of marks. If that is the case, he may marry against his mark."

Elizabeth gasped. "Is such a thing possible?"

"I have never heard of it happening, but I imagine it has at some point. Especially if the gentleman were already promised to another."

Elizabeth felt a moment of unease over this thought, but pushed it aside. She had made her decision.

“He also may not wish for a wife at all. Many soldiers in the army and sailors feel this way. Or he could have some sort of illness. Or simply not wish to have a wife and family. There are a great many reasons a man may choose not to be marked. Should you not respect his wish if he does not want a wife chosen for him?”

Elizabeth scrunched up her face. She had not thought of it in that way. She had no desire to foist herself on someone who did not want her. But was that not the whole reason for the marks? Fate would match you with the person who suited you best, in personality and character, and you would be ridiculously happy together. If he was marked for her, his wish for other women’s company would gradually wane. He would want no other companion but her. He would desire no woman but her. She would be his greatest source of happiness and he would be hers. They would complement each other perfectly.

Was that not reason enough for him to forgive her for marking him when he had not wished it? Was a chance at that kind of perfect love not reason enough to get the mark? And perchance he was younger than her. He might have been born only a week later than herself!

“Jane did not have such a choice,” she said carefully. “Neither did Kitty. She was only seven when her mark came in. Is that not the same? Marking a girl when she has not decided for herself that she wishes it?”

Mr. Bennet blinked at her for a moment. “You are right, my dear. It is the same. I am thinking like a man, which I daresay

is no surprise.”

Elizabeth smiled at him in that secret way they had between themselves. “Perhaps that is why Fate gave you so many daughters. To learn the way ladies think.”

Mr. Bennet threw back his head and released a howl of laughter. He drew Elizabeth into his side and squeezed her tightly, kissing the top of her head. “You are my greatest joy, Elizabeth.”

She smiled. “Papa,” she said, biting her lower lip, “will you be very disappointed if I get the mark?”

“No, my dear, I will not. It is entirely your decision, as it should be.”

She nodded slowly. “I have decided to get it. Not because I do not understand your reasoning, for your arguments are sound.”

Mr. Bennet smiled sadly at her, both proud of her skills at logic and afraid that she was headed toward disappointment.

“I wish to be marked because I do not think I could be happy with a man who did not love me completely. I wish for a deep and abiding love, like Aunt and Uncle Phillips have. I wish for a sharing of minds like Aunt and Uncle Gardiner. They are all marked.” She looked at her father sheepishly, as if she just realized she had not named him and her mother in her list of happy couples to emulate.

“You are right, my dear. Your aunts and uncles are very happy with their soulmates.” He pressed her hand. “I will

stand beside you proudly when you receive your blessing, and I will not be the least bit disappointed you have chosen a mark.”

She threw her arms about her father’s neck and squeezed him tight. “I am choosing love, Papa. Not just a mark.”



Elizabeth’s birthday ceremony went along in the normal way, followed by a dinner at Longbourn her mother especially planned for her. Elizabeth was touched Mrs. Bennet had gone to the trouble, but she should not have been surprised. Elizabeth was the first Bennet daughter to undergo a marking ceremony. Jane’s ceremony had been a simple blessing followed by a nice dinner, but it was not as elaborate as Elizabeth’s Marking Dinner.

She went to bed happy and smiling, wondering what her mark would be and how long it would take to come in. She only hoped it was as beautiful as Jane and Kitty’s had turned out to be.

It did not take a fortnight for Elizabeth to regret wishing she had a beautiful mark. A simple heart or circle would have been much more agreeable than the monstrosity currently being etched onto her back. She reached behind her with a knitting needle and scratched again, huffing in frustration.

“You will scratch yourself bloody if you continue doing that!” scolded Jane. She snatched the needle from Elizabeth’s hand.

“I cannot help it! It is so itchy!”

“Let me see.” Jane moved behind her sister and carefully slid Elizabeth’s wrapper off her shoulders.

Regular gowns were too irritating to her skin, so Elizabeth had taken to wearing a wrapper most of the day over the last week.

“It is coming in nicely, though it is very large. I cannot make out any particular design yet, but there is a rectangular structure here.” She touched the inside edge of Elizabeth’s shoulder blade. “Perhaps it is a building of some kind. Mayhap it is an image of London!”

Elizabeth scowled. “I do not care what it is anymore, I only wish it would stop itching!”

Jane gave her a sympathetic look, then gently pulled the wrapper up over her sister’s back. She took a pair of woolen socks from the drawer and pulled them over her hands, then began rubbing her sister’s skin in circular motions. “Does that help?”

“Oh, thank you, Janie! You are a saint among sisters!”



Elizabeth itched terribly for another month as her mark took shape. What Jane had originally thought to be a cityscape turned out to be an elaborate landscape that spanned the entire left side of Elizabeth’s back, from her should blade down to

her hip bone. The farthest edges reached in to her spinal cord and around along her ribs, nearly to her breast.

There was a beautiful forest along her side, in various shades of rich green, with a path running through it leading to a large house in the distance—the rectangular structure Jane had noticed at the top of the mark. The house had a rolling lawn in front and a steep ridge behind it. A stream of rich blue snaked around her rib cage nearly to the front of her body. A fawn drank at its banks and birds flew above near the crease of her arm. A colorful rose garden took up the center of the image and stood between the house and the forest. It was clearly a country estate of some sort, but no one recognized it, and the trees and steep ridge did not resemble the geography of Hertfordshire.

The last piece of the image to come in was low on her back, covering her hip and reaching to her buttock. In the forefront of the image, near her spine, a large oak stood in a clearing by the stream, a swing hanging from a branch. And there, right over the left dimple at the base of her spine, carved into the tree trunk was a crude heart with two sets of initials in it.

She knew ERB stood for Elizabeth Rose Bennet, but FGD was a mystery.

The general itchiness ended after six weeks, but it was a full nine months after her ceremony before the mark was complete. The colors were rich and lush, the textures intricate, the light and shadow masterfully done. The sheer size and scope of the mark was more than a little impressive. Mrs.

Phillips said it must be a good sign, that such a mark must mean there was a very great love with a very great man in her future. Or with a groundskeeper, thought Elizabeth saucily, but she did not share her thoughts with her family.

Thankfully the mark was in such a location that she would not be expected to show it to all and sundry as Jane had. It was also easily covered with clothing. She had two gowns that showed the uppermost corner of the image, but it would be easy enough to have all her gowns in the future designed with concealing the mark in mind.



Christ's College, Cambridge

Fitzwilliam Darcy struggled to pay attention to his tutor. His arm had been burning and itching for two days now, and the pain was more than a little distracting. He had thought it was a bite of some annoying pest, but he could not see a mark and there was no redness. The itch was not isolated to one small location. The entirety of his upper arm, from his elbow up onto his shoulder and wrapped around the back, itched like the dickens.

Finally, the lecture was complete and he made his way back to his rooms. He roomed with a distant cousin on his mother's side, Reginald Digby, and he called for him as he entered.

“Reggie, what do you think this is? It will not stop burning!”

Reginald looked at Darcy's upper arm carefully. "I cannot tell. It is red all over from you scratching at it. Best see the apothecary."

Darcy sighed and huffed his annoyance, but he knew his cousin was right. God forbid he had some horrible infection that needed to be rooted out. Best to get it over with.

The apothecary saw him that very afternoon. The old man took Darcy right up to the window to see the irritation in the light. He turned his arm this way and that, poking at the flesh and pressing the red skin down until it appeared pale again.

"I think I see the problem, young man," he said in a voice that creaked like old attic stairs.

"What is it?" asked Darcy, his voice laced with worry. "You are coming into a soul mark." Darcy could only stare at him.

The old man looked right back, his eyes made large and owl-like by the spectacles he wore.

"Pardon me?"

"I said your soul mark is coming in. That is why it itches. It is a large one, and quite intricate I believe. That is good," he said with a conspiratorial smile. "Those often lead to the best matches."

Then the man winked at him. Winked! At Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley.

"I cannot have a soul mark."

“But you do.”

“I did not have a marking ceremony.”

“You have one just the same.”

“But I do not want one!” Darcy heard the petulant tone in his voice, but he was powerless to stop it. In fact, he had a strong desire to stomp his foot, clench his fists, and scowl. But he did not. He was the heir to Pemberley and a gentleman of twenty. He would not behave as a young boy of five.

The old man clucked and patted his arm roughly. “Do not worry, young man. You will come to peace with it soon enough. Then you will have the greatest treasure you could ever wish for.”

Darcy only scowled at him.

Understanding that he was the bearer of unwanted news, the apothecary quickly packed up and left, leaving a seething Darcy behind him.

How dare she! How dare some ridiculous little tart mark herself and take him along with her. It was not fair! He did not wish to marry for a great while yet. Truly, he did not know if he wished to marry at all. He did not know more than two women he would willingly spend above an hour with, and they were his relations!

He paced back and forth, treading heavily on the carpet in his distress. Finally, he took himself off to the hunting club. Shooting something would make him feel better.



Over the next several months, Darcy's mark made its presence known. It was enormous, taking up the entirety of his upper arm and half his shoulder. He could admit that the design was well-formed and that the colors were rich. It did not look like a cheap sailor's marking as some he had seen.

But that did not mean he was happy to be marked.

Due to the mark's location, it was often remarked on by his peers. When he fenced in his shirt sleeves and rolled the cuffs up as was his habit, the bottom of the mark was visible where it ended just below his elbow. If he was hot and wished to remove his jacket, the deep greens of the forest trees showed through the lawn of his shirt. And when he went for a swim, the entire ghastly thing was on display for all and sundry.

His classmates made no effort to hide their amusement at his predicament. They teased him and howled with laughter when he scowled at them. They made wild conjectures about the identity of the lady and where her mark might be found. Did he think it was as large as his own? If it was, only certain parts of her body could accommodate it, and would that not be delightful to discover?

Darcy seethed with the indignity of it all. This was not how it was supposed to be, not at all. He was supposed to complete his studies, then go on an extended trip for his Grand Tour. After a year of travels, he would return to Pemberley and his father's tutelage, where he would spend the next few years

learning the intricacies of running a large estate and managing an army of servants and laborers. Then, if he wished to, he would begin looking for a suitable wife. He would be at least five and twenty before he even considered it and preferably much older before it came to be.

He had always known on some level that he would have to marry and sire an heir, for the sake of Pemberley and the Darcy family. But he was not looking forward to it and had hoped to put it off as long as possible. Now, the chit who marked him would likely be out in four years' time. Five if he was lucky. It was likely he would run into her in Town—he seemed to run into everyone in Town—and then he would fall helplessly in love with her and his will would no longer be his own.

If he did not meet her, well, Darcy did not wish to think about that either. As appealing as simply avoiding London was to him, he did not wish to find himself the recipient of mate sickness. No one was entirely certain what it was, or why it struck some and not others, but it was a phenomenon that had been known to happen to soulmates who did not find one another for many years.

John Harrison, an estate owner near Pemberley, began showing signs of the illness when he was five and thirty. He had taken a mark at thirteen—foolish man—and after two and twenty years, his body began to suffer from the absence of its chosen mate. He was frequently tired and his muscles were weak. He did not sleep well and his skin appeared sallow and

dull. His hair began to fall out and he lost interest in riding or tending to his usual affairs.

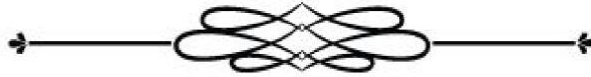
Luckily, a neighbor had a cousin visiting—a young lady of six and twenty who happened to be marked and had not yet met her match—and Harrison felt a remarkable pull toward her. It was soon discovered that their marks were a match, and within a fortnight of this revelation, his complexion was rosy and healthy, and a wedding date was set.

Being married before one wished to sounded awful to Darcy, but even worse was the threat of losing his strength and vigor. He was a young man in the prime of his life. He could ride for hours, fence against four opponents before he tired, and his hair was thick and lustrous. He had no wish to sacrifice his health for his stubbornness. He was not one to cut off his nose to spite his face.

As much as he hated to admit it, he would marry, and likely before he was thirty. Enough men at Cambridge had seen his mark. If anyone saw a woman with a similar marking, they would write to him immediately. It was a common courtesy. He doubted he would make it beyond four and twenty without meeting her.

He would simply have to stop hating her before that day, or they would both be miserable.

Chapter 3



Longbourn, December 1806

“**S**he gravely is too young to come out,” said Mr. Bennet

“Oh, Mr. Bennet! Must you be so tiresome? She is fifteen! That is plenty old enough.”

“I agree with Bennet, sister,” added Mr. Gardiner. “Lizzy is full young to come out. Jane is not even out yet and she is two years older!”

“And whose fault is that?” cried Mrs. Bennet. “I wished her to come out when she turned seventeen, but Mr. Bennet insisted her soulmate was at university and she had no hope of meeting him, so what point was there to her coming out.”

Thomas Bennet rolled his eyes.

“I must agree with my brother, Fanny,” said Mr. Gardiner. “If Jane were wishing to come out, it would be another matter, but as it is, she is content to remain home with her sisters. It is not as if she has no society. She attends dinners here at

Longbourn and has friends in the neighborhood. She is hardly desperate for company.”

“There is more to coming out than hunting for a husband,” huffed Mrs. Bennet.

Mr. Bennet raised his brows. “Is there now? I had never thought to hear you say as much.”

“Let us speak rationally,” added Mrs. Gardiner. “I agree that Lizzy is full young to be out. What think you of next year, Fanny? She will be sixteen and Jane eighteen. The two of them could come out together.”

Fanny looked intrigued.

“No one will mind a sixteen-year-old girl coming out in Hertfordshire society,” put in Mr. Gardiner. “They could attend assemblies and practice their dancing and begin working on their hostessing skills. They should begin taking on some of the duties of managing Longbourn. They will need the knowledge later, after all.”

Mrs. Bennet appeared nearly convinced now. But to wait an entire year? Jane would be eighteen! Fanny had been engaged to Mr. Bennet at eighteen!

“I would be happy to host both girls in Town for a season when Lizzy is seventeen. And with any luck, Jane’s soulmate will be out of university by then. I think a year of practice in Hertfordshire will be just the thing to prepare them.” Mrs. Gardiner smiled, knowing she had dangled a particularly juicy carrot in front of her sister.

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” said Mr. Bennet. “Do you not think so, Fanny?”

Mrs. Bennet sighed. “Very well. Lizzy and Jane will come out in Meryton next year. But they must have a proper Season in Town! You must not be stingy with your pockets, Mr. Bennet.”

He could only laugh at his wife. “I will begin saving now, my dear.”

Mrs. Bennet nodded and shifted in her chair, like a satisfied hen on a roost full of eggs. “Very well.”

One Year Later

Longbourn, 1807

Since Elizabeth had decided on her mark herself, there was no way to know how old her intended soul mate might be. He could be younger than herself, or only a year older. He could be three and twenty or five and twenty. He could be thirty! He could even be forty. Horrifying thought.

Elizabeth had been entirely certain that a mark was what she wanted, but now, three years later and faced with the prospect of meeting the man she had bound herself to, potentially against his own will, she felt more than a little unsure. What if he was angry? What if he resented her interference in his life’s plans? What if he were already married?

It was a daunting prospect.

In spite of her feelings, she went along with the preparations for the coming out their mother was planning. Mrs. Bennet had decided the girls would attend October's assembly as their first foray into Hertfordshire society, and the day before, she would host a grand dinner for all her friends and neighbors.

For the occasion, Jane had a light blue gown made up, though she had requested green. Her mother maintained the blue brought out her eyes and Jane was overruled. Elizabeth was in a pale pink dress, a color she was fond enough of, but her mother insisted that the back be low enough to show the top portion of Elizabeth's mark. Elizabeth was appalled. She had spent the last three years covering up her mark. It was personal and private, not an oddity for gawking eyes.

But Mrs. Bennet insisted that Elizabeth would never meet her match if she did not make it known that she was marked, and one could hardly argue that logic. She pushed her mother into compromising and only showing the uppermost corner of the mark. Any gentleman looking for his match would see it and request more information if he bore something similar.

Elizabeth also planned to keep a thick shawl on hand at all times, but her mother did not need to know that.

Longbourn was bursting at the seams for Mrs. Bennet's dinner, and at the assembly the following evening, neither Jane nor Elizabeth sat out a single dance. Mrs. Bennet ferried them to every party and dinner in the neighborhood throughout the winter, no matter how tired they were, and she was sure to speak of their marks to anyone who would listen.

It was mortifying for the girls—and highly amusing for Fate, who appreciated the assistance, little as it was needed—but at least they knew their matches were not in Meryton society. They would have met the gentlemen by now if they were to be found in Hertfordshire.

In spring of 1809, Jane and Elizabeth went to London to stay with the Gardiners.

Mrs. Bennet was certain at least one of them would come home engaged. They were both marked after all, and with such rich, detailed images. She was certain both their husbands were gentlemen, as they each had a grand house in their mark, and Elizabeth's had a garden and an entire forest! It must be for a man of property. But Mrs. Bennet was also practical, and she was not against a merchant who had amassed the funds to purchase an estate. She was not so finicky about money—as long as it was plentiful, she was not overly concerned with its provenance.

Their Season in London was more of the same, though on a larger scale. Mrs. Gardiner was considerably more discreet than Mrs. Bennet, and the parties they attended were elegant and filled with interesting people. Well, Elizabeth thought they were interesting. Jane was rather intimidated by the wealthy tradesmen her uncle associated with. At each gathering, she was likely to find the most soft-spoken, slightly impoverished gentleman of the lower gentry present. She would speak to him for the majority of the evening. He would then leave the gathering half in love with her while she was simply relieved it was all over.



“Did you enjoy yourself this evening?” Elizabeth asked as she ran the brush through Jane’s golden tresses.

Jane sighed. “Well enough. I will be happy when the Season is over though.”

“Is it too much?” asked Elizabeth, surprise in her voice. She was having a delightful time, but Jane was not as sociable as she was.

“Not exactly. It is only,” she hesitated.

“Only what?”

“I do not enjoy the gentlemen’s attentions.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I understand. Do you think it is the mark? Aunt said we would likely have no interest in gentlemen who were not our soulmates.”

“It could be. Or perhaps I have become too accustomed to life in our small village.”

“Do you like attending parties in Meryton?”

“Yes. But I know everyone there, and they know me. There are no questions about my mark or my status. Everyone knows I am the eldest daughter of Longbourn. I do not receive so much attention.” She reached up and took Elizabeth’s hand. “I am so glad you are here with me, Lizzy. I do not know what I would do without you.”

Elizabeth smiled and kissed the top of her sister's head, setting the brush on the dressing table. "I too am glad we came out together. I am especially glad Mama did not put us out at fifteen as she wished to!"

Jane moved to the bed and slipped under the covers. "You seem comfortable in society. How are you enjoying the Season?"

"I am enjoying it very well." She smiled slyly. "Though I am not half as pretty as you, so I receive only half the attention."

"You are perfectly lovely and you know it, Elizabeth Rose Bennet. Do not fish for compliments."

Elizabeth laughed and Jane joined her. "I am more sociable than you so I am enjoying myself, but truly Jane, if you were not quite so stunning, the gentlemen wouldn't pay you as much attention and you might enjoy yourself more."

"Are you suggesting I make myself ugly before our next outing?" asked Jane in a teasing voice.

Elizabeth propped herself up on one elbow and looked at her sister with all the earnestness a seventeen-year-old girl could muster. "Of course not. But if you truly wish to dissuade attention, you could wear less beautiful gowns. You could arrange your hair in a less flattering style. You could smile less."

"You are serious?" Jane sat up on the bed, her expression conflicted.

“It is merely a suggestion for warding off unwanted attention. I am by no means stating that I wish you to do such a thing. I am merely saying it is one method of dissuading gentlemen you do not wish to encourage.”

“I do not wish to encourage any of them!”

Elizabeth gave her a look.

Jane sighed. “Very well. I will consider your idea.”



When Mrs. Gardiner saw Jane come downstairs for a dinner party the following evening, she was more than a little surprised. Jane was wearing one of Elizabeth’s gowns. It was too short, a problem she had remedied with a lace-edged petticoat, and the yellow hue made her look positively ill. It looked well on Elizabeth’s warmer skin and dark hair, but with Jane’s paler complexion and light hair, the combination was less appealing.

She had a fichu tucked into the bodice that came up to her collarbone and her hair was pulled back tightly from her face in an unflattering style.

“Jane, dear, are you well?” asked Mrs. Gardiner.

“Yes, aunt. Quite well.”

Mrs. Gardiner raised her brows but said nothing.

When Elizabeth came down a few minutes later, Mrs. Gardiner turned to her younger niece expectantly, thinking

Elizabeth would mention something about her sister wearing her gown. But no comment was forthcoming. Instead, Elizabeth looked over Jane appraisingly and smiled.

Mrs. Gardiner was immediately suspicious. "Girls, what is going on?"

"Whatever do you mean, Aunt?" said Elizabeth innocently.

"I think you know exactly what I mean, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth flushed, not wishing to antagonize her aunt. "We only thought we would make Jane a little less attractive."

"You what?"

"So the gentlemen would pay less attention to her," Elizabeth stumbled on, her face red and her eyes darting between her aunt and her sister who refused to look up from the floor.

"Have the gentlemen been harassing you, Jane?" asked Mrs. Gardiner.

"No, aunt. I merely wish not to speak to quite so many of them."

Mrs. Gardiner pursed her lips. "I see. I would be remiss in allowing you to leave the house like that, and your mother would never let me hear the end of it if she were to find out." She exhaled heavily. "Let us go upstairs and repair your appearance as quickly as we may. We still have twenty minutes before we must leave."

Elizabeth and Jane both looked crestfallen that their plan had been thwarted. Mrs. Gardiner stifled her laugh as she followed them up the stairs.

“You know, girls,” she said once they were safely in the guest chamber, “there is more than one way to dissuade a gentleman’s attention. You do not have to make yourself less attractive to gain peace at dinner.”

“Would you teach me how?” asked Jane, her expression pathetically hopeful.

Mrs. Gardiner patted her niece’s hand. “Of course I shall, my dear. But first, let us deal with this hair.”



Mrs. Gardiner was generous with her advice and soon enough, Jane was enjoying herself and had become adept at deflecting unwanted attention. Elizabeth had no such difficulties. She did not have Jane’s beauty or more mature figure to draw suitors to her, but her eyes were bright and her smile genuine, and she was prepared to please and be pleased. She always had a dance partner and lively conversation at dinner, and so far, she had only wished to avoid one gentleman’s attention, and he was easily dispatched.

As they had expected, none of the men present at any of the gatherings they attended sported a matching mark. It was rare to meet one’s match as soon as one began looking for them. Mrs. Gardiner assured them their matches would come along at the right time and that in the meantime, they should simply

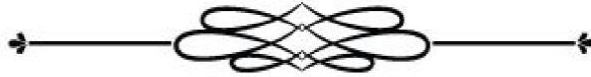
enjoy themselves and not think about it overmuch. It was advice they were happy to take.

The girls had been told that most marked ladies find they have no interest in men who are not their soulmate. They might think a gentleman charming or attractive, but her heart would remain untouched. To their combined surprise, the girls' lack of romantic interest led to a wonderful Season.

Gentlemen knew the Bennets had no marital designs on them, and the ladies knew the men would not be drawn to any lady but their fated mates. Most of their uncle's friends were marked—lower gentry and successful businessmen like himself—and it was easily determined whether or not their marks matched. It was a refreshingly honest way to make friends.

Both Jane and Elizabeth were happy to return home with promises to correspond with half a dozen ladies and the sincere friendship of twice as many gentlemen.

Chapter 4



Longbourn, Spring 1809

While Jane and Elizabeth were enjoying a Season in London, Lydia was contemplating her own future. She would be thirteen that coming summer and she must decide if she wished for a mark. Kitty and Jane's marks had come in before their birthdays, and Elizabeth had had a ceremony followed by the most elaborate mark anyone had ever seen. Mary had chosen not to get marked, though she refused to explain her reasons to anyone, vexing girl.

Now Lydia must choose for herself. She did not wish to be the only Bennet sister without a mark along with Mary. She was nothing like Mary. Her solemn elder sister had no desire to marry, or not one that she would admit to, anyway, and Lydia did wish for a husband. Preferably a dashing one in a red coat. She thought she should get the mark so there would be no confusion over whom she should wed, and she had heard that marked women were happier in their marriages and she intended to be very jolly indeed.

But she was more than a little hurt that she was not already marked. Whoever he was, he clearly did not wish for the assurance she did. He was content to go about the world, doing whatever it was he did all day, not knowing a thing about his soul mate. His own soul mate! It was insulting, and a part of her did not wish to get marked at all. That would show him to ignore Lydia Bennet! Let him marry some ugly little bore of a girl while she danced at all the parties and never lacked a partner.

Except...most of the gentlemen she knew were marked. So were the wealthy tenants, and the handful of officers she had met in her life. If they were marked, would they be interested in her at all? Would they even dance with her?

It was a difficult decision to make, likely the most important choice of her entire life. What was she to do?

In the end, it was Maria Lucas who decided it. Maria's birthday was in April while Lydia's was in August. Maria chose to receive a mark in her ceremony, and by the end of July, she had three beautiful butterflies flying over her left arm. They were small and delicate and brightly colored.

Lydia was terribly jealous.

When her thirteenth birthday came about and she stood before the vicar and was asked if she would like to receive a mark, her answer was a resounding, "Yes!"

Her voice echoed off the stone and more than one person had to hide their snicker, but she could not stop smiling. Her mark would be just as nice as Maria's. She knew it.



Derbyshire, Spring 1809

Georgiana Darcy was the only daughter of a wealthy landowner and a titled mother. She did not rebel. She did not do anything less than what was expected of her. She did not go against the grain or fight the powers that be. She accepted. She acquiesced. She was a lady through and through.

And she was thoroughly miserable.

Her thirteenth birthday had just come and gone and like the weak little child she was, she had allowed her family's opinions on soul marks to sway her decision. She had wished for a mark. A person designed to suit her perfectly sounded magical to her. Why would anyone not want such a thing?

But the Fitzwilliam family did not receive marks. Not anymore. No one had received a mark on their thirteenth birthday since 1755, and she could not be the first to break the new tradition. The Darcy family was more divided, but the Darcys of Pemberley—the Darcys that mattered—did not receive marks. Her father had not been marked. His father before him had not been marked. Her brother had not wished to be marked, but when he was twenty, a mark had appeared on his right arm and shoulder. It had not been his choice and he had been livid. He complained about it bitterly, cursing the mark and the person who had forced it on him.

He did not always know Georgiana could hear him, of course. He likely would have modulated his tone if he had

known she was nearby, but she had heard him just the same. He was horrified at receiving a mark and she pitied the woman who put it there. Georgiana was certain her brother would be a terrible beast the day he met her.

She did not wish a man to feel that way about her. She did not wish for someone to curse her name and her very existence. And yet, she could not help but think it was a surer way to happiness than any other she had seen. She knew many couples in the Ton—her aunt and uncle Davies, Lord and Lady Matlock, her cousin Jeffrey Fitzwilliam and his wife Minerva. None of them were happy. Not with each other, anyhow.

Her aunt Davies—her father's younger sister—was happy when she was shopping and she doted on her three children, but she did not seem to care one way or the other about her husband. Lady Matlock found joy as a hostess as she had a mind for politics, but she and Lord Matlock had no great passion between them. They were friends, or at least they appeared to be, but they had separate chambers in their homes, and they spent months at a time apart—and had for as long as Georgiana could remember.

Her cousin Jeffrey had only been married a short while. He was perfectly polite to his wife, but poor Minerva nearly jumped each time he spoke to her. Georgiana did not know what to make of it, nor her cousin's slightly exasperated looks and frustrated sighs, but she knew these were not the signs of a happy union.

She wished better for herself.

She wanted something more. More than politeness. More than friendship. Something more complete. She did not wish her husband to feel exasperated with her as her cousin did with his wife. Nor did she wish to be like her aunts and not even notice when her husband was in another county.

But she could not go against her entire family. No one had even asked her if she wished to receive a mark, so against marking were they. Her brother was pitied for his mark. The family would look at it and shake their heads, tutting under their breath.

Fitzwilliam would sigh and close his eyes, likely mentally counting to ten (a trick he had taught her to employ when dealing with uncomfortable situations) and then tell them that there was nothing to be done for it now and that he was not an object of pity. Then he would change the subject.

Georgiana imagined his own upset and conflicted feelings led him to disregard her choice in the matter. Perhaps she should have brought the subject up herself. Just because no one had asked her what she wished to do did not mean they would be unwilling to speak with her about it. But she was afraid to upset anyone, so she remained silent.

Then her ceremony came and when the vicar asked if she would like to receive a mark, she had barely drawn breath before he was moving along to the next portion of the ceremony, so sure was he of her answer. She had whispered a quiet “no” when he was halfway through the next sentence,

simply so she could feel as if she were participating in her own ceremony.

But she regretted it.

She should have said yes. She should have said it loud enough to echo through the nave and shock her family. She wished she was waking up each morning to check herself for a mark, happily speculating on what it would be, not filled with regret and sadness.

She was a rich girl. A rich girl with excellent connections and only one brother. He was as yet unmarried and the estate was not entailed on the male line, therefore she was his heir.

The granddaughter of an earl with thirty-thousand pounds who may one day inherit the largest estate in Derbyshire was no small prize. She had learned that in school, if nothing else. Many men would do a great deal to possess what she had. To possess her. They would be charming and kind, feigning interest in all her pursuits and worming their way into her heart. They would feign affection. They would feign love.

And she would never know what was real and what was an act to acquire that which she possessed. Would he show his true colors the day after the wedding? Or would he continue the charade for a few more months or perhaps until her first child was born? She had heard a great many stories from the girls at school, and she had watched Minerva in her miserable marriage. She did not wish for such a fate. And yet, without a mark, how could she be certain a gentleman was truly

interested in her and not her thirty-thousand pounds? How could she ever trust enough to fall in love?

She was a coward who could not state her own wishes in a church, in front of her family who cared about her. What had she thought would happen? They would hardly have interrupted the ceremony and stopped her. The blessing would have been over before they had realized what was happening. She could have spoken with the vicar privately—he had known her since her birth. He had christened her! He would have understood.

But she was a weakling who could not speak for herself, and now she had lost her chance at a soulmate. She was a wretched creature.



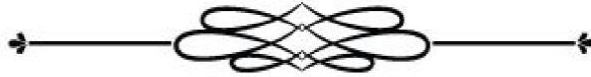
Lydia was terribly disappointed. She had hoped for something beautiful and vibrant. Instead, she had received a plain green ivy. It began at the outside of her left hip and snaked its way up her ribs, ending at the side of her breast. Her mother said she could not understand why her daughters did not have their marks on their arms like everybody else, but Lydia did not mind the location. It was the plainness of the image that bothered her.

She supposed the color was nice and the way it curved was delicate enough, but it was not what she had wanted. It had been two months since her birthday and the ivy had already completed itself. Jane's image had taken at least twice as long!

And what was worse, her mark gave no indication of the sort of man it matched her with. What did ivy mean? Did he have an interest in plants? Was he a botanist? Or had the unthinkable happened and she had matched with a gardener? To make matters worse, there did not appear to be any sort of name on the vine. She thought the letters might come through later—she had never heard of a mark without at least initials, if not a name—but waiting for them was more than a little distressing.

Alas, six months after her mark first appeared, and four months since it had completed, there was still no name. What was she to do?

Chapter 5



Mrs. Bennet was determined that her daughters would have better luck than she. They would all find their fated mates and be happily married. She would stand for nothing less. She thought it likely Jane and Elizabeth's husbands were to be found in Town, so she set about preparing them. She insisted on having their wardrobes made in London each year. Mr. Bennet only agreed to the expense if Mrs. Bennet utilized her brother's warehouse and connections, a condition his wife gladly assented to.

Since they were spending so much on the first two girls, Mr. Bennet also insisted that Mary wait to come out. Mrs. Bennet readily agreed. After all, Mary was the plainest of all her daughters and unmarked besides. Her chances of finding a husband were low, if not nonexistent. It would be better to focus the attention on the two eldest girls so they might support their unwed sisters when their father was no longer with them.

Kitty was another matter. Her mark had come in early. She had only been seven years old! That meant her husband was

six years older than her and now one and twenty. Because Kitty's mark was a horse, Mrs. Bennet insisted on riding lessons. While the master was instructing Kitty, he also taught Jane and Elizabeth. After all, their husbands were men of property. It would behoove their wives to know how to ride. Mrs. Gardiner suggested music lessons as well. Elizabeth had a natural gift for the instrument and a lovely singing voice, but she lacked discipline. Jane seemed to have no knack for it at all but was willing to practice, and Kitty showed some promise. Mary enjoyed playing, but her voice was best left unheard.

Thus Longbourn was filled with masters and lessons and music all day long. Mrs. Gardiner had suggested a governess more than once, but Mrs. Bennet refused. The money would be better spent on clothes for the girls, and what could the governess do that she herself could not? They still had Nanny to help with the practicalities, and Mrs. Bennet felt herself more than capable of teaching her daughters to be proper young ladies. Any doubts she had on the topic were quickly squashed by her own vanity and elevated standing in the neighborhood.

By the time Jane was one and twenty, she could play the pianoforte well enough to accompany dancers and entertain with a song or two in the evening. Her voice was weak, but sweet, and as long as she limited herself to songs that favored her light tones, she acquitted herself well enough. Mrs. Bennet thought it was rather a poor return for eight years' worth of lessons, but the Gardiners had insisted it was necessary for

Jane to move about high society, so she kept her complaints to herself and the patient ear of Mrs. Hill.

Jane did excel at riding, and she cut a fine figure in her smart blue habit and jaunty cap. For her twenty-first birthday, Mr. Bennet gave her the most extravagant gift any of his daughters had ever received. A new mare.

Andromeda was a beautiful horse. Her coat was a warm honeyed brown and she had a bright blaze on her forehead. Jane was instantly in love and she spent hours every morning riding about the countryside.

This meant the two horses set aside for riding were now available for her sisters, so though she was jealous of Jane's mare, Kitty was glad she got Hercules to herself. The gelding was her favorite. He was too big for Elizabeth, who was a skilled enough rider, but she had never taken to it like Kitty had.

Kitty lived to be on horseback. She had no fewer than three habits in good repair in addition to her old one for particularly muddy days. She was the fastest out of all her sisters, and she could take higher jumps than any of them dared.

Mary was indifferent to horses, as she was to most things, and once she had made her preference known, her mother had stopped insisting she ride. Kitty could not understand it. Who did not enjoy riding?

Lydia often joined her elder sisters on their rides, though she had ridden a smaller pony for many years. Her father had said she was not yet big enough for a mare of her own and insisted

she wait. Not only was she the youngest Bennet daughter, she was also the smallest.

Shortly before her fourteenth birthday, that all changed. In one short year, Lydia shot up half a foot, surprising her parents and Kitty, whom she was now slightly taller than. She was the same height as Elizabeth and Mary, and only Jane rose above her now, though Lydia was growing still. It was possible she would be the tallest of all the Bennet sisters. And she the youngest! Was it not a good joke?

Unfortunately for the Bennets, they had been so focused on launching Jane and Elizabeth, and so adamant about not hiring a governess, that the younger girls had been somewhat neglected. Mary was not the sort to ever get into mischief, though she was turning into a bit of an odd duck. Kitty was happy and well occupied so long as she was with the horses, but she had fallen slightly behind on her other pursuits. Her singing was middling, her playing barely better, and she had no head for more academic pursuits. She hated reading above all things except needlepoint, which she was certain was the devil's own punishment, and she only drew when her mother insisted she practice for the master. What good was drawing anyway? At least riding got one from one place to another. Drawing was merely a respectable way to pass the time.

Lydia was another matter entirely. Distressed about the lack of a name on her soul mark, and the general plainness of the silly thing, she withdrew more into herself and had many hours of unusual quietude. She had always been a boisterous girl. Some would even say she was unruly. Now she vacillated

between attempting to find some way to relieve her boredom and fretting over her mark. In addition to the usual turmoil of a girl of fourteen, she became rather difficult to live with.

Mr. Bennet watched his youngest daughter with concern. She was the most like Fanny. In addition to being the spitting image of her mother, she had no patience for deep thinking and no aptitude for concentration. Mr. Bennet felt more than a little guilty of his treatment of Fanny—some days he was so consumed with it he did not leave his bookroom in order to avoid her—and he vowed he would do better with his daughter. He had not had the patience he should have with his wife—or the honesty—but Lydia was an innocent child and she was clearly floundering. She needed guidance. She needed attention.

He was her father, after all. If he did not take an interest in her development, who would?

“What are you about today, Lydia?” he asked her one May morning at the table. Kitty had left for a ride with Jane, and Mary and Elizabeth had just scampered off to the music room to practice duets.

Lydia looked at her father in surprise. “I do not know. I had thought I might visit Maria Lucas.”

“Does your mother have nothing for you to do?”

Lydia looked down. “Jane has taken over the accounts and Elizabeth the still room. There is nothing for me to do.”

“Nonsense. Your mother is hosting a dinner party next week if I remember correctly. You should help with the arrangements. Are you any good with flowers?”

Lydia was so surprised by the question—and the fact that her father was having a prolonged conversation with her—that she stumbled through her answer. “Only moderately, sir.”

Mr. Bennet nodded. “I shall speak to your mother. She has always had a knack for arranging flowers. She could show you.”

Lydia did not know how to respond and merely nodded her head.

Mr. Bennet clasped his hands together on the table. “What are you reading currently?”

“Reading?”

“Yes. What book?”

“I, uh, well, I am not. Reading anything. Currently.” She swallowed nervously.

Mr. Bennet’s eyes grew large. “Well, that is something we shall have to remedy. Come along, Little Lyddie.”

He rose from the table and moved to the door, and Lydia jumped up to follow him. He had not called her Little Lyddie in ages. Not since she had her marking ceremony almost two years ago, and certainly not since she began growing. She followed her father into his bookroom and stood in the middle of the carpet, unsure what she should do.

“Ah ha! Here it is!” cried Mr. Bennet. He turned and triumphantly waved a book above his head. “You shall read this one next. Get through the first three chapters today and tomorrow we shall discuss your impressions.”

“We shall?”

“Yes. Now hurry along and find your mother. I look forward to seeing your flower arrangements about the house.”

Lydia smiled at him awkwardly and left the room, the book clutched to her chest. Whatever had gotten into her father?

To something of his own surprise, Mr. Bennet continued his interest in his youngest daughter. Lydia turned out to be brighter than he had thought. Perhaps she was less like her mother than he had imagined? Regardless, he enjoyed discussing books with her.

He spoke with his wife and she agreed to teach Lydia to arrange flowers. The first few vases Lydia made up were so hideous Mrs. Bennet refused to display them in the house, so they adorned various tables and windowsills in Mr. Bennet’s bookroom. He found an odd pleasure in seeing the ugly little creations splashed about his sanctuary. Lydia had made a purple arrangement just for him, as she knew it was a color he favored, and though the results were not visually pleasing, his heart was warmed by the notion that his daughter was aware of his favorite color and gratified that she wished to please him by making something just for him.

He placed the vase proudly on his desk and smiled each time he saw it until the flowers wilted away.

Eventually, Lydia's efforts improved and her creations went from abysmal to middling, and finally to attractive and occasionally pretty. Her mind was sharpening as well. She was not as quick as Lizzy nor as ponderous as Mary, but she was smart enough, occasionally insightful, and always entertaining.

One August morning at breakfast, a few months after he had begun to focus his attention on his youngest daughter, Mr. Bennet looked at Lydia and said, "Your birthday will soon be upon us. Have you a wish for anything in particular?"

Lydia dropped the scone she had been buttering. She was surprised he remembered her birthday—he had forgotten it more than once in the past—and looked at her father with wide eyes.

"Well? Does anything spring to mind?" he asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

There was something she wanted, but she did not think he would do it. She looked at him with hope in her eyes and he smiled at her, giving her the courage to ask. "I would like to go to London, sir, with you," she added the last in a whisper and looked at her lap.

Mr. Bennet sat back at her request, surprised and a little flattered. "What do you wish to do in London?"

"I want to go the theater!" she cried, excitement seeping through her discomfort.

Mr. Bennet laughed at her enthusiasm.

“Would you consider it?” she asked hopefully.

He smiled at her warmly. “I shall do one better. I shall plan it.”

Lydia squealed with happiness.

“To the theater we shall go, though I don’t know what they will have appropriate for a girl your age. Perhaps you would enjoy Astley’s more?”

“I do not care where we go, so long as it is in London.”



A fortnight later, in early September, Mr. Bennet and Lydia were in the Gardiners’ house, preparing for a night at the theater. Mrs. Gardiner was helping Lydia prepare for the evening. Lydia had borrowed one of Elizabeth’s gowns, as they had the most similar height and coloring, and she was practically vibrating with excitement.

“Step in, dear,” Mrs. Gardiner held the dress out and Lydia gathered her petticoats to step gingerly into the gown. Mrs. Gardiner pulled it up over her hips, then stopped. “I did not know the rest of your soul mark had come in. It is lovely.”

“What?” Lydia lifted her arm and tried to look, but her mark was in such a location that she could only really see it in a mirror.

“The flowers. They are lovely.”

Lydia turned to face the mirror and looked at her side. She could not see beneath her stays, but where they ended, her thin chemise did little to conceal the bright red flower on her lower rib cage. She gasped.

“Aunt, help me remove this.” Soon she was standing in her chemise, looking at herself in the mirror, her mouth hanging open.

“Whatever is the matter, dear? Do you not like it?” “I do not understand.”

“What do you mean?” Mrs. Gardiner looked at her niece in confusion.

“My mark was a plain green ivy, Aunt. For nearly two years now. I looked at it in May and there were no flowers.”

Mrs. Gardiner did not ask why her niece had not looked at her mark in four months. It was clearly not the time, but she did wonder.

“So you have never seen these before?” she asked.

Lydia shook her head, staring at her mark in amazement. Suddenly, her posture stiffened. “Aunt, would you look closely and tell me if you see a name? Perhaps hidden in one of the petals or along the vine?”

“Of course.”

It was a trifle awkward standing there with her chemise pulled up and an open dressing gown, but Lydia was past the

point of caring for her modesty. She was wild to know if there was a name.

“I do not see a name exactly, but it does look as if letters are trying to form just here.” She traced her finger along one of the leaves on the vine. “This may be an F, or perhaps a T.”

Lydia gasped, so surprised and happy was she. “Oh aunt! It is a miracle!”

“What has caused the change, do you think?”

“I have no idea,” breathed Lydia. She turned to the side to look at her mark in the mirror. What had been a plain green ivy was now surrounded by bright flowers. One large red one at the bottom, the one her aunt had seen, and a scattering of smaller pink and yellow flowers along the vine. Her plain mark was quite pretty now.

Oh, happy day!

The change in Lydia’s mark was all anyone could talk about at the Gardiners’ house. No one had ever heard of such a thing occurring. Mr. Gardiner was so intrigued he asked his acquaintances about it, but they had never heard of it either. Mr. Bennet sent off a flurry of letters to his Oxford friends and eagerly awaited their replies.

Lydia did not particularly care why her mark had changed, but she had a sneaking suspicion that she knew what had done it. Since the last time she had checked the mark and the day the flowers were noticed, only one thing had changed.

She had begun spending time with her father.

Perhaps it was the result of being around a man more often. Or perhaps her father's love for her had made the flowers blossom, just like she had blossomed under his constant attention. It was a little too poetic for her to believe, but strange things were afoot and nothing could be discounted. Personally, she had a more likely culprit: it was the change in her that had done it.

She had been moody and difficult, even surly at times. She had refused to work on her needlepoint because it bored her. She had refused Kitty's help with riding because she could not stand being so much worse at something than her sister. She had resisted Jane's offers to help with her drawing and Lizzy's with her music. She had pouted and felt sorry for herself because she did not have a beautiful mark and because her soulmate had not been marked first. She had taken it as a personal affront and let it color her attitude in unflattering ways.

She listened to the adults discussing the phenomenon with one ear. She would test her theory, and then they would know.

As soon as she returned to Longbourn, Lydia asked Jane to draw her mark. Jane was the best with a pencil and watercolors out of all of them, and she made a good rendition. Lydia wrote the date in the corner and set about her plan.

She began with Jane as she was the most approachable of her sisters. Jane agreed to help Lydia with her drawing and to

gift her with the riding habit she was having replaced as Lydia looked to be growing taller than Elizabeth and Mary now.

She practiced diligently and listened to everything Jane said, and once the riding habit was adjusted to fit her, she approached Kitty. It was more than a little humbling to ask her former playmate and the sister closest to her in age for instruction, but she had a theory to confirm and she would not be swayed.

Kitty was thrilled to be asked and threw herself into teaching her sister. Much to her surprise, Lydia found that she enjoyed learning to draw and ride. Kitty was a patient teacher and her enthusiasm for the sport infiltrated everyone around her, and her drawing was already showing improvement.

She approached Elizabeth for help with her music, and soon Lydia was playing simple tunes that her sister could sing with. She was a little scared to try her own voice for she thought she had no great talent, but through Elizabeth's gentle urging, she attempted something simple.

It was soon discovered that Lydia had a haunting alto which rather complimented Jane's timid soprano and Elizabeth's fuller mezzo. Even Kitty joined in the singing while Mary played. Lydia would never be as good a singer as Elizabeth, who was clearly the most vocally talented of her sisters, but she could be pleasing to the ear. And who knew? Perhaps her soulmate would prefer a deeper voice.

After a month of improving herself, Lydia went into her room and locked the door. She peeled off her gown and

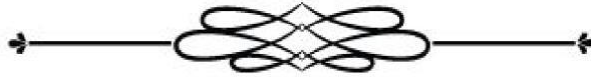
petticoats, then unlaced her stays and pulled her chemise over her head. Nude before the mirror, she turned to her side and lifted her arm. Her eyes were closed tight in a mixture of dread and anticipation, Jane's drawing of her mark in her hand for comparison.

Taking a deep breath, she opened her eyes and looked in the mirror. She gasped.

Her mark was nearly unrecognizable. Where five small flowers and a larger red one had been, there were now dozens. Tiny little flowers in pink and purple and yellow, large exotic flowers in a deep pink, bright red flowers with petals she had never seen. All along her ribs and spreading onto her stomach was a tropical garden. And there, along the leaf of a full pink flower, in clear dark lettering, was the name Frederick.

She did the only thing she could in that moment. She laughed.

Chapter 6



Derbyshire, August 1811

Fitzwilliam Darcy looked in the mirror, turning his head this way and that as he examined his hair. Was it thinning along the sides? No, it could not be! His mark had only appeared seven years ago. Mate sickness was rare, and he had only heard of it occurring after at least a decade had passed without one's soulmate. Usually twenty years or more! He could not be wasting. Not yet.

Though he had noted the mark at work in other ways.

When he was younger, he used to notice women. Not one particular feature over another, but he had appreciated their bosoms, both full and light, and the delicate bones that rested so tantalizingly above them. He had wished to run his fingers through their lustrous hair, touch their brilliant skin. A rosy cheek and a sly smile had appealed. Long legs had brought delightful images to mind, and a coy expression had sent his blood rushing.

Now, he noticed them less and less. A barmaid practically sat in his lap at a tavern last week and he had barely even realized it. His cousin Jeffrey had laughed uproariously at him. He might have thought it was merely his age. He had been twenty when the mark came in—hardly old enough for his blood to cool. But his cousins were two and four years older than he, and they noticed women a little more each year. Furthermore, they had developed very specific tastes.

Richard liked clever women with bright smiles and quick tongues. The kind who sparkled in a crowd. He did not seem to have much in the way of physical preferences, though he had never shown much attention to a plain woman. Jeffrey was just the opposite. He did not seem to care about her personality one way or another, or even that she had one. He liked a comely face with delicate features, creamy skin, thick hair, preferably blonde or even better, red, and most importantly, a full bosom. He also liked a full backside and a slightly shorter stature, but he was willing to compromise on those if his other desires were met.

Darcy rolled his eyes at him. At least Richard's preferences had to do with character and compatibility. Jeffrey was exactly as he seemed. A dandy who cared for nothing but appearances. Well, he had gotten his just desserts. He had married Lady Minerva Sutton. She was fine-boned, full-bosomed, and had a head full of strawberry gold hair crowning a pretty face.

She was also terrified of her husband.

Darcy could not completely blame her. She had only met the man half a dozen times before they were wed, and Jeffrey did little to befriend her or even accustom her to his presence. He was direct and eleven years her senior. That ought to have stirred some compassion in Jeffrey, but it did not. He was only ever irritated at her timidity, and the more she retreated from him, the more he barked at her, and the vicious cycle went on and on.

Darcy would not be surprised if they were living in separate residences before their fifth anniversary.

That was one thing to be thankful to his mark for: he would not be pressed into an unsuitable marriage of convenience. As the only Darcy male of his generation, the family could not afford to risk him becoming ill and dying without an heir. As much as they disliked it, they would wait for his soulmate to appear and he would be spared their machinations.

He could only hope that he recognized her when they met. This waiting was becoming tedious. He had been angry when the mark first appeared. In truth, he still was. He did not like his choice being taken away, even if the end result would be a happy union with a woman he loved and who loved him in return. It was the principle of the matter. He should have been able to choose his own bride!

Thanks to this blasted mark, he did not even have preferences. Every man he knew had preferences. They knew what they found attractive and what they did not. They knew

what appealed to them, what drove them wild, and what left them disappointed.

Darcy had no idea. Did he prefer tall or short? Tall might be nice so he would not crane his neck looking down at her, but short was appealing if he ever wished to pick her up. Not that he thought of such things very often, but one did wonder.

Would he like a woman who spoke her mind, or one who was more reserved? Would he have to question her endlessly to know her thoughts or would she freely volunteer them? He thought chasing after someone's opinion sounded exhausting, but then so did living with a person who told him every thought that ran through her head, regardless of its relevance.

He would prefer clever, but an unintelligent woman was not out of the question if she had a sweet nature. He knew plenty of people who were intelligent enough, but their lack of morals or shrewish nature ruined any enjoyment he might have had from engaging their minds. Kindness was more important. Now, if a woman was kind and clever, he would be satisfied.

Darcy smiled at himself. He had a preference after all.

He looked at his hair again in the mirror. It was his imagination. It was as full as it had always been. He was simply overtired and suffering the strain of being a guardian to a fifteen-year-old girl.

Georgiana.

He had nearly lost her. He was the worst of brothers. She was a foolish sister—he had spent many hours contemplating

exactly how foolish—but she was only fifteen. Was everyone not foolish at such an age? He was seven and twenty. She was under his care. He had a responsibility to ensure she was not placed in situations for which she was unprepared and in this, he had failed spectacularly.

He had been deceived in her companion's nature, but the woman had had all the right references. He had checked them himself. Still...he should not have allowed her to go to a strange place with only a companion. He could have sent the underbutler and a few footmen with her. With strict instructions to escort her wherever she went, of course, and to report Mrs. Younge's movements to him. Regardless of her references, he had not known her long. That alone was reason for caution.

He took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of his nose. There was no use obsessing over what could have been. He had learned his lesson now and he would not make the same mistake again.

Mrs. Annesley came highly recommended. She was the widow of a vicar and had one son who was living in Derby. Her husband had been significantly older than her and widowed himself, and he had three children from his first marriage. She was on good terms with her husband's children and one of them happened to have a living thirty miles from Pemberley. Darcy was friendly with the estate owner in charge of the living, and he had grilled him relentlessly on Mrs. Annesley and her family.

He was comforted by what he heard of her, but he still would not allow her to take Georgiana anywhere without him. They were at Pemberley now, and when he joined Bingley at his new estate, they would go to stay with his aunt Davies in Nottinghamshire. Two of his most trusted footmen would accompany them with the sole job of looking after Georgiana.

Darcy was paying them well for their services, and their families had served the Darcys for several generations, so he was almost certain he could rely on them. He still fretted though. Bingley was his closest friend and in need of his assistance. And Georgiana was filled with remorse every time she saw him. Even when he was at his gentlest with her, she could barely look up from the carpet. She would likely recover quicker away from his presence. But he could not help but feel he was leaving her at a delicate time.

Would she feel abandoned if he left? Or worse—would she be relieved? He supposed the best he could hope for was that she would be grateful for the time to herself, not necessarily his particular absence. Knowing he was thinking in circles and driving himself mad in the process, Darcy took up his riding crop and headed for the stables. A good ride would clear his mind.



There was nothing for it. Darcy must speak with Georgiana. If she was upset at the idea of him leaving, he would put Bingley off. His sister was more important. Regardless of what her

reaction was they could not go on as they were. He was the elder, he was more mature and experienced. It was up to him to broach the topic.

He quickly found her in the music room, playing a sad dirge.

“Georgie, may I speak with you?”

Her fingers clanged on the keys and she looked up at him like a startled deer. Was she truly afraid of him? Good God, how had such a thing happened?

She nodded and he gestured to the sofa by the window. Mrs. Annesley smiled at Darcy and discreetly left the room, leaving brother and sister alone. Together.

Georgiana settled next to him, perched on the edge of the seat as if she would run away at any moment.

“Georgie,” he said softly, “are you afraid of me?”

She startled and looked up at him with wide eyes. “No! Of course not! You are all that is good, brother. I could never be frightened of you.”

“Then why will you not look at me?”

“It is not you, Fitzwilliam. It is me. I am ashamed of myself.”

He took up her hand and squeezed it tightly. “Dearest, you have no need to be. It was not your fault. It was entirely that blackguard Wickham. He took advantage of your youth, of your prior connection. The fault is entirely his, and Mrs.

Younge's for not looking after you better, and mine for trusting her in the first place."

Georgiana huffed. "I am not a child, Fitzwilliam! I must bear some of the blame."

He could only stare at her, shocked at her outburst. Georgiana never spoke so, and certainly never to him.

She sighed. "I will be sixteen in the spring, brother. Some women are married at my age."

"Women with foolish parents."

"Nevertheless." She twisted her hands in her lap, staring at the floor. "I must own some responsibility for my actions. And for my inactions."

He tilted his head to see her face. "What do you mean, your inactions?"

"I mean that I knew Wickham was in the wrong. I knew I should not be meeting him on my own. I knew I should not agree to an elopement. I did not even wish to, not truly. But it seemed to make him so happy, and I did not want to disappoint him, so I agreed."

Darcy fumed where he sat beside her. He should have challenged Wickham when he had the chance.

"I have a long history of remaining silent when I would do better to speak, and it has not served me well. It is of this that I am most ashamed." Her head hung lower as she whispered, "I am a coward."

Darcy scooted closer to her on the seat, tilting her face up gently. “Of what do you speak, dearest? Perhaps if you tell me about it, we might work it out together.”

“There is nothing to work out! When I most need to say something, I am utterly silent. And then the moment passes and I am left to live with the consequences.”

“Do you speak of Wickham, or other instances when you wish you had spoken up?” he asked gently.

“My mark.”

“What?”

“My marking ceremony. Or the lack of marking ceremony. I wished to take a mark, but no one in the family took one, and I knew you would all be disappointed, and the vicar spoke so quickly I did not even have a chance to answer!”

“You wished to receive a soul mark?”

She nodded miserably.

“May I ask why?”

“Is it not obvious?”

“I am afraid it is not.” He tried to smile in a reassuring manner, but she was looking at the floor again.

“I am a Darcy! The niece of an earl. The sister to the wealthiest landowner in Derbyshire. You have no heir besides me. I have a dowry of thirty thousand pounds. And I am no great beauty.” She held her hand up to stop her brother from speaking. “Do not say otherwise—I am in possession of a

mirror.” She sighed. “There is no way to know if a gentleman is interested in me, truly, without a mark. How will I know he is not marrying me for nothing but my dowry? A woman is not like a man, Fitzwilliam. Marriage is a vulnerable place for us. Aunt made sure I understood that quite clearly after this summer’s debacle.”

Darcy sat back, shocked. He had never thought of it that way, though he certainly should have. He had known fortune hunters would come for his sister, but he had thought he could weed them out, choose a good man for her. But she would never know if said man even truly liked her—many men were good at putting up a front, and she was not incorrect that she had not grown into all her features just yet. He thought she was adorable as she was, and she would be lovely in another year or two, but he understood her point. If beauty lured a man in, and she felt herself to be without it, what else would they come for?

“Oh, Georgie. I am sorry. I had not thought of it in such terms.”

“Why would you? You are a man. You will marry a lady and live your life as you always have. It is her life which will be nearly unrecognizable. A new home with new staff, possibly hundreds of miles from her family, a new name, a gentleman she must take care of and keep happy. What will she do if he mistreats her? Ignores her? Abandons her?” She plucked at her skirt, her voice hollow. “I would rather remain your spinster sister forever than be the wife of a man who does

not care for me. At least I know you have my best interests at heart.”

He squeezed her hand, not knowing what else to do. She was right, of course. Marriage was a very great risk for a lady, and he had stupidly been thinking it was the best—no, the only—option for his beloved sister.

“Georgie, I would be happy for you to live at Pemberley with me forever. I hope you know that. If you do not wish to marry, I will not push you. You may do as you like. I promise.”

She looked at him with shining eyes. “Truly? You promise?”

“Truly. You have my word.”

She threw herself into his arms and he crushed her to him, grimacing as he tried to hold back his own tears. His poor sweet sister! No wonder she had gone along with Wickham. She had known him since childhood and thought she could trust him. He should have told her the truth about their old friend’s character long before this. More than that, he should have spoken openly with her. She was right—she was no longer a child. It was time he began treating her like the young lady she was.

“Dearest, would you like me to stay? I do not have to go to Hertfordshire. Bingley will be fine on his own. I can go next month, or not at all.”

“No, you should go. Mr. Bingley is depending on you, and I do not wish you to break your commitment because of me.”

“Very well, dearest, if that is what you wish.”

He hated to see her brought so low. He now understood why she had wanted a mark; why any young lady would want a mark. It was a guarantee. Not that she would have a husband, but that she would have one who treated her well. Who treasured her. Who loved her. He suddenly found himself more understanding of the young lady, whoever she was, who had taken a mark and subsequently changed his life forever.

“I have an idea, Georgie. It probably will not work, but there is a chance it might.”

“What?”

“Why do we not visit the vicar and see if you can have a marking ceremony now? You are still young. It might work.”

Her eyes brightened for a moment, then she slumped. “I was thirteen two and a half years ago. I have missed my chance.”

“But surely it is worth attempting?”

She hesitated, then said, “Very well. If Mr. Mayhew will perform the ceremony, I will attempt it.”



In short order, a note was dispatched to the vicar. He wrote back saying he had never done such a thing before, but that

there was no reason they could not try it, and said he would meet them at the chapel the following morning.

They walked into Pemberley's small chapel at ten exactly the following day, Georgiana clinging tightly to her brother's arm. Darcy patted her hand and smiled reassuringly.

"All will be well, Georgie."

"I hope so. I feel ridiculous."

He smiled kindly. "It is not ridiculous to pursue that which you truly desire. It is quite brave."

She smiled tremulously and he squeezed her hand again, moving to the front of the chapel.

The vicar immediately joined them and the ceremony began, with Fitzwilliam as the only witness.

"Do you wish to take a mark?" the vicar asked.

"I do."

He said all the necessary words and Georgiana felt... nothing.

"I do not think it worked," she said to her brother as they made their way back to the house.

"Why do you think that?"

"I felt nothing. Mr. Mayhew said everything he should have, but I feel exactly the same as I did before."

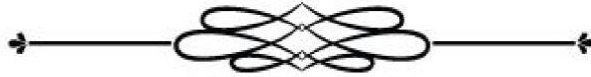
"I think it is quite common to feel nothing at first. Most only notice when the mark begins to come in."

She looked thoughtful at that. “Perhaps.”

“Have faith, little one. All will be well.”

She nodded, but no matter what her bother said, her heart was anxious.

Chapter 7



Longbourn, October 1811

Elizabeth rolled her eyes to Jane, who in turn covered her mouth with her hand to hide her smile. Mrs. Bennet had been going on and on for the last hour about Netherfield's new tenant, a Mr. Bingley from somewhere in the north of England.

Mr. Bennet had gone to visit him, but when Mr. Bingley returned the call, the ladies had been out. Only Lydia had been home, watching from the window, and she told her sisters that he was an attractive man who rode a black horse and wore a blue coat. Mrs. Bennet had not stopped speaking of it since.

“Do you suppose he will be at the assembly tomorrow?” asked Kitty.

“I do not see why not! It would be terribly unneighborly of him not to show himself,” said Mrs. Bennet,

“He may be a private sort, Mama,” added Jane. “We should not judge a person we do not know.”

Mrs. Bennet pursed her lips. "I am certain he will be there. You must all look your best. Jane, Lizzy can help you add new lace to your blue gown and Lydia can embroider more flowers along the hem."

Lydia looked up in surprise. "What? Why do I have to do it? Jane's stitches are neater than mine."

"Because Jane will be preparing for the assembly! You are staying home, so you have more time to assist your sisters."

Lydia crossed her arms and slumped back into the chaise. She was trying to improve herself, but her mother did make it difficult sometimes.

"Is your gown ready for tomorrow, Kitty?" asked Elizabeth.

"Yes. Everything fits perfectly, and Sarah practiced a new style for my hair already."

"Oh that sounds lovely!" said Jane. "I cannot wait to see it."

Now that Mrs. Bennet was off the topic of Mr. Bingley and onto the more agreeable subject of gowns and trims, her daughters breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Kitty was attending an assembly for the first time tomorrow. She was now seventeen and it was time to come out. Mary had come out in simple fashion last year, asking her mother not to host a party or force her into anything overly social. She had requested she stay home with Lydia the next night as well, and as Mrs. Bennet was preoccupied with her other daughters, she agreed.

Kitty could not understand Mary. To not want a fuss for her come out! And to not want to dance at every opportunity? It was beyond comprehension. Kitty would have liked a grand ball if it were possible. Alas, she would settle for the local assembly.



As they prepared for the assembly the next day, Elizabeth's mark began to feel warm and parts of it tingled. She thought it was the way she was moving, or perhaps her stay was digging into her ribs, but even in nothing but a chemise and wrapper, the burning sensation continued. She had no idea what it meant, but after what had happened with Lydia's mark, and how large and unusual her own was, she had come to the conclusion that the Bennet sisters' soul marks simply did not behave the way marks usually did and that was all there was to it.

“Lizzy! Hurry and dress! We mustn't be late!”

Elizabeth sighed at her mother's shrill voice, then stepped into her gown. It was high enough in the back that only a tiny sliver of her soul mark showed. It would be easy to miss unless one was looking for it.

Jane's mark was more difficult to conceal, on the back of her neck as it was. She had a few curls hanging down that covered it partially, but it was still visible to anyone who was looking. It had not escaped the sisters' notice—nor Mrs. Bennet's—that Mr. Bingley had the correct initial for Jane's

mark. They did not know his given name yet, but Jane looked nervous.

“All will be well, Jane. I know it,” said Elizabeth.

“Thank you, Lizzy. There is no use wondering until we know. It is either him or it is not.”

“That is a very sanguine approach. I applaud you.”

“Girls! Come downstairs!” Mrs. Bennet’s shrill voice echoed up the stairs.

Elizabeth sighed and pinched her cheeks. She would not think about the mysterious Mr. Bingley or his party of strangers. Tonight was Kitty’s first assembly and she deserved her sisters’ attention. Besides, Jane was nervous enough for both of them.



The assembly room was a crush. Every family they knew in Meryton was there as well as some from further afield. The local tradesmen who could afford a ticket were also in attendance with their families.

Kitty was bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Are you nervous?” Elizabeth whispered to her sister.

Kitty turned to her with wide eyes. “No. Should I be?”

“No, not at all! Nearly everyone here is known to you, at least by sight, and you have your family about you. All will be well.”

Kitty nodded and looked about the room with a bright smile. She would open the dance with her father, and her Uncle Phillips had requested she save the last dance for him. For the rest of her dances, she faced the daunting task of finding partners.

This was where having a social mother and two well-liked elder sisters was a distinct advantage. Within ten minutes of them arriving, every man present knew it was Kitty's first assembly and her dance card was filled.

"Well, Kitty, your first ball appears to be a success," commented her aunt Phillips after the first dance.

"And why wouldn't it be?" cried Mrs. Bennet. "These young men are lucky to be dancing with her!"

"I was only saying her evening is filled with—"

Mr. Bennet interrupted. "Now ladies, let us not take the attention away from Kitty. This is her night after all."

Mrs. Bennet huffed and lifted her nose in the air and her sister flounced off to her friends.

Just as the second set was starting, there was a commotion at the door. Everyone turned to see the party from Netherfield striding in. There were three gentlemen and two ladies, a far cry from the numbers which had been circulating, and the entire group looked rather too pleased with themselves.

Sir William Lucas rushed over to greet them, loudly crying, "Mr. Bingley! Welcome to our assembly!"

Soon enough, Sir William was taking Mr. Bingley around the room, introducing him to all and sundry. Mrs. Bennet quickly gathered her daughters like chicks to a hen and placed them in order of seniority.

“This is Mr. Thomas Bennet of Longbourn,” intoned Sir William.

Elizabeth listened with half an ear as he went down the family line, bobbing a curtsy when her name came up. What was the man’s given name? Oh, why did he not just say it already?

“Mr. Charles Bingley.” That was all Elizabeth needed to hear. CB! His initials were CB! Now if only his middle name were Harold or Henry or Hezekiah. Jane grabbed Elizabeth’s hand, squeezing tightly. When Mr. Bingley asked Jane for the next set, Elizabeth squeezed her sister’s hand in return. She had not even heard the rest of the conversation, and she had completely missed the name of Mr. Bingley’s companion.

This could be him! Jane’s soulmate! How could anyone focus on such a night?



“Did you hear that, Darcy?” asked Bingley in an excited whisper.

“Yes, tonight is Miss Catherine’s first assembly. It would be polite to ask her to dance.”

“Not that! Jane! Her given name is Jane! JB!” He looked at Darcy expectantly until the other man acknowledged the wonder of meeting a woman with the initials JB.

“Have you not met a great many women named Jane? It is not an uncommon name.”

“Yes, but not with the last name Bennet and in possession of a mark.”

“How do you know she is marked?” asked Darcy.

“It is common knowledge in the town,” answered Bingley, color tinging his cheeks.

Hmm. Darcy imagined he knew exactly how Bingley knew. He had probably set his valet to question the local servants on the ladies of the neighborhood. Most women in the ton were not marked, so it was not unreasonable to think his lady love might be country gentry. It would not be the step up Darcy had hoped for his friend, but it would be better than a servant.

“I see,” said Darcy.

“I shall ask her when we dance.”

“Bingley! You cannot ask a woman about her mark. It is unseemly. Not to mention entirely too personal for a public ballroom.”

“It may be on display. Many ladies’ marks are,” he said, ignoring Darcy’s words.

“Did you see it?”

“No, but I was hardly looking for it. I could not do such a thing in front of her father!”

Darcy sighed. “Of course not. You could look discreetly while you dance. Discreetly, Bingley,” he added when his friend looked entirely too excited.

“She is an angel, Darcy. Look at her! Have you ever seen such a beautiful face?”

Darcy could admit she was pretty enough. He was not blind and he knew what was considered attractive. But he did not feel attraction, not like an unmarked man would. “I suppose she is pretty.”

“Ha! You only say that because you are marked yourself. You cannot truly see her.”

“That is all the better for you.”

“It must be her, Darcy. I have never found a woman so lovely.”

“You could ask her father, you know. Save yourself all this wondering. It is quite an acceptable question. Better than involving the lady and facing an embarrassing situation if you are wrong.”

“Yes, yes,” said Bingley absently. “I should speak to her father. Wonderful idea, Darcy!”

Darcy shook his head, certain his friend had not really understood what he was saying.



When Bingley led Jane Bennet to the floor for their set, every eye in the assembly hall was on them. The entire town knew Jane was marked, and that the initials on her mark were CHB. A man named Charles Bingley could not possibly come into the area without a great deal of scrutiny.

They faced one another on the line and the musicians began to play. They danced across from one another for a few minutes, neither speaking, each staring into the other's eyes as if in a trance. Mrs. Bennet could not stop thumping her husband's arm, whispering, "Look! Look at them!"

Elizabeth was happy to see it. The couple seemed completely wrapped up in each other, and Jane had certainly never looked at anyone that way in her entire life.

The music shifted and Jane stepped forward with the other ladies. She proceeded to dance around Bingley in a circle, and he followed her with his eyes. When she was passing his right shoulder, he could see the mark on the back of her neck. It was a country house, with a wide front door and a set of initials in the center of the door. He could not read the small script while she was moving so, but he did not need to. For the image on her neck matched the one on his chest exactly.

"Miss Bennet!" he cried as she paused in front of him. "It is you!"

"Mr. Bingley?"

He caught up both her hands and brought them to his chest.
“You are my soulmate.”

The other dancers eventually stopped and gathered around them, and once they realized no one was dancing, the musicians stopped playing.

“What is going on here?” called Mr. Bennet as he moved into the circle of people surrounding the couple.

“I believe your daughter is my soulmate, sir,” said Mr. Bingley without removing his eyes from Jane’s surprised face.

“And why do you think that?” asked Mr. Bennet.

“We bear the same mark, sir.”

The crowd gasped. “What is your middle name, Mr. Bingley?” asked Jane, her voice soft but steady.

“Harold. And yours, Miss Bennet?”

“Eleanor.”

Bingley’s smile grew even wider. “The initials on my mark are JEB. May I look at yours more closely?”

She nodded and turned shyly, pulling her curls out of the way.

“Remarkable,” whispered Bingley. “It is exactly like mine, only smaller.”

Jane wished to ask where his was located on his body, but the question was unseemly in a crowded ballroom.

“Mr. Bingley, I believe you and I should talk,” said Mr. Bennet, his voice stern.

Finally realizing he was ignoring the father of his soulmate, Bingley turned to face Mr. Bennet with a red face. “Of course, sir. I’m sure we can find somewhere quiet to speak.”

Mr. Bennet nodded and led him out of the ballroom. As soon as they crossed the threshold, the crowd erupted.

“Oh Jane! I knew it! I always knew you would marry well!” Mrs. Bennet cried as she rushed to her daughter. She took up Jane’s hands in her own and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Just think! Netherfield is one of the finest houses in the county!”

Jane was staring blankly ahead, ignoring everyone around her.

“Let us give Jane some air, hmm?” said Elizabeth. She gestured to her friend Charlotte and the two of them plucked Jane out of the crowd and pulled her towards the balcony on the other side of the room.

“Are you well, Jane?” asked Charlotte once they were safely on the balcony. “It is a great shock.”

Jane nodded, her face pale. “I am well, I think. It all happened so fast.”

Elizabeth laughed lightly. “Your Mr. Bingley is not one to waste time, I gather.”

“He certainly did not miss a minute with Jane!” agreed Charlotte.

Jane continued to stare blindly out at the night sky as her friends laughed and chatted.

Eventually, Elizabeth chafed her arms and said, “All will be well, Jane. I am sure papa will insist on a long engagement so you may come to know one another before you wed. And if it turns out you do not like him, we will find a way to release you.”

Jane snapped her eyes to her sister. “Not like him? What makes you think I do not like him?”

Charlotte smiled slyly. “So you like him already, do you?”

Jane flushed and looked down. “He seemed like a fine young man, though I do not know him as yet.”

“It is not surprising you like him, Jane. He is your soulmate after all. Fate would not have paired you with a man you could not like.”

Charlotte nodded in agreement. “Fate is very particular.”

Jane looked from Charlotte to Elizabeth, both smiling at her and each holding one of her hands, and raised her chin. “I am ready to go back inside now.”

They linked arms and made their way back into the party. Mr. Bennet and Mr. Bingley had not yet returned, but that did not stop all her neighbors from swarming around her and asking a flood of questions.

Had she known tonight would be special? Did her mark feel any different now that she had found her soulmate? When did she wish to wed? Would she encourage Mr. Bingley to buy Netherfield?

On and on it went until Jane begged for the carriage to take her home. Her father and Mr. Bingley were nowhere to be found, and she was certain her new suitor would call on her the next day. She could take no more of her neighbors' attention.

**

Jane and Elizabeth arrived back at Longbourn earlier than expected. Lydia was sitting in the front parlor, reading a book, when they walked in and Jane fell into an exhausted heap on the sofa.

“Where are mama and papa? And Kitty?” asked Lydia.
“Why are you home early? Are you injured?”

“No, we are quite well, but it was an exciting evening,” answered Elizabeth.

“What happened?”

“Mr. Bingley is Jane's soulmate.”

Lydia's eyes widened and her head jerked back. “What? How did you know? What did he say? Tell me everything!”

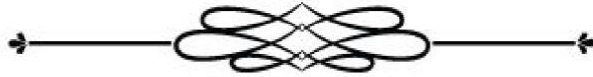
Jane began to tell her youngest sister the story of how she met Mr. Bingley and Elizabeth settled next to the fire and allowed her thoughts to drift.

She had known something exciting would happen tonight. Her mark had been hot and tingly, and she had had the oddest feeling. Now she knew why. To think her mark tingled because Jane was about to meet her soulmate! She had always known she was close to her sister, and she certainly loved Jane more

than anyone else in the world, but she would not have thought such a thing possible.

It was just another sign that the Bennet sisters were more than a little unusual when it came to their marks.

Chapter 8



The next day, Charles Bingley was in Mr. Bennet's study before the family had even finished breakfast. For such a momentous event, all the particulars were decided quickly. They both thought it wise that Bingley court Jane for a few months before they wed. By the end of the day, all of Hertfordshire and half of London would know that Jane and Bingley were soulmates. They could go forward with an engagement, but there would be no exact wedding date just yet. Bingley would call on Jane regularly, spending more and more time at Longbourn, and when Jane felt she was ready, they would announce the engagement formally and choose a date.

Mr. Bingley was more than generous with the settlement he proposed and Mr. Bennet readily agreed. The papers would be drawn up in short order and if Jane had no objection, Mr. Bennet would sign them.

Bingley joined the family for breakfast when they finished their discussion, quickly taking the vacant seat next to Jane. She smiled shyly and spoke softly to him, and by the end of

the meal, Mr. Bingley was utterly smitten. Jane was more cautious, but after two more calls and a walk in the garden, she was very pleased Mr. Bingley was her soulmate and would soon be her husband.



“Jane and Mr. Bingley came together so easily,” said Elizabeth. She was walking along the fields south of Longbourn with Charlotte Lucas, her closest neighbor.

“Of course, they did. It is Jane.”

Elizabeth laughed. They had joked throughout the years that Jane was the most angelic of them all. The most beautiful, the most good, the most selfless and generous and kind. Of course, her gowns never tore and her hair never escaped its pins. It was Jane! She was perfection personified. She deserved every good thing and Fate would not be so cruel as to deny her.

“Yes, I know. I cannot help but think my own match will not be so easily accomplished,” said Elizabeth.

“What makes you think so?”

“The same thing that made my hems tear when Jane’s remained intact. I do not have my sister’s luck.” She gave Charlotte a look. “Or her goodness, which may have more to do with it.” She twirled a leaf in her hand as she walked. “I do not know really. It is just a feeling I have.”

“A more complicated romance is no less estimable than a simple one. It does not mean the love is any less pure.”

Elizabeth squeezed her arm. "Thank you, Charlotte. You are right, of course."

"Of course."

"Does it ever get tiresome? Being right all the time?" teased Elizabeth.

Charlotte sighed. "It does, but it is the burden I must bear."

She maintained her serious expression for half a minute before they both burst into laughter.

**

Darcy sat atop his horse on the other side of the field, watching two young ladies walk along arm in arm, laughing and talking. They seemed so happy and carefree. What he would not give to see Georgiana in such a manner!

He took the letter he had received that morning out of his pocket and read over his favorite part again.

...it is faint, but I can see where the lines are coming in. I have no idea what the final shape will be, but it is exciting nonetheless. I will be sure to keep you abreast of the progress until you may see it in person.

How are you getting on with the Bingleys? To think Mr. Bingley met his soulmate so quickly! Well, I suppose it was not so very quick. He was married ten years ago. But he did know within a few minutes of meeting her. She sounds positively lovely! I cannot wait to meet her. Should we invite them to Pemberley in the summer? I would much rather have

Mr. Bingley and his new bride than other members of his family...

Darcy could not contain his smile. Georgiana's soul mark was coming in. It was appearing rather slowly, and it was small and faint, but it was there, and that was all that mattered. The mark was on her left shoulder. So far it covered the cap and down the back of her shoulder an inch. At least hers was not as large as his had been. His entire arm had itched for weeks. His sister would hopefully be spared such indignity.



Over the next fortnight, Netherfield and Longbourn mixed freely. Mr. Bingley came every day, and he often brought company. At first it was his sisters, Miss Bingley—who was acting as her brother's hostess—and his elder sister Mrs. Hurst. The ladies could be pleasant when they wished, but they did not often wish when they were at Longbourn or when the Bennet ladies were returning their call.

Miss Bingley was haughty and above her company, often speaking of people and places no one but she and her sister knew of, thus alienating the rest of the room. She handed out sly insults to Mrs. Bennet and was falsely sweet to Jane. Even she understood that a marriage contract, once signed, was nearly impossible to dissolve, and the entire county knew of the engagement. There was no getting out of it now. But clearly, she did not mean to go down gracefully. She clearly

felt the Bingleys were above the Bennets, and anyone halfway intelligent knew it.

Mrs. Hurst was less troublesome than her sister, but she was also less entertaining. She did not seem very interested in her neighbors, or her guest, or her brother's intended. Her husband seemed to enjoy eating, sleeping, and drinking, and Mrs. Hurst made it her priority to see he was provided with all of the above, likely so he would not bother her. She had no other conversation unless she was cackling with her sister over some petty business or other.

After three visits, Bingley's sisters clearly thought they had done their duty by their brother, for they ceased coming to Longbourn altogether. They were not much missed.

More of an enigma, and a more frequent companion, was Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley's friend. He was supposedly visiting Hertfordshire to assist Bingley in learning estate management, but Bingley was so often at Longbourn he could not have been learning much.

Darcy played chess with Mr. Bennet—they were evenly matched and currently drawn in wins and losses—and he sat silently in the parlor as Mrs. Bennet served him tea, listening to her complain of her health and the difficulty in finding good lace with the war on.

Elizabeth was not sure what to make of him. He was handsome, with his straight nose and noble bearing, and he was certainly intelligent enough. Her father liked him, and Mr. Bennet could not abide stupidity. He was always kind to Jane,

which she appreciated, but he was only polite to the rest of the Bennets, which confused her.

Did he not wish for friends? Did he disapprove of them? Was he overwhelmed by so many people? She could not know, but her curiosity was piqued.

One day, when he was visiting Longbourn with Bingley, she passed him a cup of tea prepared just the way he liked it. His fingers brushed over hers when he took the cup from her hand and he blushed crimson. Then he looked in her eyes and said, quite solemnly, “Thank you, Miss Elizabeth.”

What was she to make of that? Confounding man!



Elizabeth may not have known what to make of Mr. Darcy, but the man was growing more enchanted with her at each encounter. At first, he admired her smile and the way the light glinted off her hair. It looked brown at first, but near the fire, it was a riot of golden hues, and in the sunlight, red danced through her tresses.

He admired her figure when they walked in the garden. Her form was graceful and pleasing, and there was something about the way she moved that made him smile just watching her. It was as if she glided along the paths. Like a wood nymph most at home in the forest, so Elizabeth seemed made for the outdoors.

He found her scent tantalizing, and he spent hours wondering what it was that seemed to hook into his senses and draw him closer.

Her mind was sharp and quick, but she was never cruel. Even when Miss Bingley let loose her nastiest barbs, Miss Elizabeth responded with grace and patience, skillfully redirecting the conversation, or returning the insult so slyly Miss Bingley did not even realize it had happened. Had he ever known such a clever woman?

She had the most delightful taste in clothes, the most fetching bonnets, the softest pelisses. She wore her hair in simple but elegant styles, and he imagined pulling the pins out one by one, running his hands through her locks, and finding out if her hair was as silky as it appeared.

After he spent a week obsessing over her appearance and quick mind, he noticed her talents.

He liked the way she played the pianoforte. She had a light touch on the keys and her choice of songs was always happy and bright. Then he heard her sing, and as he watched her, half hidden at the back of the room, he felt his heart slide a little closer to hers. How could she possess him so thoroughly with just a few notes? How could she see inside his soul as if she had known him forever? She was such a bright, cheerful person; he did not know how she could sing with such feeling, such depth of passion and pain. She should know nothing of darkness. She should be in sweetness and happiness all her days. He would make it so for her if she were his.

It was when he noticed such thoughts that he began to think he was truly in trouble. He was mesmerized by the dimple in her cheek, enchanted by her laugh, bewitched by her eyes. Her voice was pleasing and her wit entertaining. She was everything he would want in a companion, if only he would speak to her. But he did not wish to excite expectations he could not fulfill, and he was a marked man.

It was unusual that he noticed a woman so thoroughly—it had not happened since his mark had come in—but that did not mean anything in and of itself. And of course her initials were EB, and he was looking for a woman with the initials ERB, but Elizabeth was a common name and B a common letter. He could not trust that alone.

Besides, Elizabeth was unmarked. He had seen her in a multitude of gowns now, and he had never seen a mark, despite careful observation. Miss Bingley had even caught him scanning her arms and asked what he was looking at. When he confessed he was looking for a mark on a lady, she had informed him that Miss Elizabeth did not have a mark. Jane and Kitty had received their marks as children when their soulmates took them, and Miss Lydia had had a ceremony two years before, but Mary and Elizabeth were too practical for that sort of thing and had chosen not to receive a mark.

Darcy could not believe his disappointment when he heard the news. His Elizabeth! Not marked! He had not realized how accustomed he had become to the idea of her being his soulmate—his wife—until it was snatched away from him. Miss Bingley had seemed entirely too pleased with herself

when she told him, but he would not waste his time worrying about her. She was Bingley's problem. Darcy had a soulmate to find.

If only he could rid his mind of Miss Elizabeth.

Chapter 9



“**S**hall you come for a ride, Lizzy?” asked Kitty.

“I believe I shall. Allow me to change and I will join you at the stables.”

In short order, Jane, Kitty, and Elizabeth were atop their favorite horses and riding towards Longbourn’s border.

“Where are we headed?” asked Elizabeth.

“I thought I might call in on Miss Bingley. But we need not if you would prefer not to,” answered Jane.

“Would you be terribly cross with me if I did not wish to? I would much rather see Charlotte.”

“Of course. I have not seen Charlotte in some time.”

Kitty took off first, being the best horsewoman in the family, and Jane was close behind her on Andromeda. Elizabeth brought up the rear on the family’s faithful old mare. Nelly would need to be put out to pasture next year, but for now she was Elizabeth’s favorite mount as she was not as spirited as Jane’s mare or as strong as Hercules, their gelding and Kitty’s favorite.

Unbeknownst to the Bennets, Fate was agitated that day. She was frustrated with all the silly humans and all their ridiculous behavior, the way they took perfectly good chances she had practically gift wrapped for them and squandered them, and in a fit of pique, she sent a sudden rainstorm down to Hertfordshire. One minute the sky was blue and clear, and the next it was filled with dark clouds and spitting rain.

“Hurry! Under that tree!” called Jane.

The ladies all led their mounts to a large tree just off the road that would offer them shelter until the worst of the rain had passed.

“What should we do?” asked Kitty.

Jane looked at their surroundings. The road to Netherfield was just to their right and as Mr. Bingley’s soulmate, she could arrive wet and request a room to refresh themselves, but it was not ideal. A quarter mile up was the turn to Lucas Lodge, and they had known the Lucas family their entire lives. Showing up wet at the home of an old family friend was a much more palatable idea. They could continue on to Meryton to their Aunt Phillips, but that would require delivering their horses to the stable in town and listening to their aunt cluck over them getting wet for an hour.

“We could continue on to Lucas Lodge. It is closer than returning to Longbourn,” suggested Jane.

“I agree. I do not want to go into Meryton,” agreed Kitty.

Before Elizabeth could voice her agreement, they heard a great shout.

“Ho there, Miss Bennet!”

It was Mr. Bingley, riding alongside Mr. Darcy, both drenched and turning towards Netherfield.

“Ladies, come and dry off at Netherfield! You mustn’t stay out in this rain,” shouted Mr. Bingley over the storm.

Jane lit up when she saw him and before either of her sisters could say a thing, she was leading her horse to gallop alongside Bingley’s.

Kitty looked at Elizabeth and shrugged, then took off after her sister. Elizabeth shook her head and joined them.

“Do you not approve of continuing on to Netherfield, Miss Elizabeth?” called Mr. Darcy in his deep voice.

He really should not be so appealing when he was wet. It was unfair. Elizabeth knew he was unmarked, and therefore, off limits. The least he could do was be as unattractive as possible.

“I do not mind at all, Mr. Darcy. I do not wish to be wet through, though, so let us continue.”

He nodded and gestured for her to go ahead of him, and she galloped off behind her sister.

Elizabeth had gotten into a conversation on soul marks with Miss Bingley the last time they had called at Netherfield. Miss Bingley had told her that most members of the ton did not

receive a mark—a fact Elizabeth already knew—and that her brother had only taken one because he was a romantic at heart and they had had a rather charming governess who made marks sound exciting and ideal. Before anyone knew what was happening, he had made the impulsive decision to be marked and announced it to the church at his ceremony, without any discussion with his parents or sisters. Their father was more than a little put out—he was afraid Bingley would match into the merchant class they were trying to remove themselves from or worse, with a servant.

“How lucky then that he matched with a gentlewoman from a landed family of longstanding,” Elizabeth had said.

Miss Bingley had smiled tightly. “None of his friends were so foolish. Take the Darcys, for example. They have not received a mark in sixty years.”

Elizabeth’s brows rose. She did not know why Miss Bingley was baiting her, but she would play along and see what she was up to. “Not a single one? That is odd.”

“Not particularly odd. Families such as the Darcys value more important things. Connections, accomplishments. You understand, surely.” She lifted her chin and looked down her nose at Elizabeth, and suddenly everything was clear.

Miss Bingley wished to wed Mr. Darcy—everyone already knew that—but for some reason, which was less clear to Elizabeth, she viewed the Bennets, and Elizabeth in particular, as a threat to that goal.

“I understand, Miss Bingley. Some people value fortune and position more than love and happiness. And some will do anything to achieve that which others are naturally born to.”

Miss Bingley bristled.

“Good afternoon.” She had walked away and said nothing further about it, but now, riding in the rain with Mr. Darcy, she wondered if Miss Bingley was more perceptive than she had given her credit for.

Was Mr. Darcy attracted to her? That would certainly be unexpected.



Netherfield was warm, and most importantly, dry. The ladies were sent to a guest room to change and Louisa kindly offered to send gowns for Elizabeth and Kitty, who were similar to her in height, and Caroline loaned one to Jane, as she was taller. They may have been of a similar height, but Caroline had a rather small bosom, unlike Jane. The gown was almost indecent on Jane’s fuller figure.

“I need a fichu. I cannot leave the room like this!” cried Jane, staring at herself in the mirror in horror.

Kitty could not help laughing at her sister’s predicament. Perfect Jane, who never had a hair out of place or an unkind word to say, was nearly spluttering with shock. She was practically falling out of the gown, less than half of her bosom covered by fabric.

“Do not worry, Jane. I asked the maid for a fichu. She shall be back any minute,” said Elizabeth.

Jane sighed. “Thank you, Lizzy. I do not know why I am so worried. It is not as if the Bingleys will not soon be family.”

“But you would rather not look ridiculous in front of your new sisters?” added Elizabeth.

“Exactly.”

“And Mr. Darcy will not be family,” threw in Kitty. “The scowl that man has! I would not want him to look at me like that in my best dress, let alone in an ill-fitting gown I borrowed from my soulmate’s harpy sister.”

“Kitty!” cried Jane. “You mustn’t refer to Miss Bingley that way.”

Kitty shrugged. “It is true, Jane, and you know it. And it is only us here. I would not say so in public.”

Jane could hardly argue with that and turned her attention to drying her hair in front of the fire. Elizabeth was doing the same, but where Jane’s hair dried golden and shiny, Elizabeth’s curled up into ringlets with fuzzy edges. She focused her attention on twirling each curl about her finger and smoothing it out before moving on to the next. It was a painstaking process, but it was also the only thing that kept her from looking like a newborn duckling, covered in fluff.

The maid returned with a selection of fichus borrowed from Mrs. Hurst and Jane ended up using two, so low was the neck of the gown. She tucked the more opaque one into the bodice

first—though it was not nearly as modest as what she usually wore—and added a thin lace one atop that.

“How does this look?” she asked her sisters.

“Well enough,” said Kitty.

“It looks very well, Jane. I cannot see anything indecent,” said Elizabeth.

Jane sighed in relief. “Thank heavens! Are we ready to go down?”

They assented and made their way to the drawing room where Miss Bingley was serving tea to the recently arrived gentlemen.

“Miss Bennet!” cried Mr. Bingley. His eyes were drawn to her lower than usual neckline, but being the gentleman he was, he quickly snapped his eyes back to her face, though his cheeks were a little flushed. “I hope you have been made comfortable?”

“Perfectly so, Mr. Bingley, thank you. Your sisters were kind enough to loan us their gowns.”

Bingley finally noticed Kitty and Elizabeth standing next to Jane.

“Of course. I am glad to hear it.” He led Jane to a chair near the fire and they quickly fell into conversation.

Kitty shot Elizabeth a look—the one that said they were on their own now that Jane had been scooped up by Mr. Bingley

—and the two of them made their way to a sofa across from Miss Bingley’s chair.

“Tea?” Clearly, Miss Bingley was not in the mood for company.

Elizabeth and Kitty each requested a cup with milk and they drank in silence. The Hursts were absent and Mr. Darcy was standing at the far window, giving no indication he had even heard them enter the room.

“You have a lovely instrument,” Kitty finally said, looking toward the pianoforte in the corner.

“Thank you. Music is such a delight. Though I suppose you do not have as much opportunity in the country to hear the great works.”

“We do not, but we often go to concerts when we are in Town,” answered Kitty.

“In Town?” repeated Caroline, as if she could not believe these country bumpkins ever left their village.

“Yes. Our father is particularly fond of the theater, so we often go when we visit,” added Elizabeth.

“Does your father keep a house in London?” asked Caroline, a sneer tickling at her lip.

“No. Our father does not enjoy Town enough to keep a house there. We usually stay with our Uncle or cousins, or with other friends.”

“And where is your uncle’s house?”

Elizabeth knew what Miss Bingley was doing, but she would not allow this harpy to degrade her. “My uncle has a home on Gracechurch Street. We visit them often as they are our favorite family members.”

“Do not let Cousin Claude hear that or he will be terribly put out!” said Kitty.

“You are right, Kitty, of course. I should not speak for all of us. I am particularly close to my uncle Gardiner as he is also my godfather, but I am very fond of our cousins as well.”

Caroline was clearly displeased at not achieving her aim and said loudly, “Miss Catherine, would you favor us with a song? The day is so dreary. A little music will be just the thing.”

Kitty smiled and nodded, rising gracefully and moving towards the instrument.

“I shall turn your pages,” said Elizabeth and quickly followed her sister.

“My, she is relentless!” whispered Kitty once they were safely hidden behind the pianoforte.

“I know. Poor Jane. She may have to live with her.” “Let us hope she lives with Mrs. Hurst.”

There was a slight snort behind them, and they looked at one another, realizing they had forgotten Mr. Darcy’s presence by the window.

“How about this one?” said Elizabeth brightly, holding up a sheet of music, telling Kitty with her eyes not to say anything

more in Mr. Darcy's hearing.

“Wonderful,” replied Kitty, scooting onto the bench.

Kitty played moderately well, and she had a nice enough singing voice. However, the real talent of the Bennet sisters was when they sang together. Their harmonies were of the type only achievable with close relations, and between them all, their range was impressive.

Kitty began playing and Elizabeth stood at her shoulder until it was time for them both to sing, then their voices rose together in synchronicity. Miss Bingley's head shot up when she heard them, and Jane smiled proudly while Bingley smiled at Jane. Elizabeth nudged Kitty, slanting her eyes to Miss Bingley's angry expression, and they continued with gusto. Elizabeth only smiled brighter when she noticed Mr. Bingley leading Jane out the side door without saying a word to anybody.

**

The storm continued into the evening and it was decided the Bennet sisters would have to stay the night at Netherfield. A note was dispatched to Longbourn and they retired upstairs to dress for dinner in more borrowed clothes. Elizabeth went to the library first to find a book and told Kitty she would meet her upstairs. Jane was still off somewhere with Mr. Bingley.

Mr. Darcy finally decided to step away from his beloved window and when Elizabeth stepped into the hall near the stairs, he was waiting for her.

“Good evening, Mr. Darcy.” She was still disconcerted from her earlier thoughts of him and his possible attraction to her. She could not make him out; they had never spoken much, though she did often find him looking at her. But they had never had a full conversation, and she could not say she truly knew him, let alone what he thought of her.

“Miss Elizabeth.” Darcy bowed his head and looked at her expectantly.

She waited, and when he said nothing more, she held up the book in her hand. “I was just borrowing a book from Mr. Bingley’s library.”

“Did you find anything of interest? It is woefully understocked.”

“There was not a great selection, but I found something to read.”

He looked at the title in her hand, surprised to see it was in French. “You read in French?”

“As you see.”

“I did not know you spoke French.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “Ladies can be educated properly, even in a backwater like Meryton. Good evening, sir.”

She turned to go and Darcy rushed to stop her.

“Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. I meant no offense.”

“You are forgiven, Mr. Darcy, though I do not see what is so surprising about a gentlewoman being able to read in French. It is 1811, you know. Not the 1500s.”

“Of course. The fault is entirely mine. I was not thinking.”

She nodded, wondering why he constantly insulted her when he seemed perfectly polite, if not pleasant, with everyone else. He was even cordial to Miss Bingley! Thinking there was nothing to add to the conversation, she said, “I will go upstairs now.”

As Elizabeth turned away from him and made her way to the stairs, Darcy followed her with his eyes. Something flashed on her back, above the hem of her gown. He looked closer, his eyes squinting, and unthinkingly moved closer. It was a mark! On the left side of her back, beneath her gown.

So excited was he at the knowledge she was marked that he reached out without thinking and touched the edge of her gown.

Elizabeth spun around to face him. “Mr.

Darcy!” He spluttered.

“I don’t know how you do things in Derbyshire, but here, gentlemen do not put their hands on a lady’s person uninvited!”

Darcy flushed. What had he been thinking? He had not been thinking, of course. He said the first thing that came to mind. “You have a soul mark!”

“Yes?” She looked at him in confusion. “It is common knowledge I have a mark, Mr. Darcy, as I have had it since I was thirteen.”

“So you had a marking ceremony? You were not marked before?”

Elizabeth bristled. “That is correct.”

“Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. I meant no disrespect. It is just that, I was under the impression that you and your sister Miss Mary were not marked.”

“Mary is not marked, but that was her decision. My other sisters and I are marked. Does that clear it up for you, Mr. Darcy?”

He felt his ears burning under her glare. “Yes, quite. Forgive my clumsiness, Miss Elizabeth.”

She softened a little at his apology and his obvious embarrassment.

“It is forgotten, Mr. Darcy.”

They watched each other in silence for a moment. He looked like he wished to say something, but he did not, so she finally asked, “Why were you grabbing me, anyhow?”

“I wished to see your mark.” He closed his eyes in mortification. Would he never stop saying the wrong thing to this woman?

Her lip quirked slightly. “Why do you want to see it?”

To know if it is a match to mine, he wanted to say, but for once, he maintained control of his tongue.

“I was curious. Forgive me. My actions were unpardonable.”

“I can understand curiosity, Mr. Darcy. It has gotten me into trouble more times than I care to count.”

He smiled ruefully at her and it was her turn to flush. Must this man be so attractive?

She watched him for a moment, then said steadily, as if imparting significant information, “It is a large mark, the largest most have ever seen or heard of.”

“Oh?” He remarked, pleased she was confiding in him.

She raised a brow. “Yes. And intricate, too.”

“Intricate? In what way?”

“That is enough for now, Mr. Darcy. Let us speak no more about what is under my gown.”

She turned and walked up the stairs, her hips swaying temptingly with each step.

Darcy watched her go with a smile, desperately hoping her middle initial was R. Heaven help me.

Elizabeth fell back against the bedroom door and fanned her face. What had she been thinking, taunting Mr. Darcy like that? She did not say such things to people—to gentlemen! What had come over her?

But oh, it had been fun! Wickedly fun, and delicious, and dangerous, and oh so daring.

She should not have done it, but she could not wait to taunt Mr. Darcy again.

“Lizzy, where have you been?” asked Kitty.

“Just getting a book from the library.”

“Have you seen Jane? She has been gone with Mr. Bingley an awful long time. Should we go and find her?”

“I think Mr. Bingley may be coming to the point at last,” said Elizabeth. “Let us leave them alone a little longer.”

When a couple found they were marked, things did not progress in the usual way. It was often decided they would marry eventually, as it had been done with Jane and Bingley, before the gentleman had a chance to propose properly. The engagements would be a little longer than usual, and when they felt they were ready, the gentleman would offer an amended proposal. Having never received one, Elizabeth thought it would be something like “Are you ready, dearest?” but she could not know for certain.

She only hoped that wherever she was, Jane was enjoying her time with Mr. Bingley.



Jane was overwhelmed. Mr. Bingley had kissed every inch of her face and neck, and he was currently nuzzling his nose in the fichu she had painstakingly donned to preserve her

modesty. She ran her fingers through his hair, encouraging him closer, so overcome with feeling that she did not even stop to wonder at her actions. He was her soulmate. He would be her husband. There could be no wrong between them.

“Dearest Jane, my sweet darling,” he murmured.

“Charles.” Her voice was breathy and quiet, driving the man beside her more than a little mad.

“Jane, marry me, my darling. Marry me soon. I want you with me always.”

She could not think for the way his hands were roaming over her gown, stroking down her hip and over the bare skin of her arms.

“Yes,” she breathed.

He continued kissing her for a few moments before he lifted his head and stared at her. “Did you say yes?”

“Yes.”

“You will marry me soon? Not in three months or six months, but soon?”

“Yes.” She smiled beatifically at him and Bingley let out a great whoop.

Jane laughed at his exuberance.

“I am the happiest man in England!”

She smiled as he straightened her fichu, then looked guiltily at her hair. “I am afraid I do not know how to fix that.”

She felt her head and realized several locks of her hair had come undone from their pins. “Charles! How will I leave this room? Everyone will know what we have been up to.”

He grinned at her wickedly and leaned forward until he could trail kisses up her neck and along her jaw. “You could simply not leave this room,” he whispered. “We could marry this week.”

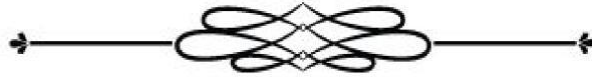
She breathed heavily, trying to think straight. “As lovely as that sounds, I do not wish for a cloud over my wedding.” She gently pressed her hands against his shoulders, easing him away from her. “I should go.”

Bingley sighed. “You are right. There is a mirror in the corner if you wish to repair your hair.”

Jane put herself to rights in a few minutes, then Bingley peeked out the door to make sure the corridor was empty. “The way is clear.”

She bustled past him, stopping and turning back to give him a quick kiss and a bright smile, then rushed up the stairs, leaving Bingley staring after her with a stupid grin on his face.

Chapter 10



“Jane, you sly thing!” cried Kitty when Jane entered their shared room.

Jane flushed a deep red and Elizabeth asked, “He came to the point at last, did he not?”

Jane could not keep the smile from taking over her face. “He did. We will marry this month.”

Her sisters embraced her, squealing and congratulating her. “I knew he could not resist you in that gown!”

“Kitty!” Jane flushed crimson as her sisters laughed uproariously.

“We had best hurry and change. Dinner will be served soon,” said Elizabeth.

Once their hair was arranged, Elizabeth held up the gown she was to wear that night. It was a lovely pink color, one of Mrs. Hurst’s, and it would look well on her. But the one set aside for Kitty was a warm green and cut a little lower in the back. “Do you mind if I wear the green and you wear the pink, Kitty?”

“Not at all. You know I prefer pink, but I thought you did not like the green?”

“I think it will bring out my eyes.”

Kitty shrugged, preoccupied with her petticoat. “As you like, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth slipped into the gown and Jane did up her buttons. “Lizzy, do you mind—”

Elizabeth cut her off. “It is fine, Jane.”

“Very well.” Jane looked at her suspiciously but said nothing more.

Elizabeth usually took pains to cover her mark. She did not want to discuss it and she thought of it as a private part of her. But tonight, she wished to tease Mr. Darcy. The mark was far from showing completely, but the gown was cut low enough that two thirds of the house at the top of her mark was showing, as well as some treetops to the far left.

Mr. Darcy was curious, and she felt like tempting him. She refused to examine her motives beyond that.



Elizabeth walked into dinner with her head held high and a stomach full of nerves. She had felt confident in her room, but now that she was here, and blatantly flirting with a man far above her in consequence and unmarked besides, she felt her own foolishness.

She had allowed two large curls to hang down her back, just over her mark, so she was provided with a little cover, but it was still odd to feel her hair swishing against bare skin as it was doing.

They arrived in the drawing room just before the butler entered to say dinner was served. Elizabeth was prepared to walk in with her younger sister, but to her surprise, Mr. Darcy appeared at her elbow.

“Allow me, Miss Elizabeth.”

She automatically twined her arm through his, seeing Miss Bingley glare at her from Mr. Hurst’s arm just ahead of them.

“May I say you look lovely this evening? Borrowed gowns suit you.”

She smiled. “I did not know you had a gift for flattery, Mr. Darcy.”

“I speak only the truth, Miss Elizabeth.”

She smirked but said nothing, allowing him to lead her to the seat next to his in the dining room. She was surprised he dared to upset Miss Bingley, but then Mr. Darcy struck her as the kind of man who did not allow others to dictate his actions. Darcy pulled out her chair and she sat down, murmuring a quiet thanks as he pushed her chair in.

She heard his sharp intake of breath and supposed he had just seen her mark. Well, he had been curious. Now he knew.



Why was it so warm in the dining room? Darcy resisted the urge to tug at his cravat. Really, someone should tamp down the fire.

Elizabeth sat next to him, sipping her soup like she had not just turned his world on its head. Her mark—he knew it intimately. He would know it even if it were not the same one that graced his right arm, for it was Pemberley. As seen from his favorite clearing on a rise a little off the estate road. He knew the tree that had their initials carved into it. He had climbed it countless times as a boy with his cousins. There was currently no swing hanging from it, and no initials either, but he had always presumed those things would come once he had met the lady.

Now here she was, sitting beside him, and completely unaffected, while Darcy felt like the world had just spun off its axis. Conversation drifted past him, but he was lost to everything. All he could think about was that he had found her. His soulmate. She was sitting right beside him at this very moment.

And she was perfect.

Why had he ever doubted Fate? He had raged and argued and felt sorry for himself, and for what? For being granted the most perfect wife he could have ever imagined? For having a soulmate by his side who would intrigue him, entice him, and challenge him in the most delightful ways?

The first course was taken away and it was time to carve a slice of meat for his dining partner.

“Would you like some, Miss Elizabeth?” “Yes, please.”

She looked at him strangely, watching his every move. Did she feel it, too? This pull towards him that he felt towards her? That he had been feeling towards her since the first time he heard her speak?

“Are you well, Mr. Darcy?” she asked quietly.

“Yes, perfectly well, Miss Elizabeth. Why would you think otherwise?”

“You seem...”

“I seem what?”

Energized. Excited. About to burst. She said none of those things. “Nothing.” She smiled and ate her dinner, cutting each bite into precise squares.

Darcy watched her in awe, feeling oddly privileged that he would get to live his life alongside this magnificent creature. He had always been proud of his position in life, of his ability to manage his estate and his affairs, of his family and his name. He had never thought of his wife as someone to be proud of. Not to say he had thought he would be ashamed of her, but he had simply never thought of pride and his soulmate at the same time. His soulmate simply was. He was neither proud nor ashamed.

Now, watching Elizabeth Bennet make eating roast beef look like the most graceful dance, he rethought that notion. He was incredibly proud. Of her, of the fact that Fate had chosen

him—out of all the men she could have chosen—to be the husband of Elizabeth Bennet. It was a very great honor, and he was humbled and awed.

“Mr. Darcy?”

He startled. “Yes?”

“Sir,” Elizabeth spoke quietly, “is aught amiss?”

“No.”

“You are staring.”

“I am?”

“Yes.”

“What was I staring at?”

She shifted her eyes away. “At me.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh.”

He felt his face heating. “Forgive me, my dear.” He took a sip of wine, then noticed Elizabeth looking at him with a shocked expression. “What? I am not staring now.”

She looked around the table and ensured the others were busy talking amongst themselves, then said, “You called me dear.”

“I did? When?”

“Just now.”

She was becoming frustrated and he found it adorable. It must be the effect of the mark. He had never felt so moonish

in his life.

“Why are you smiling?” she hissed.

“You are lovely when you’re agitated.”

She gasped, then clenched her teeth together, her cheeks flushing.

Darcy smiled cheekily and went back to his dinner.

Elizabeth resettled herself in her seat and turned to speak to Kitty on her other side. Mr. Darcy was an infuriating man and she would not encourage his antics, whatever he intended by them.



Dinner was finished, the fires were low, and the ladies had all gone to bed. Darcy stood in the billiards room, a silly smile on his face. No matter what he did, he could not erase it. He was ridiculously happy and his face insisted on announcing it to the world.

Hurst and Bingley had trounced him at billiards—not that he cared—and gone up to bed. He could not sleep just yet, so he had waved them off and reset the balls on the table. His jacket was over a chair in the corner and he had rolled up his shirt sleeves to his elbows. His mark peeked out the tiniest bit on his right arm, which he usually found slightly irritating, but tonight it was a source of joy. That mark was the means by which he would be granted his heart’s desire.

Elizabeth Bennet. His soulmate. The most enchanting woman he had ever met.

A figure passed by the open door. "Miss Elizabeth!" he called.

She turned back and peered into the dim room. "Pardon me, sir, I did not mean to disturb you. I was on my way to the library."

"Finished with your French book so soon?"

"Kitty liked it, so I decided to let her read it and choose another."

"Your sister speaks French as well?" He looked impressed this time instead of surprised, so she did not berate him.

"All my sisters speak French, Mr. Darcy, and quite well, too."

He raised a brow. "Why do I get the feeling you are laughing at me, Miss Elizabeth?"

"Because I know something you do not, Mr. Darcy."

She was closer now, rolling one of the billiard balls beneath her palm.

He took another step towards her and said lowly, "I'm certain you know a great many things I do not, Miss Elizabeth."

She flushed, her breath coming faster.

"Are you not going to tell me?" he asked, his voice teasing.

“Tell you what?” Her eyes were wide as she stared up at him. Somehow, he was standing less than an arm’s breadth from her now.

“Your secret.”

She looked down. “I do not have secrets, Mr. Darcy.”

“Let us call it your prior knowledge then,” he said, picking up his brandy glass and taking a sip. “Would you like a drink?” He tipped his glass towards her.

“No thank you, I do not care for brandy.”

“That is too bad,” he said, wondering if she would like it on his tongue if she did not like the taste of it from a glass.

“Now you look like you have a secret, sir.”

“Fitzwilliam,” he said, his smile back in place though not as wide as before. He had never been a great flirt, but he was enjoying flirting with Elizabeth immensely, and he was not too bad at it if his judgement was to be trusted.

“What?”

“My name is Fitzwilliam, if you would like to call me something other than ‘sir’ or ‘Mr. Darcy’.”

She bristled, clearly unsettled but also curious. So like a cat, she was. Wanting to know everything but feeling affronted when he had the upper hand. How delightful.

“That would not be appropriate, *Mr. Darcy*.” She emphasized his name and he could only tilt his head in response.

“As you wish, my dear. Now are you going to tell me or not?”

She huffed. “I have already told you once tonight not to refer to me so familiarly. And it is not a secret.”

“What is not?”

She exhaled heavily and shook her head, then looked at him again with a rueful smile. “My grandmother. She was French. She died when I was twelve, but until then, she spoke French almost exclusively in our home. We have all been speaking it since we were old enough to talk.”

Darcy’s brows rose. “I did not expect that. How did she meet your grandfather?”

“Grandfather Bennet was searching for his soulmate.” She wandered around the table as she spoke, rolling balls beneath her palm and running her fingers over the felt. Darcy stood along the wall and watched her with hooded eyes, brandy glass in hand. “He accepted every invitation that came his way. He went to house parties and balls and soirees. He grew quite tired of searching for a woman who refused to appear and took a break from his search. His cousin had recently been to France and asked my grandfather to meet him at the docks when he arrived. Grandfather agreed, and my grandmother was on the ship. As soon as he saw her, he knew she was the one.”

“Your grandfather sounds like he was a determined man.” “It is a Bennet trait.”

He laughed. "I'm sure it is."

She smiled slyly at him. "Why are you flirting so boldly with me, Mr. Darcy?"

"Do you not like it?"

She looked down. "I did not say that."

He sipped his brandy. "I find that I like flirting with you."

She looked up at him in surprise.

"I like the way your eyes widen when I shock you."

She tilted her head.

"And the way you upbraid me with your eyes when you think I am misbehaving. It makes me want to do it again."

She laughed.

"And I like your laugh. It is magical. Ethereal."

She flushed.

"And I like your blushes." He sipped his brandy. "I hope to see many more of them."

Her eyes were soft now as she watched him across the billiards table. He crossed to her side and she dropped her eyes to the floor. He brushed his knuckles along her cheek.

"So I ask you again, Miss Elizabeth, do you wish me to stop flirting with you?"

She swallowed. "No."

He smiled warmly at her. "Look at me, Elizabeth."

She tilted her head up. "You are much taller up close."

He laughed lightly. "And you are even lovelier than from afar."

She wanted to say something impertinent, but her mind was blank. Looking at him this closely was too much, so she turned her head to the side. Before she could say anything, she saw something on his arm. She looked at it more closely, leaning forward.

Darcy realized she had just seen his mark and held his arm out for her inspection.

"You have a mark." Her voice was tremulous.

"Yes. I thought you knew."

She shook her head. "Miss Bingley said your family does not receive marks."

"Normally they do not. But nearly seven years ago, one began to appear on my arm."

She looked up at him and he gave her a crooked smile.

"It itched like the devil."

Elizabeth smiled. "At least it is only your arm. Mine is nearly my entire back."

His brows lifted. "Is it? I should like to see that."

Her face heated. "Perhaps you shall," she said so quietly he almost did not hear her.

"Do you not want to take a look?" He held his arm out again.

She tentatively touched his sleeve, pushing the fine linen further up over his elbow. There was a tree, a swing hanging from a limb, and a heart carved into the trunk, her initials engraved in it.

She inhaled shakily and swayed on her feet. He placed a hand under her elbow to steady her.

“Are you well?” he asked gently.

She nodded. “Well enough. Merely more surprised than I have ever been.”

“You had not wondered if I was your soulmate before now?”

She looked up at him, then back down, her eyes darting around the room. “I was curious about you, and I found you unusually attractive,” she said to the floor. “I suppose that should have been a clue as I had never thought of any other man in such a way.”

Darcy was inordinately pleased by that statement. “I am glad you have never been attracted to another man.”

She tilted her head back and raised a brow, her humor reasserting itself. “You are going to be impossible now, aren’t you?”

When Darcy grinned at her like that, her stomach twisted itself into a knot.

“If you do not want me to kiss you, stop looking at me like that,” he said, his voice delightfully rough.

“Looking at you like what?” she said with an impertinent smile.

He reached around her waist and pulled her against him. She slammed into him with a squeak and her hands came to rest on his chest. He was in nothing but his shirt sleeves and an open waistcoat, and she could feel his muscles beneath her palms. She let her hands rove over his chest, exploring, and rested her right hand over his heart.

“Your heart is beating fast,” she said.

“Is yours not?”

She stared up at him, a challenge and an invitation in her eyes. Darcy raised his right hand, moving slowly so she might stop him if she did not wish for him to touch her. His hand came to rest just above her left breast, her heartbeat a nervous flutter beneath his palm.

“Elizabeth,” he breathed.

“Fitzwilliam.”

They stood there for several long moments, hands on one another’s hearts, looking into each other’s eyes. Darcy moved first, sliding his hand up along her shoulder, then behind her neck. He drew her closer, slowly, and she tipped her face up to meet his.

Her breath was sweet and warm, her lips soft and pliant beneath his. Her hands fisted his shirt and held him close, then slowly slid up behind his neck as he pulled her impossibly closer.

He tasted the wine she had been drinking, opened his mouth to drink her down. She clung to him, her body pressed against his, her tongue tentatively darting out to taste him in return.

“You taste like brandy,” she said as he kissed along her jaw.

“You taste like heaven,” he replied. He was kissing her neck now, his arms wrapped so tightly about her that her ribs were in the crooks of his elbows. She could not move, could barely breathe he held her so closely, but she could not care about that. What was breathing compared to this? She laughed.

“What is funny?” he asked between kisses.

“I am. I am a ridiculous creature, more ridiculous than I was even at fourteen and I am thoroughly embarrassed at my own thoughts.”

He raised a brow. “Care to share what thoughts have made you so ridiculous?”

She shook her head. “No, sir. I prefer to maintain some dignity in your eyes.”

He looked at her skeptically again. “Are you going to be in the habit of keeping secrets?”

“Perhaps. A lady must maintain some mystery, you know.”

“Hmm.” He held her face in his hands, then, as if he was tasting a very fine wine, he kissed her. Slowly, deeply, until her toes curled and her fingers clung helplessly to his forearms.

“Keep your secrets, my love. I only require your heart.”

Chapter 11



When the carriage left Netherfield the following morning, Jane and Elizabeth leaned back against the squabs and sighed.

“That’s it! You two have been sighing all morning. What is going on?” cried Kitty.

Jane looked at her sister in surprise. “I told you. Mr. Bingley and I have set a date for the wedding.”

“And he kissed you. Rather a lot if your hair was anything to go by,” said Kitty.

“Catherine Bennet! You should not speak of such things.”

Kitty rolled her eyes. “It is only us, Jane. If you cannot talk to your sisters, who can you speak to?”

“I do not wish to speak of my private activities with Mr. Bingley with anyone,” said Jane. “Not at this time, anyhow.”

Kitty rolled her eyes as Jane looked out the window. “I know why you are sighing, Lizzy. Miss Bingley was an absolute harridan!”

Elizabeth did not correct her and turned her gaze to the window so her sisters would not see her face.

“Jane, I hope she does not live with you and Charles after you are married. She will make your life a misery.”

“She is not so bad,” said Jane.

“She is awful!” cried Kitty. “Truly Jane, you cannot trust her. She will take over your household and drive you mad.”

“I agree with Kitty,” added Elizabeth.

“What?” cried Jane. “I was counting on you to be the voice of reason!”

Elizabeth shrugged. “Miss Bingley is shrewd and self-serving, a terrible combination. And I cannot give you particulars, but I know she has a loose relationship with the truth.”

Jane gasped. “Calling a lady a liar is a serious accusation, Lizzy. Are you sure?”

“She lied to my face, Jane. And I suspect she has lied about me as well.”

“I am not surprised,” said Kitty. “She is jealous that we are the daughters of a gentleman and our family has lived on our land for hundreds of years. Her brother has yet to buy an estate.”

“We should not judge them for that. They cannot help their birth,” said Jane.

“I am not judging them for it, merely saying it is a reason Miss Bingley might be jealous.”

“Kitty may be right,” said Elizabeth. “She is certainly displeased with Hertfordshire and our family in particular. You should be careful with her, Jane. She will not make things easy for you.”

Jane looked troubled and twisted her hands together.

Elizabeth reached over and placed her hand on Jane’s. “Talk to Charles. He knows his sister better than we think. I do not think she has him fooled. He will deal honestly with you and you may come up with a plan to deal with her together.”

Jane nodded. “Very well. I shall speak to Charles, but I hope you are wrong.”

“For your sake, Jane, I hope I am wrong, too. But I do not think I am.”

The carriage pulled up to Longbourn and the ladies climbed out, asking the groom to see to their horses who were tied to the back. They made their way inside only to be waylaid by their mother just inside the door.

“Girls! There you are,” cried Mrs. Bennet. “You’ll never believe what has happened.”

“What is it?” asked Kitty.

“Your cousin has arrived.”

“Claude is here?” cried Elizabeth, moving towards the front parlor.

“No, no, your father’s cousin on the Bennet side. Mr. Collins.”

“Mr. Collins who will inherit the estate?” asked Kitty.

Mrs. Bennet scowled. “Do not remind me, child.” She huffed, then pulled them further into the hall and spoke in a hushed voice. “He is here looking for a wife. Since the rest of you are marked, I have encouraged him towards Mary.”

“Mary?” asked Kitty.

“Shhh! He will hear you. They are reading scripture together in the front room. Do not distract him.”

“Will we not meet him sometime?” asked Kitty.

“She does not want him to see the sisters he cannot have until Mary has secured him,” said Elizabeth dryly.

“Lizzy, that is unkind,” scolded Jane.

“I speak of mama’s motives, not Mary’s attributes,” defended Elizabeth.

“Oh, go upstairs, all of you! You are giving me a headache.” Mrs. Bennet shooed them away.

“I will just go to Papa,” said Jane as they passed the study.

Kitty and Elizabeth smiled at her encouragingly and made their way upstairs.

“Lydia!” called Kitty. They found their youngest sister in the nursery on the third floor, a room they only visited when they wanted to hide from visitors or their mother. “Tell us about Mr. Collins.”

Lydia set down the book she was reading and sighed dramatically. "Oh, he is a dreadful bore! I thought I might actually fall asleep standing up when we greeted him yesterday. He kept us standing in the hall for ten minutes, going on about how pleased he was to be at Longbourn."

"So you do not like him?" said Kitty.

"He is ridiculous! He never stops speaking, but he never actually says anything! He only talks about his patroness, some nosy old woman called Lady Catherine. He speaks about her as if she were the queen and not some batty old woman in Kent."

"You do not know she is batty," said Elizabeth.

"If she is even half like what Mr. Collins says of her, she is batty."

"Does Mary seem to like him?" asked Elizabeth.

"That's the strangest thing of all!" exclaimed Lydia. "She does. I do not know what she sees in him, but if he makes her happy, that is her choice."

"I am surprised you are so magnanimous, Lydia. Brava."

Lydia sighed. "I am not magnanimous. I was horrid to Mary last night when we were getting ready for bed. I told her Collins was a disgusting toad and that she would be better off as an old maid than married to him."

"You didn't!" said Kitty.

Lydia hung her head. “I did. She nearly cried. And instead of being kind, I told her she would spend her entire life crying if she married Collins, and she ought to put him off while she could.”

Kitty slapped a hand over her mouth.

“Oh, Lydia,” said Elizabeth. “Is Mary all right?”

“She seemed well enough at breakfast, but it is Mary. She is impossible to understand!”

Elizabeth rubbed Lydia’s arm. “Did you apologize?”

“Yes. She said it was her Christian duty to forgive me, but that doesn’t mean she has done it, does it? Anyhow, I know I did the wrong thing because my favorite flower was missing this morning.”

“What?”

Lydia stood and raised her skirt, showing them the bottom of her mark. Where there had been a vibrant red flower over her hip, there was now a faded pink outline. Elizabeth and Kitty sat back in shock.

Lydia looked at them solemnly. “I know. It is wretched. After I saw it, I apologized again to Mary and promised I would help her along however I could if this was what she truly wanted. Then I came up here to improve my mind and try to get it back.” She gestured to the book beside her.

Elizabeth did not know what to say. Lydia’s mark had always been unusual. She had never heard of a mark behaving in such a way, but it was yet more proof that the Bennet sisters

were unusual. At least the mark was encouraging Lydia toward good behavior. She did not want to think how wild her sister would have been without its influence.

“Are you going to hide out here all day?” asked Kitty.

“Probably. Mama does not want Collins to spend any time with the rest of us until he has decided on Mary.”

“You were right, Lizzy!” cried Kitty.

Elizabeth huffed. “We cannot stay up here for days at a time. How long is he staying?”

“For the week,” answered Lydia.

“This is ridiculous. Surely Mr. Collins knows the rest of us are marked. Even if we were not, Jane has Mr. Bingley and Lydia is too young to consider marriage.”

“That leaves you and me,” said Kitty, her eyes wide with horror.

“You are too young as well. And I would never marry a ridiculous man. I could never take him seriously,” argued Elizabeth.

“Mama seems set on Mary for Mr. Collins. It is a good match in some ways. He is respectable, I suppose, and he has a good living now. She will live moderately well. And then one day she will have Longbourn.” Lydia made good points, but it was clear they tasted like ash as they came out of her mouth.

Elizabeth stifled her urge to laugh at her sister’s expression and stood to leave the room. “I will go and greet papa. I shall

pray for your mark, Lyddie.”

Lydia stuck her tongue out at her elder sister as she was walking away, then sucked it back in when Kitty tutted at her.

“You will never get your flower back with that attitude,” scolded Kitty.

Lydia crossed her arms and scowled. At least Kitty had the grace to restrain her laughter.



Mr. Bennet smiled when Elizabeth entered his bookroom. “How was your sojourn at Netherfield, my dear? Have you come back engaged like your sister? Jane has told me all about her plans with Mr. Bingley. And now Collins is sniffing around Mary. If he follows through, I will lose two of my girls in the same month.”

Elizabeth looked at him guiltily. “Three of your girls, papa.” “What?”

“While I was at Netherfield, I made a discovery.” She took a deep breath. “Mr. Darcy is my soulmate.”

Mr. Bennet stared at his daughter with a blank expression. “Papa? Will you not say something?” “Mr. Darcy? Your soulmate?”

“Yes. We were both quite surprised. He has the mark on his right arm. I only saw the bottom portion, it would have been

indecorous for me to see the whole thing, but it is an exact replica of my mark, only smaller.”

Mr. Bennet continued to stare at his favorite daughter.

“I thought you liked Mr. Darcy? You seem to enjoy your discussions.”

“Yes, I like him well enough for a game of chess or a discussion of politics, but that is a far cry from wanting him to marry my daughter!” Bennet’s voice rose louder as he talked, and Elizabeth cringed back into her seat.

“So you do not approve?” she said in a small voice. She had never thought her father would deny her. She did not know what she would do if he withheld his consent.

Mr. Bennet sighed. “I am not saying I do not approve, but I do not love the idea either. He is a difficult man, Elizabeth. He will not be easy to be married to.”

“How do you mean?”

“Men like that are used to having things the way they like them. They do not often have to cede to another’s wishes or place another’s desires above their own. It can make them selfish, demanding. Unpleasant companions for more than an afternoon.”

“Mr. Bingley seems to like him well enough.” “Bingley likes everyone.”

Elizabeth worried her lip. “I had not thought of all that. Do you truly think he will be a difficult companion?”

Bennet rubbed a hand across his brow. "I cannot say with any certainty. And it is a moot point if he is your soulmate. The mark will make him treat you well, or so I have heard. He will be incapable of being unkind to you."

That was only a slight relief to Elizabeth. "I do not know that I want a husband who is kind only to me and a tyrant to everyone else."

"Now, now, we don't know that he a tyrant. I should not have said anything. The truth is that we do not know him well. He may be perfectly companionable."

Elizabeth nodded, her forehead still creased with worry.

"Let us do this. I will give him my permission to court you, and we will acknowledge the marks match after I have seen his, but you will wait several months before you wed. That will give you time to get to know him, and at least you will know what you are getting into." He levelled her with a serious look. "Elizabeth, if you find you do not like him, you may stay here at Longbourn. Mate sickness is rare. There is a very good chance you could lead a perfectly happy life without him."

"I do like him, papa. Far too much already, I fear."

"Ah." He smiled sadly. "That is the mark at work. Forgive me for frightening you, dear. I'm sure all will be well. Send your young man to me and I will work it all out with him."

She nodded, worry gnawing at her mind. Was Mr. Darcy a demanding man? Would life with him be difficult and

unpleasant? Was the happy home she wished for only a fantasy? She was afraid there was only one way to find out, and it was paved with peril.



Mrs. Bennet could not hide Jane forever, so she invited Bingley for a family dinner that evening so Mr. Collins would understand her eldest and most beautiful daughter was taken. And by a man with five thousand a year!

Kitty and Elizabeth conveniently secured an invitation to dine at Lucas Lodge that evening, and they were out the door and down the path before Mr. Collins could even see them, let alone be introduced.

Once she saw that Mary had a viable marriage prospect, Mrs. Bennet put extra effort into her least eligible daughter's appearance. Mary was trussed up in one of Elizabeth's gowns and her hair was done by Sarah before even Jane's, something that had never happened as long as the girls could remember. No one was ever ready before Jane.

They knew for a fact that Mr. Collins was not marked—the poor man had not even known he could be marked. His miserly father had not arranged a ceremony for him, nor informed him of the usual procedure. By the time Mr. Collins realized he had missed this important rite of passage, he was sixteen years old.

Mrs. Bennet had told Mary in no uncertain terms of the risks of marrying an unmarked man. He could come into a

mark later. It was unlikely, as Mr. Collins was already five and twenty—and she could not think who Fate would purposely saddle with such a buffoon—but there was always the possibility, and she did not want Mary to be shocked if she woke up next to a marked man one day.

Mary knew the risks and told her mother she was ready. She was proud to be the next mistress of Longbourn. She may not be the most beautiful, or even the third most beautiful of her sisters, but she could carry on their family legacy and ensure Longbourn remained in Bennet hands. She could be proud of that.

When Mary stepped into the drawing room before dinner, Mr. Collins stared at her in silence for a full minute. As if that alone was not a great feat, he then proceeded to splutter through a clearly unrehearsed compliment that left Mary blushing. Mrs. Bennet was beaming with triumph. Her daughter would be Mistress of Longbourn, and it would be her home forever. Just as it always should have been.



The following day brought great excitement to Longbourn. First, Mr. Collins asked Mary for a private audience after breakfast. Mrs. Bennet was already ridiculously happy because of Jane's impending wedding, and Mary's betrothal was icing on a five-thousand-pounds-a-year cake.

Collins proposed, Mary accepted, and Mr. Bennet gave his consent, though not without having a Very Serious Talk with

Mary to ensure she knew what she was about. Collins was an imbecile, but he could likely be managed if she put forth the effort. She assured her father she knew what she was about and he reluctantly agreed, though he promised to negotiate a generous settlement for her so she could maintain her independence as best as possible.

Just as Mr. Bennet was contemplating having a brandy before the clock struck noon, Mr. Darcy was announced.

“Send him in,” he said tiredly. Best to get all the young bucks dealt with at once.

Elizabeth was waiting in the corridor for Darcy when he stepped out of her father’s study. “Come,” she said, taking his hand and leading him out a side door.

She had his gloves and coat and shoved them into his arms as soon as they were out of sight of the house. Darcy shrugged into his coat, then pulled his gloves on as Elizabeth paced impatiently before him.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“We need to walk.”

“We do?”

“I need to walk, and I wish to speak with you, so we need to walk.”

“Understood.” Darcy moved quickly to keep up with her. “Are you going to tell me why we are racing away from Longbourn?”

She stopped abruptly and turned to face him. “How did it go with my father?”

“As expected. He wished to know I was solvent, which I am, and what I intend to put in the settlement. He asked about my family and I told him of my sister and about Pemberley.”

“Anything else?”

“He said we must court for at least three months before he will consider consenting to a marriage.”

She nodded, having expected as much. In fact, she was surprised it was only three months instead of six.

“You will be one and twenty next year, will you not?”

“Almost twelve months away,” she said with a sheepish expression. “I only had my twentieth birthday a fortnight ago. The twenty-seventh of October.”

His lips flattened into a straight line. “I see.”

“Did my father say he was considering withholding his consent?” she asked in horror.

“No, he was not so forthcoming. But he looked like he would very much like to deny me.”

Elizabeth paled. He wouldn't! He had promised he would give Darcy a chance!

“Dearest, do not worry.” He rubbed his hands over her arms to warm her. “I will win him over. It is understandable that a man would not want to give up such a treasure. I am certain I will be even worse when it is Georgiana’s time. Do not worry, my love. All will be well.”

She nodded, slowly focusing back on the present moment. “I knew he would be difficult—he does like to toy with people sometimes—but that was not what I was expecting. I’m certain you are right. All will be well.” She tried to smile reassuringly but fell woefully short of the mark.

“What were you expecting?” he asked with a smile.

She cringed. She should not have said anything, for she did not want to lie to him, but neither did she wish to have this discussion.

“Elizabeth? What is it?”

“My father thinks, that is, he is under the impression that...” she struggled to find the right words.

“Your father thinks what?”

“That you will be a difficult husband and that I might be happier remaining at Longbourn,” she said in a rush.

Darcy flushed red. “He said what?”

Elizabeth cringed. “It is only because you are a wealthy man. He thinks you are used to doing as you please whenever you wish and may not adjust well to having to consider another person. Though he did say the mark would likely

impel you to treat me well,” she added with a hopeful expression.

Darcy’s eyes grew so large they looked like they would pop out of his head. His face was a bright red, and there was a vein in his forehead that throbbed with his pulse.

When he spoke, his voice was eerily calm. “This is what your father thinks of me? What he told you to expect of me? That I am a spoiled child who only knows how to demand his own way and cannot share his toys?” he spat.

She swallowed heavily. “Not in those exact words, but essentially, yes.”

He blew out a ragged breath and paced away, then back towards her. He repeated the circuit three times before coming to stand before her. “Do you agree with him?”

“What?”

“Do you think I am spoiled and will be impossible to live with?”

“No! I do not think you are spoiled.”

“But you think I am difficult?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it, not knowing what to say.

Darcy huffed and stomped off.

“Fitzwilliam, wait!” She grabbed his arm and tugged until he turned to face her. “I do not think you will be difficult or impossible to live with.”

He looked slightly relieved, but wary.

“I will admit to some trepidation”—his mouth grew tight again and she rushed through her next words—“not because of anything you have done but because I do not know you well yet.” She took a deep breath and reached for his hand. “You are a powerful man, with a noble family and a grand estate. I do not entirely know what to expect. So yes, I have some concerns about that. Understandably so.” She straightened her shoulders and spoke firmly. “But never, not once, did I consider not marrying you to be an option.”

He watched her, his expression slowly softening. He tugged her towards him by the hand that was holding his. “Did you truly not even contemplate leaving me?”

“I did not, though after your little display of temper here, I may consider it.”

He yanked her into his arms with a growl and peppered her face with kisses as she laughed.

“Elizabeth.” He breathed deeply, his face buried in her hair. “I am not a man who loses his temper. I do not stomp about and display my anger. I am sorry you saw me thus.”

“It is all right, Fitzwilliam. It has been an emotional day.”

He pulled back and held her face in his gloved hands, his breath making a cloud in the cold air between them. “It is not the day. It is you. I will never be sanguine at the thought of losing you, Elizabeth. You are more important to me than—my God, I cannot think of anything more important to me than

you. I would sign over the deed to Pemberley for you.” She gasped and he swallowed hard, closing his eyes. “I cannot lose you. It would kill me.” He brought his forehead to rest on hers. “Do you understand? You are the most precious thing in the world to me.”

She sighed, melting into him. “Fitzwilliam, my heart.”

She reached up onto her toes and kissed his face. First his cheeks, then his jaw, then his impressive nose. She held his face in her hands, her nose pressed against his, and looked into his eyes. “I am yours, Fitzwilliam, and you are mine. You shall not lose me. We belong together.”

He sighed, his body sagging in relief.

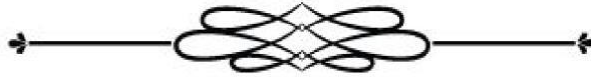
“You undo me, Elizabeth. You have no idea of the power you wield over me.”

She smiled softly against his lips. “I promise to only use my power for good,” she whispered.

He pulled her closer to him then, opening his greatcoat and pulling her inside. Her hands stole around his back inside the coat, snuggling into his warmth. She rested her head on his chest and sighed happily.

“My father will grow to love you, Fitzwilliam. I know he will. All will be well.”

Chapter 12



Three Months Later

“Lizzy! Hurry up and come down! Mr. Darcy’s family will be here any minute!”

Elizabeth put the finishing touches on her hair, then smoothed her skirt and walked out the door. How she missed Jane! Her sister had been Mrs. Bingley for seven weeks now, and Elizabeth never missed her so much as when her mother was haranguing her and she needed Jane’s calm presence.

“Come along, girl! You cannot keep a countess waiting!”

“They are not even here yet, Mama,” said Lydia.

Elizabeth smiled at her younger sister. Lydia and she had become surprisingly close since Jane moved out.

“Into the drawing room, all of you,” tutted Mrs. Bennet. She shooed Elizabeth, Kitty, and Lydia into Longbourn’s largest room and looked about to make sure all was in order. “Where is your father?”

“I will get him,” said Elizabeth, moving towards the door.

“Oh, no you don’t! I will not risk you missing their arrival. Lydia, fetch your father.”

“Yes, mama.”

Mrs. Bennet was always a mass of nerves when a marriage prospect for one of her daughters was about. She had been remarkably calm after Jane married, though, and they had thought it was the dawning of a new era. It was not. Mrs. Bennet had merely been saving her nerves for Darcy’s aunt, the countess.

“They’re here!” cried Kitty from her place by the window. A large carriage was trundling up the drive.

Mr. Bennet walked in with Lydia just as the knocker sounded on the door.

“Everybody remember your manners,” hissed Mrs. Bennet.

Lydia rolled her eyes and Elizabeth stifled a laugh. In some ways, it was good to know her mother could be relied on to always behave in a predictable manner.

The butler stepped into the room. “Mr. Darcy and his family are here, ma’am.”

“Show them in, Hodges, show them in!”

The butler stepped back into the hall and re-entered with a distinguished woman on his heels. “Lady Matlock.” Darcy followed her and the butler kept announcing names as Darcy’s family entered the room like a royal procession. His sister Georgiana was there, hiding behind her cousins. Darcy’s favorite cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam had come, along with his

elder brother and his wife, Lord and Lady Seaton. Lastly, Darcy's paternal aunt, Mrs. Davies, had come with her son Jonathon.

Mrs. Bennet was shocked into silence by all the grand people suddenly filling her drawing room. She called for tea and made polite small talk, her voice staying surprisingly soft. Her guests could not know it was intimidation and not manners that kept her volume in check.

"How are the wedding plans coming, Mrs. Bennet?" asked Lady Matlock.

"Very well, my lady. Though if they would wait another month there would be more flowers to choose from."

Elizabeth discreetly tapped her mother's hip from her seat beside her and prayed she would move on before she begged Darcy's aunt to host the wedding breakfast herself.

"I appreciate that you wish to decorate for the wedding breakfast, but I have waited for my bride for three months already. I wish to take her home to Pemberley," said Darcy.

Colonel Fitzwilliam and his brother snickered behind Darcy, but he ignored them. They were not the ones he needed to impress today.

Conversation continued and eventually Mr. Bennet invited the men to his study to look at some rare book he had acquired, and the ladies were left alone in the drawing room. Elizabeth had already met Georgiana the week before when she had arrived with her companion. She found her delightful

and sweet, which was a great relief since they would all be sharing a house.

Since she was already familiar with her new sister, she thought she would get to know her new cousin.

“May I sit with you?” she asked quietly as she approached Minerva on a settee.

“Yes, of course.”

Elizabeth sat next to the nervous woman. She appeared only a few years older than herself. “How was your journey?”

“Oh, it was uneventful, thank you,” she answered quietly, her eyes on her hands.

Darcy had said she was reserved and shy, but Elizabeth had not expected this degree of diffidence. Elizabeth imagined the lady’s husband did not help matters. She had only spoken with Lord Seaton for a few minutes, but it was enough to know he would eat alive someone as gentle as Minerva.

Looking around and seeing that her mother was occupied with Darcy’s aunts and his sister with her own sisters, she said, “Are you fond of music?”

Minerva looked up. “Yes, I am.”

“Come with me.” Elizabeth stood and moved to the door, Minerva following slowly behind her.

Elizabeth led her to the music room down the hall, far enough away from anyone else in their party that they might speak undisturbed.

“Do you play the pianoforte?”

“Yes, of course. Though I prefer the harp.”

“Oh, you are impressive! I enjoy the harp, but I do not play it myself. I believe there is an instrument at Netherfield. Perhaps I might hear you before you leave Hertfordshire.”

“Perhaps.”

“Do you mind if I play something?”

“Not at all.”

Elizabeth sat at the instrument and played a slow tune, something simple that did not require her full attention. Minerva shuffled through the music sheets set in a basket on top of the pianoforte.

“Do you have any advice for me?” asked Elizabeth.

Minerva looked up with frightened eyes. “What do you mean?”

“You have recently joined the family. You might know what topics to avoid to prevent an awkward dinner.”

Minerva looked relieved. “I would not bring up politics when Lord Matlock is at table.”

“Does he feel passionately about it?”

“Depending on the topic, he can go on for hours. Once, he would not stop talking long enough for Lady Matlock to direct the servants. We ended up missing the entire third course because the soufflé had fallen by the time he was done.”

Elizabeth laughed lightly.

“Cook was terribly upset.”

“I can imagine!”

Minerva seemed more relaxed now. Elizabeth ventured another tack.

“Do you often visit Pemberley?” she asked.

“I have only been once, last year, for a week before the Season.”

“Would you like to come this summer? Fitzwilliam and I are hosting a house party, and I would so love to have a familiar face in the crowd. My sister Mrs. Bingley will be there.”

Minerva smiled tremulously. “Mrs. Bingley is very kind.”

“She is. It has been a longstanding joke around here that Jane got all the goodness in the family, that is why the rest of us are so mischievous.”

Minerva almost laughed.

“Truly, I would love for you to come. Please think about it. If I may make a confession, I am a little nervous about Pemberley.”

“It is a beautiful estate.”

“I am sure it is. It is not the estate itself that worries me. I will be miles from my home and all my sisters, and I will know no one there. It seems a daunting task.”

“You will have Mr. Darcy to assist you.”

Was that jealousy Elizabeth detected? “I will, but he will be busy with estate matters, and some things I must do on my

own. If he is constantly stepping in for me, the staff will not learn to respect me. I may consult with him in private of course, and I intend to, but the execution will be up to me alone.”

Minerva nodded. “That does sound daunting. Surely Georgiana will help you, as well. And might not one of your sisters come to stay with you?”

“I have thought about bringing my sister Catherine. Our other sister Mary has recently married and moved to Kent, and Jane is at Netherfield, as you know. But if I take Kitty, Lydia will be here all on her own, and that does not seem fair to her. She is already likely to be the last one at home due to her being the youngest. It seems cruel to begin that prematurely.”

“I see your point. A house party seems a good idea then, but invite your friends instead of your husband’s.” Elizabeth laughed, but Minerva seemed shocked by her own words. “Forgive me, I meant no offense.”

“I am not offended in the least! Truly, you may speak as you wish here. Once you get to know my younger sisters, you will see why it takes more than such a statement to offend me.”

Minerva choked out another laugh. “Thank you, Miss Bennet.”

“Would you call me Elizabeth, or better yet, Lizzy, as my sisters do? We are to be cousins, after all.”

Minerva bit her lip.

“It would help me to feel more at home in the family.”

Minerva's eyes instantly brightened in understanding. "Of course! It is strange to suddenly be called by a new name. I will call you Lizzy, of course. And you must call me Minnie, as my sister does."

"Very well, Minnie. I am sure we shall be great friends."



"Your cousin is a brute," whispered Elizabeth. She and Darcy were standing by the window in the drawing room before dinner.

"Which one do you mean?"

"Lord Seaton. His wife is shy, but she has a lovely sense of humor if you draw her out."

"Does she?"

"Yes! But he will not take the time to do so. He is not even gentle with her! You saw how he was barking at her to put her cloak on faster. I was mortified on her behalf."

Darcy scowled out the window. "I cannot say you are incorrect, though it pains me to say it. Jeffrey thought he was getting one thing in a wife and could not cope with his disappointment when he got another."

Elizabeth huffed. "He is not a child. Disappointment is a part of life. If he would take the time to get to know her, and be kind to her, he might find she is even better than whatever it was he was expecting."

“You are right, of course, my dear.”

“You would never speak to me in such a way, would you? Even if you were cross and disappointed?”

Darcy looked horrified. “Of course not! Do not even think such a thing.”

“I am relieved to hear it.”

“I am surprised Lady Seaton told you so much. She had only known you for an hour.”

“She told me very little. Much of it I deduced from my own observations.”

Darcy nodded. “Perhaps I should speak with Jeffrey.”

“Someone should. Why not you? You have a soulmate now. You are not completely without experience.”

“Very well, I will attempt it while he is at Netherfield.”

Elizabeth beamed at him. “Thank you, my love.”

“Where is this cousin of yours? Everyone will be here soon.”

They were waiting for her cousin Claude who had been expected several hours ago, but had likely been delayed by rain. Darcy’s family had gone back to Netherfield to rest and dress for dinner, and they were expected back at Longbourn within the hour.

“Claude is almost always late. He thinks it is fashionable.”

Darcy frowned. Elizabeth laughed at him, as was her usual response when he was being dour.

“There he is!” cried Kitty.

They all gathered in the hall, prepared to welcome their cousin. Darcy was expecting a man a little older than Elizabeth, but he had not given him much thought beyond that. The man who entered Longbourn was tall and athletically built, with golden hair a little longer than was fashionable. His eyes were a startling shade of blue and his features were strong.

“Lizzy!” he cried. He rushed towards Elizabeth and embraced her, twirling her in a circle before setting her back on her feet. Elizabeth laughed in delight and Darcy fought back the jealous urge to yank her from the other man’s arms.

“Come meet Fitzwilliam.”

Claude greeted Darcy exuberantly. “If Lizzy likes you, I know we shall be great friends.”

“I hope we shall,” Darcy said solemnly. Elizabeth smiled happily up at him as Claude turned away to greet the rest of the family.

“Where is my sweet Kitty?” said Claude playfully.

“Over here, you ridiculous man.”

Kitty was treated to the same treatment as her sister, then Claude turned to Mrs. Bennet with a charming smile.

“Fanny, you get lovelier every time I see you. How do you do it?”

“Oh, you!” She swatted his arm.

“Is your cousin always so familiar?” Darcy whispered into Elizabeth’s ear.

“Yes. He means nothing by it, it is just his way. You’ll become accustomed to it soon enough.”

Claude was speaking rapidly in French with Mr. Bennet. Darcy spoke the language well enough, but he could not keep up with their pace. “How exactly is he related to your family?” asked Darcy.

Before Elizabeth could answer, Lydia thundered down the stairs.

“Lyddie!”

She leapt off the last two steps directly into her cousin’s arms. Mrs. Bennet scolded her not to behave so in the house, but no one paid any mind.

“Remember the French grandmother I told you about?” Elizabeth said quietly.

“Yes, I remember,” replied Darcy. Everyone was chattering around them so he leaned down to hear her better.

“Her sister married an Englishman as well. Claude is her grandson.”

“So he is your second cousin?”

“Yes.”

Darcy was grateful that Elizabeth had chosen to be marked. If she had not, she might have married this dashing man who already seemed to care a great deal for her.

Once Claude was shown to his room, the party calmed down to await Darcy's family's return. Darcy sat with Elizabeth on a settee by the window, enjoying what little alone time he got with her.

"I meant to ask you earlier. Is your cousin marked?" he asked.

"He was not originally. He meant to join the army and he thought it was no life for a wife. Then his uncle died and left him an estate, but by then it was too late to be marked. Fortunately though, a mark recently appeared on his left arm."

"Oh? Is there a name?" It was common practice to share the name on one's mark with family so they might be of assistance in finding one's soulmate.

"It is still coming in. He thinks the first letter is a C, or perhaps a G. It is still faint." She smiled at Darcy mischievously. "Maybe we will get lucky and he will match to one of your cousins."

"My closest friend is already married to your sister. That is coincidence enough."

Elizabeth looked thoughtful for a moment. "Do you really think it a coincidence?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you not think it possible that you were drawn to Bingley because your soulmates were sisters?"

He furrowed his brow. "I do not know, I've never thought about it like that before."

“It would not be the strangest thing to happen to a Bennet’s mark.”



Two days later, Elizabeth signed the name Bennet for the last time. Kitty stood up with her at the church, and everything went according to plan, which of course meant some disaster must befall the breakfast at Netherfield.

The ballroom was packed to the brim. Darcy’s family had come from all over the country. He was the only marked member of his generation—well, except for Georgiana, but that was not public knowledge yet—and the only male member on the Darcy side. Cousins he had not seen in years came out to see the mysterious woman Fate had marked for him.

Elizabeth’s family traveled from London, both the Gardiners and the remainder of Claude’s family. And of course the entire town of Meryton came to celebrate with the Bennets. Three daughters married! One to the heir of Longbourn and two to their soulmates. This was something worth seeing.

“How soon can we leave?” asked Darcy.

Elizabeth could not contain her laughter. “I shall take that as a compliment that you wish to be alone with me and not as an insult to my family.”

Darcy huffed. “Of course I wish to be alone with you! There are entirely too many people in this room.”

“Another half an hour and we may go,” said Elizabeth. She had a feeling she would say this to him at many balls and parties in the future.

“Lizzy, may I speak with you,” asked Claude.

She nodded and let him lead her off to a small sitting room at the back of the house.

“What is it?”

He paced across the room, his hand running through his hair in agitation. Claude was never agitated.

“What is going on?”

“Look,” he said, rolling up the sleeve on his left arm. His soul mark had been coming in more fully lately, and the image of two birds flying was almost perfectly clear. One of the birds had a ribbon in its mouth, and on that ribbon were the initials GAD.

“I see the initials more clearly. Is that what has upset you?”

He looked at her expectantly. “Can you not think of anyone with the initials GD? Someone in the family you have just married into, perhaps?”

Elizabeth paled. “Georgiana.”

Claude nodded. “Her mark has just come in! I cannot believe I have been matched with a thirteen-year-old girl.” He ran his hand through his hair again.

“But she is not thirteen.”

“What?”

“She wished to receive a mark but did not, so she only recently had the ceremony. She will be sixteen next month.”

“Sixteen.”

Elizabeth nodded.

“Well, that is certainly better than thirteen.”

“Claude,” Elizabeth asked carefully, “are you certain it is Georgiana? The letters are not particularly rare.”

“I know it is her. Kitty told me.”

“Kitty?”

“Yes. Miss Darcy showed Kitty her mark, and when she saw mine this morning, she told me they were a match.”

Elizabeth sank onto a chair. “Oh, dear.” She was thrilled Claude would be in her close family. He was great fun, and probably just the sort to coax Georgiana out of her shell. But Fitzwilliam would be horrid to him, as he would be to anyone who wished to court his sister.

“What do you think I should do?” he asked.

“There is nothing you can do. She is not yet out. You only just returned from your tour. Neither of you are particularly ready for marriage.”

Claude laughed ruefully. “No, not particularly. I never thought to marry at three and twenty.”

“Just because you have met your soulmate does not mean you must wed immediately.”

“Does anyone ever wait longer than six months?”

“I have never heard of it, but I am sure it happens sometimes.”

Claude scoffed.

“Let us do this,” she suggested. “You go on to your estate as planned and settle in there. I will invite you to Pemberley this summer for our house party. You will be able to get to know Georgiana then and hopefully win over Fitzwilliam.”

“He will be awful, won’t he?”

“Yes.”

Claude groaned.

“I’m certain we can find a way.”

Claude sank into a chair and dropped his head into his hands.

Elizabeth rubbed his back and said, “This is a good thing, cousin. Just think! You do not have to search for your soulmate like your father and grandfather did. You know exactly where she is. You need only wait a little while.”

He took a deep breath. “I will try to see it your way,

Lizzy.” “All will be well. You’ll see.”

Darcy appeared in the doorway. “Elizabeth, everyone has gathered to see us off. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, I am ready.”

She kissed Claude on the cheek and squeezed his hand, then went to join her husband. They walked out to the front of

Netherfield where their families had gathered to wish them well.

She kissed her parents and her sisters, said goodbye to her neighbors, and let Darcy hand her into the carriage. As they rolled away from Netherfield, she could not help but think that she had almost missed this.

“What are you thinking?” asked Darcy.

“That I am glad I decided to get a soul mark. I would not have found you otherwise.”

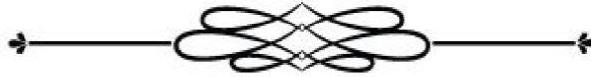
He took up her hand and kissed it. “I would have found you regardless. I have to believe that.”

“Yes, but would you have been happy to fall in love with the daughter of a small country estate? Would you have accepted me so freely if it were not for the mark?”

Darcy could only stare at her, for she was right. He would have struggled and fought the connection. “I have to believe my heart would have prevailed in the end.” He kissed her hand again. “I could not live without you, Elizabeth. Mark or no mark.”

She smiled softly at him and leaned into his chest. “Nor I you, Fitzwilliam.”

Epilogue



Pemberley, Summer 1813

Elizabeth was quite pleased with the married state. So pleased in fact that she had made it her mission to find the matches to her sisters' marks. She had a wider circle of acquaintance now, so she did not think it would be impossible.

She had made of friend of Colonel Fitzwilliam, Darcy's favorite cousin, and he would regularly tell her about men in his ranks or friends of his who had marks.

"Captain Walters might be promising," he told Elizabeth over tea. "I have not seen his mark myself, but I heard it was equestrian in nature. I also thought to see about Mr. Lawson, the younger son of Timothy Lawson. He has a small estate in Norfolk where he breeds thoroughbreds. He positively lives for horses. I know he is marked, but I do not know what with. I do know he is still unmarried."

"Could you find out, please? Kitty will arrive in a fortnight and I would so like to have good news for her." She rubbed her extended belly absently.

“I shall send a letter forthwith.” Fitzwilliam leaned back in his chair and looked at her fondly. “How are you faring, cousin?”

Elizabeth sighed. “Other than feeling like I am the size of a carriage, I am very well.”

Fitzwilliam laughed. “You are hardly that large.”

“I know. I should keep a good attitude as I shall only get bigger. That is what I get for marrying such a large man.”

“What do you get?” asked Darcy as he entered the room.

“Your wife was telling me how enormous she is and that it is all your fault for being such a great big buffoon.”

“Don’t you two start!” cried Elizabeth. “I no longer have the patience for your squabbles.”

“Yes, dear. Has my cousin brought you a good report?” said Darcy.

It was a joke amongst the family that Fitzwilliam had become Elizabeth’s private soldier, going here and there for her and finding out what she needed to know. The colonel did not mind the teasing, as long she promised to name her first child after him.

“He has. And what have you heard? How is Lord Seaton?”

“Nervous as a cat on a boat.” Darcy had followed through on his promise to speak with his cousin about his treatment of his wife. Jeffrey had been affronted at first, but Darcy had refused to back down and eventually his cousin had seen his

point. Jeffrey had begun to speak to Minerva more gently and to be more patient with her. In turn, she had begun to trust him and feel less nervous, and over time, the two became friends. They were not a great love, but at least their relationship was amiable and they could enjoy one another's company. They were now expecting their first child and Minerva would be brought to bed any day. To everyone's surprise, Jeffrey was a nervous wreck.

"I shall go to him when she is brought to bed," said Colonel Fitzwilliam. "He is likely to drive the household mad."

"You will come back here after, will you not?" asked Elizabeth. Colonel Fitzwilliam was her favorite of her husband's relations—a title he bragged about freely whenever possible—and she liked to have him about as much as possible. He was like a brother to her, only better, for he did not know any embarrassing childhood stories about her, but he knew plenty about her husband.

"You know Pemberley is my favorite place to spend the summer."

"Claude will escort Kitty and Lydia here in a fortnight," said Darcy. "He will bring the settlement if you would like to look it over."

"I would, thank you."

Claude had come to the house party the previous summer and he and Georgiana had become fast friends, as expected. He sheltered her in company and made her laugh, and she grounded him and lent him a sense of gravity that he had been

missing. Darcy and Fitzwilliam had agreed that they could correspond as they were soulmates, but in deference to their young ages, they must wait at least a year to wed.

Claude had recently turned five and twenty, and Georgiana was seventeen. She would be nearly eighteen by the time they wed that winter. Darcy thought it was still young to be married, but Claude was well known to the family and more importantly, the mark would not be denied. Georgiana was head over heels in love with him, and he with her. There was no doubt that he would treat her well.

It also helped that his estate was only forty miles from Pemberley. Darcy could check on his sister any time he wished without too much fuss.

“Oof,” Elizabeth grunted and rubbed her belly, then changed positions in her seat.

“Are you well, dearest?” asked Darcy, kneeling beside her chair.

“Well enough. Could you help me up? It is time to take your son for a walk.”

Darcy helped her out of the chair and gave her his arm. “I shall escort you.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam shook his head. He never would have thought that Darcy, out of all people, would dote on his wife so. He was practically a mooncalf!

“Just you wait, Fitz. Your time will come,” said Darcy as he left the room with his wife.

The colonel merely scoffed and set to writing his letters.



The Darceys had decided that a summer house party would be a yearly occurrence. Because of Elizabeth's condition, they had limited this year's guests to close family. The Bingleys came with their daughter, as did Kitty and Lydia. Darcy's cousins Colonel Fitzwilliam and Jonathon Davies were in attendance, as well as Elizabeth's cousin Claude, now engaged to Georgiana.

They sat on the terrace after an afternoon of croquet on the lawn, listening to Jonathon tell stories of his recent travels.

"Would you believe it, he had a mark covering his entire arm!" he cried, telling them of a man he had met on a ship near Gibraltar. "It was the most colorful thing I have ever seen. A bright green vine covered in flowers. I tell you, it would have been feminine on another man."

Lydia perked up when she heard him speak of flowers. "Was there a name on this mark?"

"I do not know, but he did tell me the strangest thing. The mark was changeable!"

The Bennet sisters all sat up straighter. "What do you mean?" asked Kitty.

"He said at first it was only a vine, for years I believe, then one day, out of the blue, it sprouted flowers! Not only that, but they would come and go. I've never heard the like. It suits him

though, as he always taking samples of vegetation wherever he goes. The man is a walking hothouse—quite literally now!”

Lydia sat pale and wide eyed. Thankfully, Darcy stepped in.

“Who did you say this was again?”

“Frederick Eastham, a younger son of Sir Anthony Eastham, out of Sussex I believe.”

“Do you have a way to contact him?”

“Yes, he gave me his direction. Why do you ask?”

“I have heard of a lady with such a mark. He might wish to meet her,” said Darcy smoothly.

“Have you? Well that is lucky! I shall give you his direction.”

“Thank you.”



“Can you believe it? We may have found Lydia’s soulmate!” cried Elizabeth once they were settled in her private sitting room.

“Let us wait until we know more. They may not be a match,” said Darcy reasonably.

She looked at him skeptically. “How many marks have you heard of that behave as Lydia’s does?”

“I grant you it is unique, and this is a promising lead, but I do not wish to get our hopes up unnecessarily—nor Lydia’s for that matter.”

Elizabeth sighed. "I know you are right. But it is exciting all the same."

There was a knock on the door and Darcy bade them enter.

"Cousins, this has just arrived." Colonel Fitzwilliam brandished a piece of paper in the air.

"What is it? A letter?" asked Elizabeth.

"Even better. Mr. Lawson has responded to my inquiry. His mark is a horse, just as I thought. He even sent a sketch of the image. Turns out he is quite the artist in addition to being a fine horseman."

"Let me see!" cried Elizabeth, reaching for the paper. She looked at the image closely, gasping when she saw a colorless replica of the mark on Kitty's leg.

"He is eager to meet the lady if her mark is a match. I did not tell him Miss Kitty's name, of course," continued the colonel.

"Fitzwilliam, look," called Elizabeth, holding out the paper. He had never seen Kitty's mark with his own eyes, owing to its location on her person, but he had seen Jane's sketches of it.

"It is very like," said Darcy.

"I knew it!" cried the colonel. "Do you think she will name their first son after me? I did find the match, after all."

"I thought you wished our son to be named after you?" remarked Elizabeth.

“I do. I want an entire generation of Richards. Just think of it!”

Elizabeth laughed as Darcy rolled his eyes at his cousin.

“You will have to make more than one match for an entire generation, Fitz,” he said drily.

“Still, I am well on my way,” replied Richard with a grin. “I shall leave you to yourselves now. I am meeting Davies for a bit of sport.”

They wished him a good afternoon, then sat together on the sofa, looking at the sketch their cousin had brought them.

“I cannot believe it. Both my sisters’ matches in one day!” cried Elizabeth.

Darcy started to speak but she cut him off.

“I know, Lydia’s is unsure, but it is promising. And Kitty’s is as good as made.” She gestured to the paper on the table.

“I will agree it has been a productive day,” said Darcy. “Shall we have a nap now?”

Elizabeth had grown inordinately tired in the last month, and Darcy insisted she lie down for an hour every afternoon. She hated to do so on her own, so he had taken to lying with her and reading while she dozed.

“Help me up?” She held out her hand and he tugged her to her feet, leading her into the bedchamber next door. He helped her climb onto the bed, noticing she was becoming more ungainly every day.

He lay down beside her, a hand protectively over her belly.
“Sleep well, my sweet.”

“Do you think they will be as happy as us?” she asked.

“Who? Your sisters?”

“Yes.”

“I do not see why not.”

She shrugged and closed her eyes, snuggling into her husband’s side. “I cannot imagine anyone loving her husband as I love you.”

Darcy smiled and stroked her hair. “I am delighted you think so, my dear, but do not say such to your sisters. Jane especially would not like to hear it.”

Elizabeth smiled sleepily. “Very well, I shall not. It will be our secret.”

“What is our secret?”

“That we are the happiest couple in the world.”

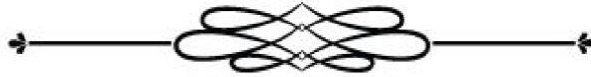
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About the Author



Elizabeth Adams is a book-loving, tango-dancing, Austen enthusiast. She loves old houses and thinks birthdays should be celebrated with trips—as should most occasions. She can often be found by a sunny window with a cup of hot tea and a book in her hand.

She writes romantic comedy and comedic tragedy in both historic and modern settings. You can find more information, short stories, and outtakes at eadamswrites.com