



AMANDA KAI

Not In
Want of a Wife?

A PRIDE
AND PREJUDICE VARIATION

THE OTHER PATHS SERIES, ~ BOOK 1

Not In Want of a Wife
*A Pride and Prejudice
Variation*

by

AMANDA KAI

Editorial Reviews

“‘Not in Want of a Wife’ is sweet retelling of Jane Austen’s ‘Pride and Prejudice’ in which the reader is allowed to view how neither Mr. Darcy’s “pride” nor Elizabeth Bennet’s “prejudice” can withstand the power of true love. It is a superb tale of both sorrow and triumph, which leaves the reader waiting to turn the page to discover what will come next. Amanda Kai skillfully envelops us in the hearts and mind of her main characters, and so we weep when they mourn and cheer when they finally find their way to each other in a lovely and romantic scene reminiscent of Shakespeare. Jane Austen, herself, would be proud of this endeavor.”

- Regina Jeffers, award-winning and Amazon Best Selling author of historical romances, cozy mysteries, romantic suspense, and Austenesque sequels and retellings

“Amanda Kai’s ‘Not in Want of a Wife’ is a delightfully light-hearted Regency “Pride and Prejudice” variation. This clean romance will satisfy readers who seek a wholesome romantic journey for Darcy and Elizabeth. Although it starts out in very familiar territory, the story soon veers away from Canon with a secret agreement made between our favorite pair. Will this association smooth the way and lead to an earlier understanding between them? And what about Mr. Wickham, who is present but seems a bit different from the original? Can he be taken at his word, or does he have an evil plan in mind? You must read the book to find out!”

-Kelly Miller, author of *A Dutiful Son*

“This pacey romp takes the reader along at speed, with twists and turns aplenty. Elizabeth and Darcy conspire to support each other in deflecting unwanted romantic attention by faking an engagement. Inevitably things become complicated! Almost akin to a Shakespeare comedy in its twists and turns, plenty of attention is also paid to other favourite characters, notably Jane and Bingley. At last, untangling and satisfying resolutions ensue for all. With a strong grasp of character and a lightness of touch this lively tale holds the reader’s attention throughout. Congratulations Ms Kai!

-Harri Whilding, author of *Out There in the World*

“Not in Want of a Wife has many twists and turns in the story. Often I thought a problem was solved when another sprang up. I was on the edge of my seat as I waited for Ms. Kai to bring Elizabeth and Darcy to their happily ever after. I enjoyed how she developed the relationship despite those problems. It is a great read.”

-Jadie Brooks, author of *Remembering the Future Past*

Dedication

To my husband, Moses, and our children, Alyssa, Henry,
and Claire, for their love and support

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Chapter 1



It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a large fortune is not in want of a wife who only loves him for his money. Ever since Mr. Darcy came of age, he became an object of prey to “fortune hunters”—greedy young ladies and their scheming mothers who would do anything to get their hands on his fortune.

It began the year that he exited Cambridge and came down to London to enjoy the “Season.” Darcy had been to London many times as a child and a youth. But this time, something had changed. It was as if a signal had gone off alerting all the women in the city that there was new meat to be hunted, and their noses drew to it like a hound to blood. Mr. Darcy quickly became regarded as one of the most eligible bachelors of the Season.

In one sense, it was good. There was no end to the supply of invitations to all the balls, parties, picnics, and sporting matches. Any door was open to him. But it came with a price— that he was expected to socialize and dance with all the young ladies who were seeking to find husbands in the “marriage mart” that was taking place all around him: a transactional bazaar in which the women vied for the most advantageous match, and the men competed to win the most attractive lady. Little thought was given to love. Love, if it came at all, was secondary to securing a match before the Season was over. Darcy wanted a happy marriage, like that of his late parents, one born out of love, not a financial arrangement. He had no interest in choosing a wife from among the *ton*. He was quite happy that year when the Season ended and he was still a single man.

But Darcy soon found that his troubles did not end when he returned to the countryside, nor even when he traveled to other parts of the country to visit his friends or family. His

reputation was now widely known, and at every public assembly or private ball, mothers would throw their eligible daughters in his path. This continued, year after year, Season after Season.

Now, six years later, at the ripe age of 28, Darcy was thoroughly tired of it all. Tired of being hunted wherever he went. And he was certain that finding love was almost impossible.

“Come on, Darcy, it will be fun!” his friend, Charles Bingley encouraged. “Hertfordshire is said to be pleasant this time of year, with good weather, and plenty of birds to shoot.”

Bingley, who had just leased an estate in that part of the country, had invited Darcy to come down for several months and stay with him and his sisters and brother-in-law.

“There might even be some beautiful ladies in that area.” Bingley grinned.

Darcy let out a humph. “I am only coming to help you learn how to run an estate and to shoot some birds. I’ve seen enough pretty ladies to last me a lifetime.”

“You never know!” Bingley chuckled. “One day somebody will finally catch your attention.”

“We will see about that.” Darcy laughed dryly.



It is also a truth universally acknowledged that wherever young men of fortune may go, the mothers of that area will be keen to have him marry one of their daughters.

Mr. Bingley, whose income was said to be five-thousand a year, had barely arrived in the neighborhood before the matchmaking mamas of Meryton began to calculate which of their eligible daughters he was most likely to marry.

“It is certain; he arrived yesterday, not today, as we had thought he would,” Mrs. Bennet said to her husband. “I have had it from my sister Phillips who heard it from Mrs. Nicholls, the housekeeper at Netherfield.”

“And what is that to us, when this Mr. Bingley arrives?” Mr. Bennet scoffed from the comfort of his chair by the fire where he was enjoying his newspaper. “What does it signify whether he came yesterday or today?”

“Why Mr. Bennet, how can you be so obtuse?” Mrs. Bennet cried. “Why, you must visit him first, before any of the others do, so that your girls may have the more immediate advantage over the others. The Lucases are sure to visit him early, since Sir William is the mayor. Lady Lucas would love *nothing* more than to see her Charlotte land a match like that! Though with Charlotte being so plain, and already having been out these several years, perhaps Maria might have better luck, since she is a good deal prettier than her sister. All the more reason for you to get there first, Mr. Bennet.”

“I fail to see how this is a race, in any way,” Mr. Bennet said. His calm demeanor as he continued to read irked his wife, who railed against him.

“Oh, Mr. Bennet! How can you be so cruel! You must think of your poor girls, who, with such small dowries, will be at the mercy of your cousin should they fail to make a good match!”

“My dear, I do not see whether my visiting Mr. Bingley a day earlier or later should make any difference as to our girls’ chances with him. He shall have to meet them all before he can decide whether he takes a fancy to any of them. I do not depend upon his impression of *me* as bearing much weight in the matter. In fact, as I am but an old codger, I should think it would be more favorable for you and the girls to go in my stead.”

“Mr. Bennet, you are being ridiculous!”

“Quite so! Better that you should send the girls by themselves, for you are still quite as pretty as any of them. Mr. Bingley may like you best of them all!” He winked at her, which made her all the more flustered.

“Ooh, enough with your teasing! You have no compassion for my poor nerves!”

“Ah, you mistake me my dear, I have the highest respect for them. They’ve been my constant companions these twenty-some odd years.”

At that moment, Elizabeth, the second-eldest daughter of the family, happened to be passing by. Her mother caught her by the arm and took her over to her father.

“Lizzy, tell your father he must do his duty by his daughters! You know he listens to no one but you.”

“And what, pray, am I to tell him?” Elizabeth asked, looking at the mischievous grin on her father’s face with amusement.

“Tell him he must go and visit Mr. Bingley as soon as he arrives, or else you and your sisters shall all end up as old maids! For *we* cannot visit him if *he* does not, and then Mr. Bingley will go and marry Charlotte Lucas or somebody else, and it will all be your father’s fault for not doing as any father should!”

“Well, Papa,” Elizabeth smirked. “It seems you have no choice. You must visit this Mr. Bingley, or else our fate is sealed.”

“Precisely!” Mrs. Bennet huffed, putting her hands on her hips.

Mr. Bennet hid his smile behind his newspaper. “Oh, well, if Lizzy wants me to go, then I suppose it is a good thing that I called at Netherfield this very morning.”

Mrs. Bennet’s expression changed from one of fretting to delight. “Oh, Mr. Bennet, how vexing you are to tease me, so! Why did you not say that you had already called and

spared us this whole argument?” She turned and hurried up the stairs, calling after her other daughters.

“Jane! Lydia, Kitty, Mary! Your father has called on Mr. Bingley! We are saved! We must decide which of your gowns to wear to the assembly this month when you meet him.”



In the days leading up to the assembly, Mrs. Bennet talked of little else but their meeting Mr. Bingley at the ball. That he would fall in love with one of them was certain; the only question in her mind was which of her daughters he was most likely to fall in love with.

“Jane is the prettiest, without a doubt,” Mrs. Bennet insisted, “and she has the sweetest temper of all our girls.”

“But Lizzy is bright and has a better sense of humor than the rest,” Mr. Bennet was quick to answer.

“I know that Lizzy is your favorite, Mr. Bennet. She inherited her caustic wit from you. I can only hope her dark eyes will be enough in her favor for a man to overlook that.”

“Then again, perhaps Mr. Bingley likes a more robust girl. Our Lydia has quite filled out, almost as much as you did at that age,” Mr. Bennet chuckled.

Mrs. Bennet prattled on, not seeming to hear her husband. “Of course, Mary, poor dear, must rely on her accomplishments. It is well that she practices so diligently. But Kitty has a fair enough complexion. She will do well, I am sure, though she is not as handsome as Jane or Lydia.”

“Well, whichever of our girls Mr. Bingley chooses, I am certain he cannot go wrong. They are all just as silly as any of the other girls in the county.”

The girls' best gowns were spruced up with new lace and ribbons, and Mrs. Bennet spoiled them with new dancing slippers for the occasion. Besides their outward appearance, she took care also to coach them in how to make the best impression on the newcomer.

“Now when you are introduced, be sure to give him your prettiest smiles, and as you curtsy, lean forward just ever so slightly so that your bosom appears to the greatest advantage. And Mary, dear, you must not bury your nose in a book at all times. In fact, I forbid you from taking any books to the assembly. Lydia— now, Lydia!” Mrs. Bennet tried to catch the attention of her youngest, who was giggling and taking turns practicing her curtsy with Kitty as their mama had instructed, trying to see who could bend forward the lowest without falling over.

Kitty lost the contest and toppled over, taking her sister down with her. A raucous laughter erupted from both of them.

“Girls, really!” Mrs. Bennet scolded. “You must try to behave with some level of decorum. You cannot expect Mr. Bingley to like you if you fall all over at his feet!”

Elizabeth was laughing at it all. “Or perhaps a girl falling in his lap is exactly the sort of thing that would endear a man like Mr. Bingley.”

“Really, Elizabeth! Spare us your uncouth comments, and pray, do not make such speeches at the assembly, lest you drive away all the eligible men from your sisters!”

“What about me, Mama?” Jane asked. “What must I do?”

Mrs. Bennet cradled her eldest daughter's face in her hands. “You, dearest Jane, need only be yourself. You are already perfect. And if Mr. Bingley cannot like you, then I shall think him a very disagreeable sort of fellow.”

Elizabeth, though outwardly taking it all in stride with the same sarcastic teasing that her father displayed, was inwardly distressed by it all.

“This practice of hunting men as though it were some sport– it is disgusting!” she remarked to her elder sister, Jane, later on.

“Oh, Lizzy, you know Mama means well,” Jane smiled. “She only wishes us all to be happily settled down with someone who can provide for us when Papa is gone. Does not any mother wish the same for her daughters?”

“That is precisely my point. They all have the same goal– to snare a rich man so that their daughter can live in material comfort for the rest of her days.”

“Consider the alternative, to spend one’s days alone and in poverty. Would anyone wish that fate on their child?”

“I suppose not,” Elizabeth admitted. “But I, for one, would rather maintain my independence and live as a poor spinster than forfeit it all on a loveless match for the sake of comfort and prosperity.”



“Now girls, remember what I taught you,” Mrs. Bennet whispered as they entered the assembly room. “Be sure to give your best smile when Mr. Bingley is introduced to you.”

As a newcomer in the room, Mr. Bingley was easy to spot. His bright, reddish-blond hair stood out, as did the cheerful smile on his face. He was engaged in conversation with Sir William Lucas, whose daughters stood beside him, and a whole crowd of other ladies with their mothers stood nearby waiting to be introduced.

“We are too late! Now the other ladies will be introduced before us and none of you will have the chance to dance the first set with him,” Mrs. Bennet complained.

“Perhaps if you had not been so fastidious about our attire, we might have been on time,” Elizabeth pointed out.

Mrs. Bennet huffed. “Well, it is no fault of mine that your gloves were misplaced, Lizzy! You know you cannot appear at a ball without them.”

Jane asked, “Who are the man and woman standing beside Mr. Bingley?” She gestured at a tall, handsome man with dark hair and a lady with reddish hair the same color as Mr. Bingley’s.

“The lady must surely be Mr. Bingley’s sister,” Mrs. Bennet answered. “But as for the gentleman, I do not know.”

Mrs. Bennet’s friend Mrs. Jung came up beside them. “That gentleman is Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, of Pemberley. They say he owns half of Derbyshire. His income exceeds ten-thousand per annum!”

“Ten-thousand!” Mrs. Bennet’s eyes lit up.

Mrs. Jung nodded. “My nieces Emily and Theresa are visiting from Essex all winter. It would be a fine thing if either Mr. Darcy or Mr. Bingley were to take a shine to one of them. I hope to get matches for them both before the winter is over.” With that, Mrs. Jung returned to where her girls were standing among the crush of expectant ladies, leaving Mrs. Bennet angry and indignant that Mrs. Jung, whose husband was merely a dentist, could think of *her nieces* as having any chance of success where there were five beautiful Bennet daughters to compete with.

Chapter 2



Darcy could hardly hear his friend's comment over the din in the Meryton Assembly Hall. The floor was crowded with couples, grinning and clapping, their feet stamping to the rhythm of the sprightly country dance coming from the string quartet in the gallery above.

"What's that, you say, Bingley?" Darcy asked his friend over the roar of conversation and laughter adding to the noise of the dancing and the music.

"I said, I have never seen so many beautiful women in all my life!" The cheerful, ruddy-faced man exclaimed, coming closer to Darcy.

Darcy held back a smile. It was the same thing Bingley said wherever they went. He always found the women to be exceedingly beautiful, and Darcy knew it would not be long before Bingley found one in particular that would charm him completely.

"Come Darcy, I must have you dance," his friend urged. "I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner."

"There is not a girl in the room with whom it would not be a punishment to stand up with," he said bitterly.

Darcy hated these sorts of events. They were all the same. As soon as word got around that Mr-Ten-Thousand-A-Year-Darcy had graced them with his presence, the young ladies and their eager mamas began circling like vultures. Shortly after their arrival, the master of ceremonies had tried his best to persuade Darcy to be introduced to several of them, but Darcy had adamantly refused. Nevertheless, a number of them had flocked around him for several minutes, batting their eyes coyly, flirtatious smiles on their faces, each hoping to be

asked by him to dance, until one by one they had been claimed by other partners.

Bingley laughed. "Upon my word! I would not be so fastidious for a kingdom! They are all extremely pleasant, and several of them uncommonly pretty."

"You are dancing with the only pretty girl in the room. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles. You are wasting your time with me."

Bingley laughed and went back to the pretty blonde he had been dancing with.

Darcy continued to watch from a distance. *What was the girl's name again? Miss Beckett? No, Bennet*, he corrected himself. *The one with all the sisters.*

Just after the first set, Bingley had asked the master of ceremonies for an introduction. Apparently, Bingley had seen Miss Bennet during the first dance while he was paired with Miss Lucas and had been quite taken with her. *Miss Jane Bennet. Yes, that's her name*, Darcy recalled. He had been standing beside Bingley when they were introduced to her and her family. She had four sisters, but Darcy could not seem to recall their names. He looked around the room for them. The two youngest girls, both of whom were nearly the spitting image of their mother, albeit younger and thinner, were dancing gleefully with a pair of fellows. Darcy imagined that Mrs. Bennet might have once been pretty herself at their age. Another sister had taken out a book from her reticule and sat down on a bench, where, despite her mother's urging that she put it away at once lest she make herself appear unavailable to any men who might ask her to dance, she continued on reading, deaf to her mother's anxious pleas. Darcy's eyes searched the room for the last sister. He finally spotted her hiding in the back of the room on the side opposite him. She appeared to be avoiding anyone asking her to dance, having deliberately positioned herself where it was unlikely that she would be sought out. *What a strange family*, Darcy thought. He studied the girl's expression as she watched the dancing

and clapped along in time for amusement. There was a brightness to her deep, dark eyes that made the corner of Darcy's mouth turn up. *She is tolerable enough, I suppose,* Darcy thought to himself, *but not handsome enough to tempt me.*

"Hiding away in the corner already, are we?" A voice whispered in his ear. Darcy bristled. It was Bingley's youngest sister, Caroline. "Are you not going to dance tonight, Mr. Darcy? I thought you had promised to at least dance with me."

"I do not recall making such a promise."

"I thought you had said as much during dinner. And anyhow, it would be such a shame if you did not! We are friends after all, are we not?"

Darcy could not claim such. He saw her as nothing more than the sister of his good friend. But ever since they had been introduced a few years past, she had set her cap towards him. She was a prime example of the type of girl he wished most to avoid; a girl who never cared to know him personally, but always had her eye on his fortune. Still, he knew it would be bad manners to deny her, and that she would persist until she had her way. *Best to get it over with,* Darcy decided.

Wordlessly, he offered her his hand and led her to join the dance. Caroline's look of glee made Darcy instantly regret that he had capitulated so easily. Luckily, the second half of the set was already under way, so it would not be more than ten minutes and his obligation to her would be over. He would not, under any circumstances, give her the satisfaction of a second dance. Doing so would only encourage her obsession with him.

As they promenaded down the polished wooden floor of the assembly hall, Caroline attempted to make conversation with Darcy. But he hardly listened. His eyes kept being drawn, not to the matchmaking mamas or their bloodsucker daughters, all of whom were eyeing them with envy, but to that pair of dark eyes, watching him from the back of the crowd. That

second-oldest Bennet girl. Elizabeth, was it? Why was she not among the girls vying for his attention?

As soon as that set had ended, Darcy broke free from Caroline and tried to make his way towards Miss Elizabeth. He was pressed in on all sides by a group of young ladies, no doubt pressured by their mothers to make themselves readily available in hopes they would be graced next. Caroline attempted to follow him but was cut off by the other ladies and could not get close.

Darcy knew that the moment he set foot in the county, every mother with a single daughter between the ages of sixteen and thirty would be desperate to marry her off to him. It was the same everywhere he went. A person's fortune was all that anybody seemed to care about. Darcy shuddered, still remembering a time a few years back when an overzealous mother tried to trap him into marrying her daughter. And then there was the incident over the summer with his dear sister and that blackguard. *No, I will not submit my thoughts to that horror any longer, Darcy told himself. Georgiana is safe now. If only I could say the same for myself.*

Darcy looked at the eager faces around him and began to panic. Some were prettier than others, but none worthy of any notice. He glanced around for help. Bingley had apparently asked Jane Bennet to dance a second set. He was already lining up with her on the dance floor, looking like an adoring puppy dog. There would be no help from his quarter.

"Why Mr. Darcy, have you not chosen a dance partner for this set yet?" Caroline Bingley had caught up with him. "I am still available, as you can see."

Now Darcy was trapped between her and the gaggle of giggling geese surrounding him.

He realized it had been a mistake to dance with Caroline. Now that he had been seen dancing, he would be expected to dance the rest of the evening. There would be no escaping it. Failure to do so would put him in social jeopardy and ostracize him in the eyes of the neighborhood. But he

could not bring himself to ask Caroline a second time, nor to give any other greedy mothers their satisfaction. What could he do?

Through the crowds, Darcy spied Caroline and Charles Bingley's elder sister Mrs. Hurst. Early on, she had secured a seat near the punchbowl, where she intended to remain the whole night unless asked to dance by one of the men in her party. Her husband had already disappeared to the card room and would likely not reappear until it was time to leave or until his pockets ran empty. There was a small gap between the giggling group of women, and he took it.

"Louisa," Darcy said, startling Mrs. Hurst and causing her to drip punch down her dress. "Dance with me," he insisted, grabbing her arm before she could say no.

"Well, I suppose," she slurred.

They found their places just as the music began again. Louisa staggered through the steps. Twice, Darcy had to take her arm to ensure she did not crash into another dancer.

His eyes returned to that dark beauty who had kept him so entranced. He detected a smile on her face as she watched the dancing. Was she amused by him? He tried to keep his composure, but it was difficult, since he had to steer a drunken Louisa Hurst around the room.

He caught Caroline's eye as they went down the set. She looked visibly disappointed with her current partner, a gangly buck-toothed fellow with two left feet.

There was a break after that set so the musicians could take a rest. Some of the dancers left to see what was happening in the card room. Others mingled near the punchbowl or went to the tea room for a hot beverage and something to eat.

Mrs. Hurst staggered off to the card room to chastise her husband for leaving her alone all evening, slurping from her punch glass the whole way. Darcy saw Caroline looking for him again. He ducked into the crowd that was headed for the tea room, hoping she did not see him.

The tea room was smaller and therefore even more crowded than the assembly room had been, since now most of the throng was gathered there.

Darcy selected a savory bacon-wrapped oyster off the tray and took a cup of tea from a servant that offered it to him. Finding his way to the corner of the room, he hoped Caroline could not find him. He inched his way backwards to the wall until he came upon something soft and squishy.

“Careful there!” a voice cried.

The voice came from none other than the dark-haired Bennet girl, who had herself sequestered in that very corner, trying to enjoy some tea and a few nibbles.

“Miss Elizabeth, please excuse me,” Darcy apologized, hoping he had her name right.

“You have the right idea,” she said, “trying to hide out in the corner. It’s dreadfully crowded this evening, isn’t it?” A beguiling smile spread across her face and made Darcy’s heart thump. “Don’t worry, I won’t give away your position if I see her.”

“Who?”

“The one you’re hiding from. Mr. Bingley’s sister. Miss Bingley, I should say. Not the older one,” she clarified.

“You saw that, then?”

“Oh yes. It was quite amusing, really.” Miss Elizabeth took a sip of her tea, a twinkle in her eyes.

Darcy seized the chance to ask her the question that had been burning in his mind all evening. “I noticed you have not danced at all this whole evening.”

“An astute observation.” Elizabeth cocked her head to one side.

“And you have positioned yourself so as to be unapproachable by any young men who might be inclined to ask you to dance.”

She nodded. "Also correct."

"If it is not too bold, might I ask why? On a night like this, why would a young lady such as yourself not want to dance?"

Elizabeth glanced up at him. "I am doing the very same thing you are doing, Mr. Darcy." The amusement on her lips drove him to distraction.

"And what is that, pray tell?"

"Trying to avoid being maneuvered into the matchmaking frenzy by an overzealous mother."

The surprise on Darcy's face made her laugh, so she continued. "I have watched you, this evening. You are not eager to be set upon by any of the eligible ladies here. And I, as you might have seen," she gestured to Mrs. Bennet on the other side of the room, who was chatting up Mr. Bingley with a blushing Jane standing beside her, "I have an overzealous mama who will do anything to make a good match for her daughters. It has been some time since any wealthy men passed through Meryton. My mother has behaved like a starved vulture from the moment she learned that Mr. Bingley was to lease Netherfield Park. You were not in the room for five minutes before it became known that your fortune is double that of your friend's. I have no doubt that my mother is only biding her time before she throws me at you."

"Yes, I am sure my ten-thousand a year holds no draw for you," Darcy said with a wry laugh.

"Were I the mercenary sort, I am certain it would!" Elizabeth joined his laugh. "Do not mistake me, Mr. Darcy. I am sure you are a good sort of person who will make your wife very happy one day. But I would never marry a rich man whom I didn't love, and I shall not make a fool of myself by allowing my mother to push me into such a match for her sake. Only the deepest love could persuade me into matrimony. Which is why I shall probably end up an old maid." There was a twinkle in her eyes as she said this.

“Surely you don’t mean that,” Darcy let out a small chuckle.

“Oh, I do.”

“I mean, there will come a time when someone or other will capture your heart.”

“Well, best of luck to any man who wishes to try!” Elizabeth smiled, raising a small cheer with her tea cup. “But what of you, Mr. Darcy? Have you no wish to settle down and find a suitable wife to make mistress of your grand estate?”

Darcy shook his head. “So far, the only women I have met are interested in nothing more than my sizable estate. Until I can find a woman who loves me for me, and not my wealth, I would rather remain a carefree bachelor. So, I suppose you and I are alike in some ways, Miss Bennet.”

“Indeed, we are.”

Darcy found Miss Elizabeth to be singular. Certainly, she differed from the women who usually associated with him, who all made it clear they desired his money more than getting to know who he was as a person. Caroline was a model in that respect, a prime example of the sort of woman who looked at Darcy and saw a fortune, a prestigious family line, and a vast estate, rather than a man.

An idea flew into Darcy’s brain. A crazy thought, if he ever had one. And why not? What had he to lose?

“I have a proposition for you, Miss Elizabeth.”

“A proposition? How shocking!” she teased, her eyes dancing with mirth.

Darcy felt his cheeks pink. “Nothing of that sort, I assure you. Everything will be entirely proper. What I am suggesting is, you and I be each other’s cover. A way to throw off all the matchmaking mamas, including your own.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrow went up and a grin spread across her pink lips. “I am intrigued.”

“We shall *pretend* to court,” Darcy said. “If I am paying exclusive attention to you, then all the other mothers in the village and thereabouts will have no choice but to desist in throwing their daughters at me.”

“And my own mama will be satisfied with the notion that I have captured a rich man!” Elizabeth laughed in glee. Then she stopped short. “But what about as time goes on? If you pay me too much attention, you will be honor-bound to make me an offer. My father would see to it, I am sure, as would my mother. I would not have you trapped so, sir.”

Pleased to hear her say such a thing, Darcy pondered a moment. He snapped his fingers. “When things begin to get too heated, I shall simply leave town, go to another place. It happens all the time, you know, when a young man is seen paying too much attention to a woman he does not plan to marry. He goes away from that area, and after a while, the talk dies down and nobody expects him to come back and propose. And that puts an end to it all.”

Elizabeth thought for a moment. “Hmm. The idea does have merit. When would this proposed departure take place?”

“I do not know. At the moment, I have no pressing business concerns. I am Bingley’s guest, and I am here to help him establish his own household at Netherfield. I always supposed I would stay until the Season, but there is nothing that would prevent me from going to London early, especially as I will likely be making short journeys there from time to time to attend to my business.”

Elizabeth nodded. “It is but a half-day’s ride.”

“Indeed,” Darcy agreed. Their plan seemed to be shaping up nicely. But Elizabeth had a few questions.

“How will we arrange our meetings? It is too risky to send a message.”

“No,” Darcy agreed. “But I am sure we shall meet often enough. No doubt your mother will issue us an invitation soon, if she is anything like you have described. And I can certainly

persuade Bingley to invite your family over to Netherfield for a visit. He has even talked of giving a ball this autumn.”

“And there are sure to be other engagements with our mutual acquaintances in the neighborhood during which we may meet,” Elizabeth added.

“All I need to do is ensure that at every opportunity, I single you out when we are together in company,” Darcy said. “If people see us talking together, dancing together, then they will naturally make assumptions about us. It is quite simple, really!”

“Well then! To that point, why not begin this evening?” Elizabeth linked her arm in his. “I hear the musicians tuning their instruments for the next set.”

Darcy smiled. “May I have this dance, then, Miss Elizabeth?”

“You may!” She beamed.

The crowd followed the faint strains of violin, viola, and cello back into the assembly room. To the astonishment of everyone in the room, and the envy of nearly every woman there, Mr. Darcy took his place beside Elizabeth at the front of the line. The scowl on Caroline’s face nearly matched the green of her dress, and Darcy thought he saw one poor girl weeping into her mother’s shoulder. Mrs. Bennet, however, was full of glee. Seeing her next- eldest daughter dancing with the richest man in the room— and in all of Derbyshire— was enough to make her forget her displeasure at the fact that Mr. Bingley had asked Mary King to dance with him on this set.

“Our plan seems to be working,” Elizabeth whispered as the Polonaise began.

“Quite so.” A grin like a Cheshire cat spread across Mr. Darcy’s face.

Chapter 3



Mrs. Bennet was beside herself.

“Ten thousand a year!” she squealed. “And I have heard that his estate is the grandest in all of Derbyshire. Pemberley. Doesn’t the name just drip off your tongue like honey?” She threw herself onto the settee and laid back dramatically. It was the morning after the ball, and Mrs. Bennet was still reveling in the evening’s triumphs.

“It isn’t the *grandest* in all of Derbyshire. You’re forgetting Chatsworth, and Haddon, and Hardwick, and others,” Elizabeth pointed out.

“Well,” Mrs. Bennet huffed. “It is certainly *one* of the grandest, and you shall be very lucky to have it! Oh, just imagine the fine carriages you will have! The jewels! Ohhhh....” she fanned herself to keep from fainting over the excitement.

Elizabeth could not help smiling. “Mama, you speak as if I am already engaged. It was only two dances.”

“Dancing is a certain path to falling in love, my dear. I saw the way Mr. Darcy looked at you. Ooh, I always knew my beautiful girls were destined to fall in love with wealthy men. And so handsome, too! Such a fine, tall man Mr. Darcy is. So well poised. And Jane, dear!” Mrs. Bennet turned to her eldest and gave her a squeeze. “Mr. Bingley is very handsome too! I never saw such a pleasant countenance on a young man!”

“Nor I,” Jane blushed. “He is everything a young man ought to be.”

“Indeed!” her mama beamed.

“Do you like him then?” Elizabeth asked.

Jane nodded. “Very much.”

“And it is almost certain he likes her too,” Mrs. Bennett added. “He danced with her *twice*, after all. It is a pity he had to dance with some of the other young ladies too. It displeased me very much to see him dancing with that Mary King girl. And Miss Lucas too, who he danced with in the first set. Why, if she thinks she can get her hooks into him—”

“Mama, calm yourself,” Elizabeth chided. “Jane was the only one he danced with twice.”

Mrs. Bennet sighed, her mouth turning upwards. “You are right, of course, Lizzy. Even Mr. Darcy did dance with others, though they were his friend’s sisters. I suppose he felt obligated to dance with *them*. At any rate, I am glad that neither of Mrs. Jung’s nieces prevailed in their quest to dance with *him*, though I believe Mr. Bingley did dance the last number of the evening with one of them.”

Mr. Bennet gave a huff from the chair where he was reading his newspaper. “If these gentlemen had any compassion on *me*, they would have sprained their ankle in the first set.”

“Such harsh words, Mr. Bennet!” his wife chided. “Surely you, of all people, do not wish to see your daughters alone, unwedded, thrown into the hedgerows before you are cold in your grave. Because that is what will happen if they do not make a good match, you know. This is a most excellent opportunity for our girls! Two gentlemen, thrown into our lap. Of course, they might have the opportunity to meet *more* gentlemen, if you had been willing to go to London for the Season in *any* year.”

Mr. Bennet hardly heard a word from his wife’s lips. He had already turned his attention back to his newspaper.

Mrs. Bennet returned to the subject of the ball. “By the way, Lizzy, where were you the whole first half of the evening? I looked for you everywhere, but I did not see you at all. Not until you appeared on Mr. Darcy’s arm in the second half.”

“Oh, er, I was there. Watching.” Lizzy muttered. But her mother did not hear because at that moment, her youngest daughters burst into the room, their bonnets still dangling around their necks.

“Oh, Mama!” Lydia exclaimed. “We have just heard the best news from Aunt Phillips!”

“Well tell me quickly, my love!”

“The militia are to be quartered here—” Kitty began.

“— All winter!” Lydia finished for her.

“Oh my!” Mrs. Bennet pressed a hand to her heart.

Lydia began skipping around the room. “You know what that means, of course!”

“Officers!”

Kitty nodded. “In splendid red coats!”

“And there are sure to be some who are handsome!” Lydia added.

“Bless me, if there wasn’t a fellow who was made handsome by donning a red coat!” Mrs. Bennet sighed. “I confess, girls, there was a time when I too was turned by the sight of a red coat. My heart does still pitter-patter, even today.” She pressed her hand to her heart.

“This will be the most exciting winter we have had in a long while!” Lydia clasped her hands and sighed. “I hope they will come to some of the assemblies.”

Kitty bowed to her, pretending to be an officer. “Might I have this dance, Miss Lydia?”

“Why certainly, Lieutenant!” Lydia playfully accepted her sister’s hand. They began sashaying down the length of the drawing room in a gleeful jig, nearly colliding with Mary when she entered the room.

“What is going on?” she asked. Her sisters and mother gave her the news.

“Well!” Mary said in reply. “I am glad, for your sakes, that there is diversion beyond the arrival of Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy. My ears would soon grow tired of hearing of them if there were not some other news to entertain besides.” And with that, she went directly to her instrument and began a loud concerto.

The bell rang, and Mrs. Bennet raced to the front window to see if it might be Mr. Bingley or Mr. Darcy, come to call.

But it was only Charlotte Lucas. She came bearing an invitation to Lucas Lodge for dinner that week.

“Mr. Bingley and his guests will be there.” Charlotte winked at Elizabeth, who turned a shade or two darker for it.

“What consequence is that to me?” Elizabeth said archly, settling herself on the morning room settee. Her guest sank down beside her. The others had wandered off in search of other pursuits, since the guest had turned out to be nobody more interesting than their longtime neighbor.

“Only that a certain tall, dark, and handsome fellow will be among them,” Charlotte pointed out.

“You don’t say! And here I was, thinking I might have to content myself with the presence of poor Mr. Buckland,” Elizabeth chuckled.

“Yes, ‘Bucky’ Buckland.” Charlotte stuck her upper teeth out in imitation of the buck-toothed fellow that had earned the nickname. “I saw Caroline Bingley dancing with him at the ball. It is a wonder she agreed to it.”

“I think she was rather hoping for a second dance with a certain gentleman and did not want to put herself out of power to dance the rest of the evening when Bucky asked her.”

“I observed she did not succeed in her quest,” Charlotte cast a glance at Lizzy. “But you did. *Twice*, you stood up with Mr. Darcy last night.”

Elizabeth's mouth turned upwards mischievously. She took two teacups from the sideboard and poured a cup of tea for each of them.

Charlotte accepted the cup and leaned in closer on the settee as Elizabeth sat down again. "He danced with no one else besides his own party, and yet he asked you a second time. How did you manage it, when so many others were contending for the honor of being his partner?"

Elizabeth shrugged, the amused expression still on her face. "I suppose he rather took a shine to me."

"Eliza, you sly fox!" Charlotte playfully swatted her bosom friend.

"Mama is— well, there are no words to describe Mama's feelings on the matter," Elizabeth laughed.

"I imagine she is already planning your wedding," Charlotte joined in. "And Jane's too! I saw her dancing with Mr. Bingley."

Elizabeth nodded. "He is quite an amiable man. And he seems to like Jane very much. Both men will add greatly to the interest of Meryton society, I am sure."

"So, do you hope to see more of him, then?"

"Who, Mr. Bingley?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, silly! Mr. Darcy!"

Elizabeth took a long sip of her tea. "Perhaps."

Charlotte grinned. "Eliza Bennet! I have never seen you so interested in a man before."

"True," Elizabeth admitted. "But then, there has never been a man in our neighborhood like Mr. Darcy."



Elizabeth found herself sitting next to Mr. Darcy at the Lucases' dinner a few nights later. Whether it was by Charlotte's design or pure coincidence, she knew not, but it pleased her, nonetheless.

"How are you liking Hertfordshire so far?" she asked.

Mr. Darcy wiped the sauce off his lips. "It is a pleasant place. Much pleasanter than I was expecting. The weather has been good, and we have shot many birds these past days."

Their conversation drifted from this point to all the sights that the county had to offer. Elizabeth recommended that Mr. Darcy ought to see the view from Oakham Mount at some point during his visit.

"It boasts the best view of Hertfordshire that one can find anywhere. You can see for miles around. If you have the time to visit it, it is well worth the climb."

"I should like that very much," he said.

Unbeknownst to them, Darcy and Elizabeth were under the observation of nearly everyone at the table, especially the eyes of Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Bennet. Caroline seethed with jealousy from the other end of the table, once again saddled with Bucky Buckland for company. Mrs. Bennet was so pleased at her two eldest daughters' good fortune, she would not cease bragging about it to her companion, Mrs. Jung, who bore it all with a tolerance bordering on irritation. The only two at the table who were completely oblivious to Darcy and Elizabeth were Jane and Mr. Bingley. The pair were so wrapped up in their own little world, it was as if the rest of the table did not exist. They carried on an animated conversation, not caring that their food was scarcely touched, until they noticed that the plates had been removed and dessert was brought out. All of a sudden, Bingley recalled his appetite.

"Goodness, would you look at that! I have forgotten to eat. Lucky there is baked custard and cake! Do you enjoy a good rum cake, Miss Bennet? Here, let me help you."

He helped her to a large serving of the cake, and another of the baked custard, and some jellies, besides, until Jane protested that she could not stomach so many sweets at one time.



After dessert, the women adjourned to the drawing room. Mary Bennet immediately went to the piano and began showing off her latest accomplishment.

“Early one morning, just as the sun was rising...” she sang in loud, off-key tones. Elizabeth stood in the corner and cringed. Must Mary always put on such a display?

“Your sister is a very *enthusiastic* performer,” a voice beside Elizabeth said. It was Caroline Bingley.

Elizabeth’s cheeks pinked. “Yes, my sister practices daily. It is her great delight to perform for others.”

“What a gift,” Caroline said evenly. “I must thank her for sharing her talents with us all.” Elizabeth could not discern whether the comment sprang from sincerity or sarcasm.

Charlotte Lucas sidled up to Elizabeth. “Do play something next, Eliza, lest Mary treat us to an encore.”

Caroline gave a slight chuckle. “Do you play then, *Miss Eliza?*”

“Only when forced.” Elizabeth grinned at Charlotte. “I am afraid my talents are not equal to my sister’s. I practice little, and therefore I play rather poorly.”

“Oh, that cannot be, I am sure!” Caroline exclaimed.

“Eliza plays rather well, I always say,” Charlotte nodded. “Do oblige us. And hurry, Mary is at the last refrain.”

“Yes, yes, you must indulge us with a display of your talents, Miss Eliza,” Caroline echoed.

Mary seemed a little put out that Elizabeth was taking over for her after only one song. Nevertheless, she yielded the piano seat.

Elizabeth began the opening notes to “Drink to Me Only,” just as the men rejoined the company. She saw Mr. Darcy’s eyes on her, and a sudden shyness came over her. She missed a chord, and there was a slight quiver in her voice which she hoped would go undetected. Steadying her nerves, she focused her attention back on the music and performed admirably.

As soon as her last note ended, Lydia and Kitty clamored for there to be dancing. Mary resumed her place at the instrument, eager to show off the new country dance she had been practicing. Elizabeth naturally found her way to where Mr. Darcy and Caroline Bingley were standing.

Caroline pasted on a smile. “Miss Lucas was right; you do play well, Miss Eliza. Much better than you give yourself credit for.”

Apparently, Caroline had no problem appropriating Charlotte’s nickname for her, which grated Elizabeth. She steeled herself and smiled back.

“Thank you, Miss Bingley, though I am not certain I deserve the praise.”

“At least we know there is *some* talent in the Bennet household.” Caroline hid her smile behind her hand.

Mr. Darcy spoke up. “You have a lovely voice, Miss Elizabeth.”

His praise brought the warmth to Elizabeth’s cheeks again as she muttered her thanks. Why was Mr. Darcy affecting her so?

At that moment, Charlotte’s father, Sir William Lucas came by.

“Here I find three young people, just standing about! Why are you not dancing with the others?”

He gestured to the center of the drawing room, where Kitty and Lydia and their partners had been joined by Jane and Bingley and Maria Lucas, who was dancing with Bucky Buckland.

Caroline sniffed. “I am afraid I have little love for country dances; I find them a bit undignified.”

“I do not mind a country dance,” Elizabeth said, “but I am better at a Scottish reel.”

“Ah, then I must see you and Mr. Darcy dance a reel!” Sir William exclaimed.

Mr. Darcy bowed to Elizabeth and held out his hand. “If I may?”

Elizabeth took his hand. A shiver ran up her spine. This is what they planned, was it not? To put on a display for the benefit of Elizabeth’s mother and all the other mothers in the county?

“A reel, please, Miss Mary!” Sir William called, as Mary’s country dance concluded. Mary sighed, but obliged, beginning a well-known Scottish tune.

Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth joined the couples in the open part of the drawing room. As Mr. Darcy whirled Elizabeth around, arm in arm, Elizabeth caught a glimpse of Miss Bingley’s face. Her lips pursed with a look of having eaten sour lemons. Elizabeth had to hold back a smile. As they turned to face the other side of the room, Elizabeth saw her mother among the group of onlookers. She was clapping along with the reel, her face pure exultation in seeing four of her five daughters dancing, especially since two of them were paired with the wealthiest men in the room. She sat next to Mrs. Jung, whose nieces were sitting down without a partner. Elizabeth felt rather sorry for them. Though they were pretty enough, and though they could draw and embroider with a reasonable modicum, they didn’t have a penny to their name. They would

be lucky to draw the attention of a townsfellow like Bucky Buckland. As one whose dowry was also somewhat paltry, Elizabeth could sympathize with them.

As if reading her thoughts, Mr. Darcy remarked, “Mrs. Jung looks rather defeated. I suspect she wishes I had asked one of her nieces to dance, instead of you.”

“You would certainly make her night if you asked Emily or Theresa to dance next,” Elizabeth suggested.

“Ah, but that might raise false expectations. As of right now, I have only your own mother’s expectations to contend with.”

Elizabeth giggled. “I do believe our plan is working. I daresay she is already planning our wedding. She has probably settled on the date, the menu, and the flowers, and has only to decide whether I would look better in pale blue chintz or yellow silk.”

“The yellow,” Mr. Darcy said, a glint in his eyes, “would set off your dark hair and eyes. Though I daresay you would look equally well in blue.”

Despite knowing that he was jesting, Elizabeth flushed.

Returning his tease, she said, “But what if I prefer to wear green instead?”

“Oh, well in that case, you must disappoint your mother. A bride must be allowed to choose her own wedding dress. Besides, you will look well in any color.”

“How disappointed she will be, when she learns that a wedding is not to take place at all. Not between us, at any rate. She may have to console herself with seeing another daughter make a conquest, though her fortune will only be half of what I might have had.” Elizabeth winked.

Darcy followed Elizabeth’s eyes to Jane and Bingley, who were dancing beside them. A frown appeared on his face, but Elizabeth failed to see it.

Mr. Darcy's frown did not escape Caroline Bingley's attention, however. After the reel ended, she came up behind Mr. Darcy, who had retreated to the opposite side of the room, where he could watch Elizabeth chat by the fire with Miss Lucas.

"It is insupportable to spend so many evenings in such a society as this," Caroline remarked. "These country folk are so noisy, yet so bland! I am sure you too find them very dull. I long to hear your strictures on them."

"Your conjecture is incorrect," Mr. Darcy answered. "My mind was more agreeably engaged. I have merely been meditating on the pleasure which a pair of fine eyes on a pretty face can bestow." His gaze was still fixed on those eyes, now glistening in the firelight as their owner talked with her friend.

"The Bennet girls are enchanting, are they not?" Caroline simpered. "Their smiles, quite *bewitching*. The younger ones strongly resemble their mother. She will make a charming mother-in-law, I daresay."

"Come again?" Mr. Darcy blinked, startled.

"I observe that Miss Elizabeth has become quite a favorite of yours. Tell me, when am I to wish you joy?"

Mr. Darcy laughed. "A woman's imagination is very rapid. She jumps from admiration to love, from love to matrimony in a moment."

"I am not the only one who shares these feelings. Mrs. Bennet has made no secret of her expectations, despite it being only your second meeting with their family. I would fear that you are being taken in, but I have witnessed your particular attention to Miss Elizabeth, and since I know that you never toy with women's hearts, I must presume you are in earnest."

"Taken in— why, no, nobody is taking me in," Mr. Darcy shook his head.

"Then you know that Miss Elizabeth, with her fine eyes and all, is only interested in your ten-thousand a year. I have heard it spoken of."

“Miss Elizabeth, I am certain, holds no ulterior motives,” he retorted.

“Can the same be said of her sister?” Caroline asked.

Darcy looked to the other end of the room, where Miss Bennet had settled on the settee next to Bingley. She was smiling, but her posture was very prim. She had looked very animated during her dances with Bingley, but that might have been due to her enjoyment of the dance more than who her partner was. Darcy had observed them both during dinner, and while Bingley had talked a great deal and with exuberance, Miss Bennet’s demeanor had remained demure. Darcy knew that Miss Elizabeth was not interested in marrying for money, but Miss Bennet was another story. Could she merely be following her mother’s orders to snare a wealthy man? It was well-known in Hertfordshire that the Bennet girls’ dowry was but a pittance, and that their estate was entailed onto a distant cousin. Mrs. Bennet must surely be desperate to marry her daughters off well, and Jane Bennet appeared to be just the sort of dutiful daughter who would cooperate with her mother’s machinations to achieve her goals.

Darcy shook these troublesome thoughts from his mind. “Miss Bennet seems to be a good sort of girl, well-liked by everyone she meets.” he told Caroline. “And we all know your brother to be an agreeable fellow. There is no reason to assume that there is anything disingenuous about Miss Bennet’s response to his attention to her.”

“Yes,” Caroline said slowly, her lips pursing. “Miss Bennet seems to be a dear girl; I will own that. I must extend an invitation for her to visit Netherfield soon, so that we may know more of her.” A smile teased at the corners of her lips.

Nearby, Mrs. Bennet was busy extolling the virtues of her eldest daughter to Mr. Bingley in a loud voice.

“I do not like to boast of my own child, but one does not often see anybody better looking than my Jane. It is what *everybody* says.” She patted Jane’s shoulder affectionately, causing Jane’s cheeks to pink.

“I could hardly agree more,” Bingley replied, looking at Jane with an adoring gaze.

“Of course, I do not trust my own partiality,” Mrs. Bennet went on. “When she was only fifteen, there was a gentleman at my brother Gardiner’s in town *so much* in love with her, that my sister-in-law was sure he would make her an offer before we came away.” She failed to see the visible discomfort her statement gave her daughter. Elizabeth noticed, however, and leaving her seat beside Charlotte, came to stand next to Jane, taking her hand.

Mrs. Bennet continued her prattle. “But, however, he did not. Perhaps he thought her too young. However, he wrote her some very pretty verses.”

“And so ended his affection,” Elizabeth interrupted impatiently. “I wonder who first discovered the efficacy of poetry in driving away love!”

Chapter 4



Over the next few weeks, Darcy and Elizabeth saw each other frequently at dinner parties and card parties, and twice they spoke to each other at church. With each passing occasion, it became increasingly obvious to the poor eligible ladies of Meryton and their matchmaking mothers that Darcy had set his sights on Elizabeth. Likewise, Bingley seemed to only have eyes for Jane. Seldom were the two apart at any function. The Bennet sisters' good fortune was soon talked of all over Meryton, and everyone expected that if things continued as they did, it would only be a matter of time before one of them had an engagement to announce.

Even Charlotte Lucas commented on it to Lizzy one day.

"Any day now, we expect to hear good news from Longbourn."

"I am sure I do not know what you mean, Charlotte," Elizabeth replied.

"Don't you?" Charlotte chortled. "I wish you well, you and Jane, whichever of you should succeed first with your gentlemen. But perhaps you may tell me as a friend, have there been any offers yet?"

"Offers! Why, we have only been acquainted with Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley these three weeks, and already you expect a proposal! I can assure you that neither Jane nor I have any such notions after such a short period. Three weeks is hardly enough time to determine one's future spouse."

"Ah, well, if I were you, I would not dally too long. You and Jane ought to snap them up quickly, before any other eager ladies do. That Miss Bingley, for instance, looks as though she would not hesitate to take your place as Mr. Darcy's favorite, and you can be sure that both Emily and

Theresa Jung would be overjoyed to marry someone like Mr. Bingley.”

“Snap them up,” Elizabeth laughed. “You speak as if Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were dishes to be devoured. I admit, I have enjoyed the time I have spent getting to know Mr. Darcy, but I am in no hurry to rush to the altar. And as for Jane— well, she has hardly had time to know her own feelings in the matter, let alone decide the course of her future.”

“A pity, then. If she has any feelings for him, then she would do well to act. In nine times out of ten, a lady had better show more affection than she feels. There are few among us who can be properly in love without a little encouragement. Bingley likes your sister, undoubtedly. But he may never do more if she does not help him on, as you have done with Mr. Darcy.”



The only one who did not give up hope was Miss Bingley. In fact, the more attention that Mr. Darcy lavished on Elizabeth, the more envious Caroline became, and the more determined she was not to lose him to her rival. In her mind, she was, in every way, superior to Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth Bennet had the charms of being a new acquaintance, but she, a longtime friend, had a prior claim. She would show Mr. Darcy that Elizabeth was inferior, and then his choice would be easy.

Caroline Bingley soon issued an invitation for Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth to join them for dinner at Netherfield.

This made Darcy happy. He told himself that this dinner would be the perfect opportunity to show Caroline that his interest lay not with her. Over the past few days, she had been especially troublesome. She followed him around to such a

degree that he could scarcely get a moment to himself without hiding in his chamber. If he wrote a letter, she wanted to stand beside him and comment on it. If he went for a walk or a ride, she suddenly felt herself in need of exercise. If they hunted, she wanted to watch. If he chose to read a book, she asked to hear what it was about and peppered him with so many questions and comments that he found it impossible to focus. The only reason she wasn't hovering over his shoulder right then was the necessity of her speaking to Nicholls about the menu for dinner that evening.

Darcy saw another benefit of having the Bennet sisters coming to dine: the chance to observe Jane Bennet's interactions with Bingley more closely. The past few weeks, he had seen his friend falling head over heels in love with Jane. At first, Darcy had attributed Bingley's infatuation with her to be nothing more than a passing fancy, the same sort of fixation he usually had on whichever lady happened to be the prettiest in the room at the time. But this was different. This time it seemed that Bingley might really be in love. He spoke of her frequently when they were apart, made sure to attend any party where she would be present, and on the occasions that they were together, he spent the vast majority of the time talking or dancing with only her. Discerning Miss Bennet's feelings, however, was more difficult. She refrained from displaying the same level of emotion that Bingley so freely gave and left Darcy wondering whether she truly held his friend in any affection or whether she merely received his courtship at the instruction of her mother, who wanted her to marry well. Caroline's words at the Lucas party about being "taken in" by the Bennet sisters, though he had initially dismissed them, had continued to linger in his mind like a bad cough lingers after a cold. He could not seem to shake them. Up until now, he had always seen Jane and Bingley together in a large party. This would be the first opportunity to witness how she behaved towards him when they were in a smaller, more intimate setting.

At four o'clock, the Bennet sisters arrived, just as the clouds began to sprinkle. "Where is your carriage?" Caroline asked, seeing them together atop a poor old nag. Darcy tried not to laugh at the image of the two ladies squished together on one saddle.

Caroline whispered something indistinguishable to her sister beside her, and the two of them hid a small laugh.

"The horses were needed on the farm today," Elizabeth answered as one of the Netherfield footmen helped her down. The footman turned to help Miss Bennet next but was pushed aside by Bingley who helped her down instead.

"Only poor old Nellie could be spared to convey us here," Miss Bennet explained.

Caroline was shocked. "Your father ought to have spared a horse apiece, rather than have you arrive in such a fashion. Could he really not do with one less horse for a day?"

Elizabeth said, "He can do with one less on many a day, but on this day, he could not. The last of the harvest must be brought in, you see. There was a red sky this morning, and Father feels certain that heavy rains are coming. Already it is beginning to drizzle." Elizabeth held out her hand to catch the raindrops that were coming down more heavily now.

"Yes, yes. Where are my manners?" Caroline said. "You must come in."

Darcy offered his arm to Elizabeth so that she might ascend the steps to the entryway without slipping. Bingley followed suit with Jane.

Caroline, not to be left without an escort of her own, clung to Darcy's other arm. Her sister was left to fend for herself, scrambling up the steps, which were already growing slippery. The ladies had scarcely handed their coats and hats when the sky opened up and a full torrential downpour could be heard, pounding Netherfield's roof like the hooves of the cavalry.

Caroline grimaced. "Oh dear," she muttered to Louisa within Darcy's earshot. "I hope this rain will clear before our guests must return home."

Mrs. Hurst nodded, then went to wake her husband from his nap and inform him of their guests' arrival.

They had drinks in the parlour, followed by an elegant dinner featuring some of the quail and pheasant that Darcy and Bingley had shot recently. Darcy did his best to shower Elizabeth with attention and compliments, which only had Caroline vying for his attention.

"Mr. Darcy is the best hunter I've ever seen," Caroline exclaimed.

"I am adequate, but nothing to brag about," Darcy replied.

"Mr. Darcy is simply being modest!" Caroline went on. "Why, he shot all these little quail we are eating, and at least one of the pheasants, too. I was just telling Louisa, we've had better eating in the last few weeks than we've had the past twelve-month, and it's all thanks to Mr. Darcy."

Mr. Hurst grunted in response to his sister-in-law's comment as he chewed the meat off one of the tiny bacon-wrapped quail. "Mmm, good meat!"

"I thank you for your compliments, but Charles here shot far more than I. The storehouse is full of his birds at the moment."

Bingley only laughed. "Darcy is too humble to acknowledge it, but he is a brilliant shot. If he just put in the time, he could have beaten me for all the birds."

"Do you hunt often when you are at Pemberley, Mr. Darcy?" Elizabeth asked.

"Not as much as I would like," he admitted. "Too often, my business affairs keep me occupied. And besides, I do not like to hunt alone. I require company to properly enjoy my sport."

“Then next year, we must all go to Pemberley to help you make up a proper shooting party,” Caroline suggested.

“Of course,” Mr. Darcy nodded. “You would all be welcome.”

“Tell me about Pemberley,” Elizabeth prompted. “What is it like?”

“It is situated in the most beautiful park in the country, surrounded by woodlands and streams and its very own lake,” Mr. Darcy said, his face lighting up as he spoke. “It is a majestic place, and I would be honored to someday show it to you.”

“Just me?” Elizabeth asked teasingly.

“Just you,” Mr. Darcy replied.

“I should like that very much.”

“I would like that very much as well,” Mr. Darcy said.

Caroline’s eyes flashed with jealousy.

“I cannot wait to return to Pemberley. The month we spent there last spring was far too short for my liking. Next time, I hope you’ll ask us to stay longer, Mr. Darcy.”

“If you wish it.”

Turning to her brother, Caroline said, “Charles, when you build *your* house, I wish it may be half as delightful as Pemberley.”

“I wish it may.”

“But I would really advise you to make your purchase in that neighborhood and take Pemberley for a kind of model. There is not a finer county in England than Derbyshire.”

“With all my heart; I will buy Pemberley itself if Darcy will sell it.”

“I am talking of possibilities, Charles,” Caroline scoffed.

“Upon my word, Caroline,” Bingley laughed, “I should think it more possible to get Pemberley by purchase than by

imitation.”

“You know Mr. Darcy would never sell.”

“She is right,” Mr. Darcy agreed. “The house has been in my family for too many generations for me to think of parting with it. But there may be some other good estates whose owners are ready to let them go, to be done with the expense of it all.”

“I will certainly give good consideration to any estates that may be for sale near Pemberley. But at the moment, I must confess, I find myself falling in love with Hertfordshire.” Bingley smiled warmly at Jane, who returned his look with a demure blush.

“Hertfordshire is my favorite place,” Jane agreed. “But then, I have traveled so little, I cannot make a fair comparison against any other. Have you traveled much, Mr. Bingley?”

Bingley began to tell Jane of all the places he had seen. In the two years since he left Cambridge, he had spent his leisure time traveling to visit his university friends, and thus had been able to enjoy a wide variety of places across the country.

Darcy, meanwhile, engaged Elizabeth in a discussion about the latest poets. Caroline saw that she no longer monopolized the conversation, and asked Mr. Darcy a series of questions to draw his attention back onto her. Darcy answered them all very politely, but also included Elizabeth by asking her opinions as well. This irritated Caroline a great deal, and she was in a sour temper by the end of the meal.



The gentlemen had no desire to remain behind for cigars or brandy (aside from Mr. Hurst, who protested the loss of his

favorite vices), so they joined the ladies in the drawing room as soon as dessert had finished.

Outside, thunder shook the house, and great streaks of lightning flashed across the sky, visible from the large picture windows in Netherfield's stately drawing room.

"Just look at this weather," Caroline hissed beside Darcy, out of hearing of their guests. "Ooh, that woman!"

Darcy was bemused. "Who?"

"Mrs. Bennet. She must have known it would rain today when she allowed her daughters to travel without a carriage! If this downpour continues, I shall be forced to offer overnight accommodations to our guests!"

A brilliant move on Mrs. Bennet's part, if Caroline's theory were true, Darcy thought. Could such a scheme have been part of Miss Bennet's plan too?

True to Caroline's prediction, the rain held, and it was with bitter reluctance that she suggested the Bennet girls should stay the night.

Bingley was delighted. The rain was a perfect excuse for him to spend more time with Jane.

"I shall be sorry to see her go in the morning," he said under his breath to Darcy.

To the group he said, "Do let us stay up late and play cards. The rain won't be letting any of us sleep for a while, anyways."

Bingley's suggestion was taken, and while Mr. and Mrs. Hurst played opposite Jane and Bingley, Darcy found himself left to volley his attention between Caroline and Elizabeth.

"Oh dear," Caroline drawled. "There are many card games for two or four, but hardly any that can support three players. What shall we do?"

"I propose that you delight us with one of your sonatas, Miss Bingley, while I entertain Miss Elizabeth." Darcy felt

pleased with his suggestion. But Caroline turned the tables on him.

“Oh, I can show off my talents *anytime*,” Caroline said. “I must give way to my guest. Your performance the other evening was quite *delightful*, Miss Eliza. You must treat us to an encore. Something lively and bright, to chase away the gloom that this weather has cast on us. I will keep Mr. Darcy company with the Cribbage board while you play.”

Elizabeth went to the piano and started on a sprightly folk tune that Darcy had heard his sister perform often. He remarked on this to Caroline while she set up the game.

“Yes, I believe you are correct. I too have heard Georgiana perform this,” Caroline nodded. “Miss Eliza’s talents are nothing compared to Georgiana’s, though. It is clear she has not had the benefit of a good teacher, as Georgiana has, nor does she practice with as much diligence. What a pity, for if she did, she would not play at all amiss.”

“Her performance is imperfect, it is true,” Darcy admitted, “but she plays with liveliness, with feeling. It is a trait I have often commented to Georgiana that her performance is lacking. She often focuses so intently on the technical exactness of her performance that she forgets to enjoy herself.”

Elizabeth played through several numbers, earning praise and applause from the others.

Turning to Caroline, who had just been sorely beaten by Mr. Darcy in Cribbage, she said, “It is your turn now, Miss Bingley. My fingers need a rest.”

“Very well,” she agreed. Caroline launched into a difficult aria, singing the vocal part loudly in Italian as she played.

Over the shrill noise, Elizabeth whispered to Mr. Darcy. “I did not know we would be treated to an operatic performance this evening.”

“Miss Bingley is something else, is she not?”

“One could say that.” Elizabeth’s eyes twinkled.

In between the verses, there was an instrumental part, full of great, rolling arpeggios and large, two-handed chords, which Caroline played at the full *fortissimo* volume, making the whole drawing room vibrate and conversation impossible over her playing. The vocal part resumed, Caroline adding her shrieks to the thundering of her hands on the keys, before concluding the piece on a note held so high, it made Bingley’s hounds whimper in their kennels.

She had everyone’s full attention, their card games on hold for the present.

Her brother cleared his throat. “I say, Caroline, that was some performance! But perhaps you might play something a little quieter next?”

Caroline, satisfied that she had proven her musical superiority, played only the first movement of an adagio before returning to the sofa. Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy, seated on opposite ends, were engaged in a deep conversation together, but they stopped when she sat directly between them on the sofa.

“A commendable performance, Miss Bingley,” Elizabeth praised. “You must have had an excellent music master.”

She named a well-known Italian master, expecting Elizabeth to be impressed, but she had never heard of him. Mr. Darcy had, however.

“I believe my sister studied with him for a time as well, while she was at school in London,” he said.

“Ah, that would explain her superior playing!” Caroline exclaimed. “I have never seen a young lady so accomplished on the pianoforte and the harp as Miss Darcy.”

The others had now finished their card games. Mr. and Mrs. Hurst both went up to bed, but Mr. Bingley and Jane came over to join in the conversation.

Mr. Bingley spoke up. "It is amazing to me how young ladies have the patience to be very accomplished, as you all are." He sat down beside Jane on the two-person settee, eliciting a warmth in her cheeks as she scooted over to give him a respectful distance on the seat.

"All ladies accomplished! What can you mean, Charles?" Caroline sniffed.

Bingley chuckled. "Why, you all paint tables, and cover screens and net purses. I am sure I have never heard of a young lady being mentioned for the first time without hearing about her accomplishments."

"The word is applied too liberally," Mr. Darcy agreed. "Many a woman has had it attributed to her merely for the netting of a purse or the covering of a screen."

"Then," said Elizabeth, "you must comprehend a great deal in your idea of what it is to be accomplished."

"I do," Darcy affirmed.

"Indeed," Caroline agreed, eager to add her sentiments. "I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen women of my acquaintance who are *really* accomplished. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages to deserve the word. And besides all this, something in her air and manner of walking, her expressions and tone of voice."

"Goodness! I no longer wonder at your knowing only *six* accomplished women." Elizabeth laughed. "I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*!"

Darcy smiled at her. "These are all very well, but I would put forth that the most important way in which a woman may distinguish herself is to improve her mind through extensive reading."

"*'Dans une grande âme tout est grand'*." Elizabeth nodded.

Darcy looked at her with surprise. “Blaise Pascal. *‘In a great mind everything is great.’*”

“Oh,” Caroline tittered. “Do you speak French then, Miss Elizabeth?”

“No, not fluently, at least. But I do read a great deal. My father has an extensive library, which I confess is my favorite room of the house.”

“You are a great reader then, are you? I declare there is no enjoyment like reading! I would sooner tire of anything than a book.” Caroline professed. “When I have a house of my own, I shall be perfectly miserable if I have not a good library. You have a delightful library at Pemberley, don’t you, Mr. Darcy?”

“It ought to be. It has been the work of many generations.”

“It is a pity that our own father did not collect many books in his lifetime,” Bingley said. “Tomorrow, perhaps, if the rain continues, we may see what books there are. Perhaps we may find something to interest us.”

The others agreed.

Caroline, dissatisfied with the direction the conversation was going, changed tactics. She turned to Jane. “Do you draw at all, Miss Bennet?”

Jane, who was not expecting the attention to be turned to her so suddenly, stammered. “I— I draw a little, I suppose, though nothing exceptional. I enjoy sketching from nature.”

“How charming! You must let us see some of your drawings the next time we visit at Longbourn,” Caroline simpered.

Bingley bobbed his head. “Yes, I would very much like to see them!”

“Really, they are nothing to put on display,” Jane protested. “Some drawings of birds and flowers, done for my own amusement. I have not the talent in that area.”

“What is your talent then, Miss Bennet? Do you have any musical inclination?”

“None, whatsoever. I do enjoy dancing, however.”

“I will attest that Miss Bennet is an admirable dancer!” Bingley chimed in, earning him another blush.

“Jane can also embroider,” Elizabeth added. “In fact, she is quite good at it.”

“You embroider?” Caroline gasped. “That is delightful! I hardly know anyone who embroiders these days. You must show me some of your pieces.”

Elizabeth took out the handkerchief she kept in her dress pocket. “Here is the gift that Jane made for me on my last birthday.”

The handkerchief was passed around so that they might all enjoy her handiwork. The white linen had Elizabeth’s initials in green thread surrounded by a string of wild roses in shades of pink.

“That is an excellent piece,” Caroline commended. “I think we can add Miss Bennet to our list of accomplished women, can we not, Mr. Darcy?”

“Certainly, and Miss Elizabeth, too.”

“Of *course*,” Caroline emphasized.

Elizabeth objected. “I cannot claim to measure up to even half of the qualifications you mentioned in order to deserve the word.”

“But that which you lack, you make up for in your desire to improve your mind. Did we not agree, ‘*Dans une grande âme tout est grand*’?”



Before going to bed that night, Jane visited Elizabeth in her room.

“Mr. Bingley must be very pleased to have you here under his roof!” Elizabeth remarked.

“I wish there was some way to get word to Mama and Papa,” Jane said. “They will be so worried when we do not return home!”

Elizabeth smiled. “If I know Mama, she will be pleased that we are here and will not be worried in the slightest. In fact, I would imagine she calculated the probability of the rain when she insisted we take old Nellie and is at this very moment congratulating herself that we must now stay the night, just as she planned.”

“You do not seem displeased with the situation yourself,” Jane pointed out. “I have noticed you do not refuse Mr. Darcy’s attention, though you have rebuffed every other gentleman that has come into our midst.”

“Mr. Darcy is...tolerable. I find he is not stupid like most of the other fellows. He speaks of books and music, of poetry, philosophy, and theology, as well as outdoor pursuits. There are some fellows who care for nothing except their sport and their food and drink. I find those men intolerably insipid.”

“Men like Mr. Hurst, you mean,” Jane smiled.

“Exactly!” Elizabeth giggled. “I do at times feel sorry for Mrs. Hurst, being married to such a man. I do not think their marriage is quite a happy one.”

“Mrs. Hurst does seem to prefer the company of her bottle to that of her husband,” Jane observed. Turning the subject back around, she said, “So, you like him, then?”

“Mr. Hurst?”

“No, silly! Mr. Darcy!”

“I suppose so. But not as much as you like Mr. Bingley, I believe,” Elizabeth said in a teasing voice.

Jane's cheeks flushed a bright pink. "I do like him. I like him very much. But, well..."

"What is it?" Elizabeth was surprised by the sudden hesitation in her sister's voice.

"I cannot be too quick to give away my heart this time. I did so once, and I regretted it."

"This is not the same. Mr. Bingley is not like..." Elizabeth trailed off.

"It is all right, Lizzy, you can say his name. It has been seven years. Mr. Grayson."

"Yes, Mr. Grayson." There was a sober moment between the sisters.

"Jane," Elizabeth began. "I know that you regret giving your affection to Mr. Grayson so freely at that time. But I do not believe that Mr. Bingley is the sort of man who would toy with a woman's affections and then leave without a word. Bingley likes you, truly, I am certain of it."

"I hope so, Lizzy. I do not know that my heart can bear to be broken a second time."

"Oh, Jane," Elizabeth sighed, pulling her sister into an embrace.

Chapter 5



It was still raining in the morning, though not as hard as the night before. Bingley dispatched a servant to assess the condition of the roads. His report was far from favorable. The river had flooded during the night, taking out the bridge, and cutting Netherfield off from the route to Meryton. The only other ford across the river was some ten miles downriver, and with the level the river had swelled, it was likely that too was impassable. In short, the Bennet girls were stranded at Netherfield until the rains cleared and the bridge could be repaired. Caroline hoped that the rain would end quickly. She was already tired of having the Bennet sisters as guests and to put up with them for many days would put a strain on her good manners.

Since outdoor activities were out of the question, they took Mr. Bingley's suggestion to examine the library. The Netherfield library was small, mainly books about textiles and dyes, some history and philosophy, and a little classic literature. Jane chose a book about poetry and found a comfortable seat in the corner. Bingley soon joined her and asked her to read it to him. Caroline seemed to not know what book to choose.

Elizabeth browsed the literature shelf and found a copy of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Mr. Darcy came up next to Elizabeth. "Romeo and Juliet, eh? I never took you for a fan of the Bard, Miss Elizabeth."

Elizabeth smiled. "There is a lot you don't know about me, Mr. Darcy." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Caroline pretend to be looking for a book to choose but watching them with a big frown on her face.

“I think our plan is working,” Elizabeth whispered, low enough not to be heard by anyone but Darcy. “We have all the appearance of a couple in love.”

“Then we must sell it even more,” Darcy grinned, leaning closer and pretending to read over her shoulder.

“If I profane with my unworthiest hand this holy shrine, the gentle sin is this, my lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand to smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.”

Elizabeth laughed. Turning her head back to glance at him with a coy look, she answered “Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much, which mannerly devotion shows in this; for saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch, and palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss.”

Emboldened by their playful banter, Darcy whispered in her ear, “Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?”

To which Elizabeth replied with a twinkling eye, “Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.”

A murmured laugh escaped Darcy’s lips.

“Pray, do share with us, what is so funny?” Caroline walked towards them.

Elizabeth explained that they were quoting from Romeo and Juliet.

“Romeo and Juliet? Is that not rather banal?”

“Some of us would rather call it a ‘classic’,” Elizabeth retorted.

Caroline huffed. “It is not even a love story. It is a tragedy about two adolescents who know each other for three days and cause six deaths.” She crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. “Or have you not even read it?”

“I have read it. Though I am surprised that you have.”

“I saw it once,” Caroline admitted. “When our schoolmistress took us to the theater.”

“Then you must agree with me that it is one of the most beautiful and romantic works ever performed in the English language.”

Caroline sniffed. “I found it to be a great moral lesson on the follies of juvenile love. Juliet has an eligible and suitable match at her fingertips, a wealthy man whom her parents approve of, yet she throws her entire life away over a man she barely knows, whom her parents would never allow her to marry, all because of a few pretty words he says to her. Therefore, it is a tragedy.”

“She marries for love, rather than for money. It is a romance,” Elizabeth argued.

Bingley, who hated any sort of conflict, especially in his own house, jumped up. “Daggers down, ladies! Please! Can we not agree that it is both a love story *and* a tragedy?”

That ended the argument. Mr. Bingley asked his sister what types of books she liked, in order that he might help her find something to read, to which she replied,

“I prefer *La Belle Assemblée*, myself. There is nothing worth reading in this whole library, if you ask me.”

“I never took you for a magazine-lover, Miss Bingley,” Elizabeth said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Oh, indeed!” Caroline said, taking her at face-value. “I read all the major publications. I believe I may have a copy of *The Ladies’ Monthly Museum* up in my chamber, if you would like to borrow it. You may find some very useful advice on how to improve one’s sense of fashion.” She sniffed.

Eyeing Caroline’s hideous orange dress, the likes of which clashed with coppery hair and made her complexion appear like a piece of over-ripe fruit, Elizabeth smiled. “One can never have too much improvement in that regard.”

“To be sure,” Caroline replied, and went to fetch the publication directly.



Any hope they had of the rain letting up vanished quickly. The brief lapse which had allowed Bingley's servants to venture out to assess the condition of the bridge ended with another huge storm. This time, the rain continued with scarcely a pause for four more days. No repairs could be made on the bridge, nor could a safe route the long way around be navigated for either horse or carriage.

The company at Netherfield amused themselves with cards, music, and reading for the first two days, but by the third day, everyone was growing irritable and bored.

"Mrs. Hurst, would you care to join us for another round of cards?" Elizabeth asked. She, Jane, and Bingley were trying to find a fourth player. Mr. Hurst had taken to the sofa where he was snoring loudly, and Mr. Darcy had been compelled to turn pages for Caroline, who had picked out the longest suite in her repertoire in order to keep him by her side at the piano for as long as possible.

Mrs. Hurst looked up from her needlework and shook her head. "I would rather die than play another card game," she said dramatically. "La, I am so bored!"

Mr. Hurst let out an enormous snore, eliciting a look of disgust from his wife.

"There must be something we can do besides cards, watching Mr. Hurst snore, and listening to *that*." She gestured in the direction of her sister, whose screeching voice was belting out the final notes of yet another Italian aria.

"You do not care for music, Mrs. Hurst?" Elizabeth asked.

"It depends entirely on the performer. But in this case, I am so tired of hearing music, I am not sure I would even enjoy a performance from Beethoven himself."

This comment made her brother laugh. “Beethoven himself. That’s a good one, Louisa! But I confess I am growing rather tired of cards too.

“Well, what should we do instead, then?” Darcy asked, walking over to join the group as soon as Miss Bingley’s final note died down.

“How about a word game of some sort?” Elizabeth suggested.

“Oh, not a word game!” Caroline had abandoned her instrument in favor of being a part of the conversation now taking place. “I quite despise word games. Let us do anything but have a word game.”

“Well, what would you suggest, then, sister?” Mrs. Hurst demanded.

Caroline thought for a few moments before answering. “We could put on a play!”

The others thought this a splendid notion, but nobody seemed to agree on what play ought to be done. Darcy suggested *Hamlet*, but everyone said that was too dark. Bingley wanted the comic play *She Stoops to Conquer*, but Caroline wasn’t having it. Mrs. Hurst said perhaps *Fortune’s Fool*, another popular comedy, which they all readily agreed to, until it was discovered that nobody had a copy of it in the house.

“I know!” Caroline exclaimed. “Miss Eliza, you have been reading *Romeo and Juliet* have you not? Why do we not perform that one?”

The corners of Elizabeth’s mouth turned up. “Was it not you who said it was too banal?”

“Perhaps I was too hasty in my judgment. Shakespeare is, as you say, a classic.”

“But the play is no less tragic than his *Hamlet*,” Darcy pointed out.

“True,” Caroline agreed, “but as Elizabeth has asserted, it is also a romance.”

The housekeeper announced that it was time for luncheon, which roused Mr. Hurst from his slumber. During the meal, they discussed which parts they ought to play. It was agreed that since there were only seven of them, they should limit it to the principal roles. Jane immediately voiced a desire to be Juliet’s nurse, and everyone agreed it was probably the best role for her.

“I nominate Mr. Darcy to be our Romeo,” Caroline said.

“Hear, hear!” Mr. Hurst cheered over a leg of mutton and a glass of stout.

“Perhaps I might take on Juliet then,” Elizabeth volunteered.

Caroline looked miffed. “I had thought perhaps *I* might play Juliet.”

Mr. Darcy looked to the dark-haired beauty beside him. “I think Elizabeth ought to be Juliet. She has the complexion for it.”

“But Shakespeare never says what color Juliet’s hair and eyes are,” Caroline argued. “Anyone can play her. Even a Titian.” She patted her lustrous copper locks.

“If Caroline is keen, I am happy to concede,” Elizabeth said.

But Darcy had no interest in playing opposite Caroline. “Let Caroline be Lady Montague instead.”

“Lady Montague has only three lines!” Caroline complained.

Bingley, not wanting a full-blown war taking place in his house, stepped in. “Why don’t we hold an audition for the role of Juliet? Any lady who wishes to try can read Juliet’s soliloquy from Act 4, and the men will vote on who is the best Juliet.”

They finished their meal, then assembled in the drawing room. Mrs. Hurst declared she would take any role, especially a minor one, and Jane had already claimed her part, so it was between Elizabeth and Caroline. They flipped a sixpence, and the lot fell to Elizabeth to go first. She stood in the center of the drawing room and began, her voice almost in a whisper.

“Farewell. God knows when we shall meet again. I have a faint cold fear thrills through my veins,” she rubbed her arms as if to ward off a chill. “That almost freezes up the heat of life. I’ll call them back again to comfort me.—Nurse!—What should she do here?”

“My dismal scene I needs must act alone. Come, vial.”

At this point, Elizabeth grabbed a decorative bottle from an assortment of knick-knacks displayed on the side table. She held it up, pondering it, walking slowly to the desk at one end of the room.

“What if this mixture do not work at all? Shall I be married then tomorrow morning?” She picked up Darcy’s letter opener that he had left there, gazed at it pensively as if it were a sharp knife that she might plunge into her breast at any moment. Then she quickly put it back where it had lay.

“No, no, this shall forbid it. Lie thou there.”

Elizabeth continued on, pouring all her emotions into the role. She recounted every line perfectly, the script taking her back to the days when she and her sisters acted out scenes in their drawing room for entertainment. Elizabeth was always the lead, and it was always she who cajoled her sisters into performing with her. Her father had often jokingly remarked that it was a pity she had been born a girl, or she could have had a career on the stage.

Nearing the end of her monologue, Elizabeth went over to the large gilt mirror hanging above the mantelpiece and let out an enormous gasp, as if she had seen a spectral spirit there. She pressed her hand to her breast.

“O look, methinks I see my cousin’s ghost seeking out Romeo that did spit his body upon a rapier’s point! Stay, Tybalt, stay!” Elizabeth exclaimed, backing away from the mirror.

Picking up the bottle once again, she went to the empty settee across from her audience to deliver the final line. She held the bottle in front of her.

“Romeo, Romeo, Romeo! Here’s drink. I drink to thee.” With great dramatic force, she tipped the bottle up to her lips and threw her head back. Then, pretending to wobble as if she were growing dizzy and faint, she threw herself onto the settee and lay limp.

The audience clapped. “Bravo!” Mr. Bingley cried. “A fine performance, if I ever saw one.”

“I never knew you were such an actress, Miss Elizabeth,” Mr. Darcy complimented.

Elizabeth’s cheeks were flushed. “Well, I confess, I memorized all of Juliet’s lines when I was fifteen. I was quite taken with the play at that time.”

“Well, sister, it is your turn,” Bingley said to Caroline.

She let out a small sigh. “It is a difficult act to follow, I will grant. But I shall do my best.”

Caroline started out well, but she quickly began to forget her lines.

“The book! The book, if you please.” She insisted on being handed the copy of the script.

“My dismal scene I must...I *needs* must act alone. Come vial,” she reached for the bottle that Elizabeth had used as a makeshift prop, but in her effort to appear as dramatic as Elizabeth had, she dropped the bottle. Luckily, it landed on the carpet rug and did not shatter.

“Oh, drat!” Caroline exclaimed, breaking character yet again. She picked it up and continued. “What if this mixture do not work? Shall I be married again tomorrow?” She

stopped, trying hard to remember her next line. Memory failing, she grabbed the script again, flipping through and trying to find the right place.

“The knife!” her audience prompted.

“Oh. Right,” Caroline said. She sauntered over to the desk and picked up the letter opener. “No, no, this shall forbid it.” She put it back down. “Let it lie there.” She turned to go back to the center of the room, but her foot caught on the edge of the rug. “Oof!” she grunted as she fell headlong, barely missing the table with her head.

Her audience roared with laughter. Caroline scrambled to her feet. A loud “rip” was heard. Caroline glanced down and saw that there was a sizable rend in the lower part of her dress. She gasped.

Bingley wiped the tears from his eyes. “I think you had better admit defeat, Caroline.”

“Yes,” her sister echoed. “The real tragedy here is your performance!” Mrs. Hurst could not stop laughing.

Mr. Hurst was chortling so hard it looked like the buttons on his waistcoat might burst. Darcy, too, was clutching his ribs and trying to stem the flow of tears.

Elizabeth and Jane were trying hard not to laugh, but it could not be helped, it seemed.

Caroline, mortified, fled from the room.



Try as they might, they could not convince Caroline to act again after that incident.

“But it was your idea,” Mrs. Hurst said. “You can be Lady Capulet; I’ll play Lady Montague,” she offered. Still, Caroline refused.

After that, the whole scheme began to fall apart. Bingley was to play Mercutio and double as Friar Lawrence, but the number of lines he had to learn was proving difficult for him. Mr. Hurst had agreed to be Tybalt, since he had few lines and got to use a sword, but there was nobody to be Benvolio or any of the smaller parts.

As a whole, the play was beginning to prove more daunting a project than the party had anticipated. No one except Elizabeth and Darcy really knew their lines, and everyone was growing rather sick of the idea, despite their initial enthusiasm.

On the fifth day of the Bennet sisters' stay, the rain finally stopped and the sun came out. Bingley sent a crew of servants to inspect the bridge more fully and the damage was less than they had initially thought. Repairs would take about a day to make it operable. The Bennet sisters would be going home before long.

"It is a shame about the play," Jane remarked. "It would have been lovely if we had the time to pull it off before our departure."

"We can still have ourselves some entertainment," Bingley consoled. "In fact, instead of doing the whole play, why don't we just have Darcy and Miss Elizabeth reenact the famous balcony scene?"

"Just us two?" Elizabeth asked.

"Why not?" Darcy contributed. "After all, you already have your part memorized, and I have been working on that scene in particular. I am certain we could pull it off."

Jane nodded. "You could make use of the railing in the Great Hall, next to the staircase. Lizzy, you could stand above, with Mr. Darcy on the floor below, and the rest of us can set up chairs to watch."

Mr. and Mrs. Hurst both agreed that they could do with some entertainment. Mrs. Hurst had already emptied out Mr. Bingley's cellars and Mr. Hurst had nearly done the same with

the larder, and without their favorite comforts to soften their tempers, they were getting on each other's nerves with their bickering. Even just a scene from a play would be good, they said, to break up the monotony.

Caroline was the only one who was upset about the whole thing. She was still sore about not being Juliet, and her jealousy of Elizabeth was increasing daily.

The chairs were brought in from the dining room and arranged in the Great Hall facing the balcony. Mr. Darcy traded his usual trousers for a pair of tight-fitting pantaloons. His loose, white shirt he wore unbuttoned, exposing the smallest patch of dark, curly chest hair. Elizabeth could hardly be seen in her nightdress, even among friends, but she was persuaded by Jane to at least wear the white muslin dress that Mrs. Hurst offered. It was a little short, but it would do, they decided. She wore her hair down, and Jane helped her to braid some small sections and tie them together like a circlet around the crown of her head. Mr. Darcy fairly gasped when he saw Elizabeth appear at the railing overlooking the hall. The very image of Juliet, he thought.

The audience waited with bated breath for the performers to begin. All except Caroline, who was clenching her fan in her lap so hard that it broke and regretting that she had ever suggested the play.

Mr. Darcy looked up at the balcony, and began his soliloquy in a low, husky voice. "But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief, that thou her maid art far more fair than she: Be not her maid, since she is envious; her vestal livery is but sick and green and none but fools do wear it; cast it off."

Elizabeth rested her arms on the railing's edge with her head leaning on one palm. She stared off into the distance dreamily, as if she were lost in thought.

Darcy stepped closer and exclaimed, "It is my lady, O, it is my love! O, that she knew she were! She speaks

yet she says nothing: what of that? Her eye discourses; I will answer it. I am too bold, 'tis not to me she speaks: Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven, having some business, do entreat her eyes to twinkle in their spheres till they return. What if her eyes were there, they in her head? The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars, As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven would through the airy region stream so bright that birds would sing and think it were not night. See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand!" Darcy raised one hand longingly towards the balcony. "O, that I were a glove upon that hand, that I might touch that cheek!"

Elizabeth sighed to herself, and exclaimed, "Ay me!" She looked every bit the adolescent girl daydreaming of her Romeo.

Darcy drew nearer, hidden from view by the balcony overhanging.

"She speaks: O, speak again, bright angel! for thou art as glorious to this night, being o'er my head as is a winged messenger of heaven unto the white-upturned wondering eyes of mortals that fall back to gaze on him when he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds and sails upon the bosom of the air."

Now Elizabeth murmured aloud to herself. "O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name; Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, And I'll no longer be a Capulet."

Elizabeth continued on, declaring her love for Romeo and her wish that he were not a Montague, seemingly unaware that her declarations were being heard, until her Romeo made himself visible to her, swearing to throw off his name for her sake. Darcy then climbed the stairs onto the balcony next to Elizabeth. As the two swore their love to each other through Shakespeare's immortal script, their tender words drew tears from the eyes of Jane and Bingley and made Mrs.

Hurst regret that she had settled for marrying someone whose mouth would never utter such romantic speeches. Even Caroline felt the sting of envy to hear such words coming from the lips of Mr. Darcy to another, despite knowing that it was all for the scene. Only Mr. Hurst seemed unmoved by the performance, having dozed off into a half-stupor, or perhaps having learnt the art of sleeping with one's eyes open.

The lovers' vows exchanged, the lady had but one charge for her ardent suitor.

"Three words, dear Romeo, and good night indeed. If that thy bent of love be honourable, thy purpose marriage, send me word to-morrow, by one that I'll procure to come to thee, where and what time thou wilt perform the rite; And all my fortunes at thy foot I'll lay and follow thee my lord throughout the world." At this last line, Elizabeth grasped both of Darcy's hands in hers and looked deeply and passionately into his eyes.

Juliet's nurse, now happily played by the housekeeper, Mrs. Nicholls, began calling for Juliet in earnest from the upper gallery. The lovers made their parting speeches, neither one wishing the other to leave.

"Good night, good night! parting is such sweet sorrow, that I shall say 'good night' till it be morrow." Elizabeth touched Darcy's cheek. In a surprise move, Darcy leaned forward and planted a kiss on Elizabeth's cheek, which they had not rehearsed.

Flushed, Elizabeth exited their makeshift stage, while Darcy slowly climbed down the stairs. He stopped on the last step and gazed back up where his Juliet had been to deliver the final lines of the scene.

"Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast. Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest. The grey-ey'd morn smiles on the frowning night, chequering the eastern clouds with streaks of light; and darkness fleckled like a drunkard reels from forth day's pathway, made by Titan's wheels. Hence

will I to my ghostly Sire's cell, his help to crave and my dear hap to tell.”

Darcy finished his monologue with one hand gesturing to the balcony and the other pressed close to his heart. Their friends waited until he lowered his arm, then burst into applause of one accord.

“Wonderful, job, you two!” Mr. Bingley cheered as Elizabeth descended the stairs to join them.

Jane dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief. “Truly, I was touched.”

Even Caroline seemed a bit moved. “I will admit, that was rather good,” she said. For once, she left off any comments about how she thought she would have done a better job.

The others repaired to the drawing room for drinks while Darcy and Elizabeth went upstairs to change into their dinner attire.

“An admirable performance, Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy called from behind Elizabeth as they ascended the staircase.

She turned to face him. “Thank you, Mr. Darcy. I do believe we have really convinced them of our being a couple in love this week.”

Darcy smiled. “I was speaking of the scene just now, but yes, I think there is no question in their minds that we are courting.”

Elizabeth did not speak of the way that Darcy's Romeo had affected her. The passionate way he had spoken his lines to her, the way he looked at her as he said them, was so tender, so believable, she could almost feel he was really in love with her. And then there was his unexpected kiss— why had he done that? She knew that many performances of Romeo and Juliet did include a stage kiss during that scene, but it was not scripted, nor had she and Mr. Darcy rehearsed it that way. As Darcy turned to go upstairs, Elizabeth pressed her hand to her cheek, flushing from the memory of his lips there. She had to

remind herself that it was merely an act. It was all an act. They were not Romeo and Juliet. They were not even truly courting. It was all for show. And it was only a matter of time before the curtain would fall.

Chapter 6



The bridge was repaired at last, which meant that the Bennet sisters could finally return home. But while Elizabeth and Jane prepared to ride home on old Nellie, word came that Mrs. Bennet had arrived at Netherfield with the carriage to fetch them.

“Oh, my poor dears, I was so worried!” Mrs. Bennet half-sobbed, throwing her arms around her daughters. “When we heard the bridge was out, and we couldn’t reach you for *days*— oh, you cannot imagine my poor nerves!”

Bingley hid a chuckle. “I can assure you, Mrs. Bennet, your daughters have been well and safe, here at Netherfield.”

“Of *course*, they have,” Mrs. Bennet crooned. “Due to your *excellent* hospitality. I do not know *what* we should have done if the girls had been stranded anywhere but here. I must thank you, Mr. Bingley, for taking them under your wing and giving them shelter.”

“It was the least that I could do. Truly, the pleasure was all mine.”

“Oh, you are too good, Mr. Bingley!”

Jane and Elizabeth thanked their hosts profusely. Bingley seemed especially sad to see them go. He repeated over and over how welcome they were at Netherfield anytime, how they could stay there anytime they had a need. He even promised to hold a ball sometime in the near future.

“Oh, what a wonderful thing that will be for my girls!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “I do hope you will save a few dances for my Jane.”

Bingley smiled. “Certainly! In fact, it would be my pleasure to reserve the first two dances for Miss Bennet, if she is willing.”

Jane curtsied demurely, and was about to say something, but her mother blurted out, “You might even ask her to dance a third time sometime during the evening!”

Jane winced. “Mama!” she whispered.

Mr. Darcy watched Jane carefully to see if he could detect her motives towards Bingley.

Bingley was surprised, but answered with dignity, “Should Miss Bennet wish it, it would be my honor. But let us not get carried away. There may be other suitors she would wish to dance with that evening. I would not monopolize her evening.” He blushed.

Jane looked uncommonly uncomfortable. Darcy knew not whether it was due to her mother’s brash behavior or because her feelings towards Bingley were cool and she was merely following the prescribed course of action. He had observed her interactions with Bingley during her stay. While it was clear to him that Bingley was utterly smitten, he was less sure of Miss Bennet. She always behaved pleasantly around him but remained reserved. She seemed to enjoy his company, but whether that enjoyment extended into affection was harder to discern. It was obvious that Mrs. Bennet wanted her to marry for money. But Miss Bennet’s intentions remained a mystery.

Even more confusing were the feelings Darcy was experiencing in regard to Miss Elizabeth. Their partnership was a success. Caroline had all but backed down on her coy endeavors to entice him, and he had overheard Mr. and Mrs. Hurst discussing the match between him and Elizabeth. Even Mrs. Bennet had picked up on their apparent closeness.

“And will you be dancing at the ball too, Mr. Darcy?” she had asked. “You know my Elizabeth is as good a dancer as her sister. She will be wanting a partner as well.”

“Of course,” Mr. Darcy bowed. “Miss Elizabeth, if I might reserve your hand, it would be an honor. For the first

two dances, that is!” he added, seeing the look on Elizabeth and Mrs. Bennet’s faces.

“The honor would be mine, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth curtsied prettily. Her dark lashes brushed against her cheeks, making him ache to touch those cheeks. Their performance the night before had stirred up something in him. He knew that they were acting, that their courtship was not real, but for the first time, he began to wish that it was.



On their return from Netherfield, they stopped in Meryton to collect Kitty and Lydia. After a week of being cooped up in the rain, the pair had been eager to visit their Aunt Phillips and catch up on any gossip that they had missed in the preceding days. Their aunt had something better to offer them than gossip, however; several of the officers of the militia had come to tea, and Lydia and Kitty could not wait to tell their mother all about it.

“The officers are all so splendid!” Lydia gushed. “Colonel Forster is so distinguished, although I think him a little old. Harriet is positively mad for him, though. And then there’s Mr. Denny—”

“I like him the best!” Kitty interrupted.

“He is rather handsome, I agree,” Lydia nodded. “But there is a new recruit who I believe might be my new favorite: Mr. Wickham! He is so debonaire! Why, did you know, I accidentally dropped my handkerchief while we were walking—really it was on purpose, though—and he picked it up and called after me. ‘Miss! Miss, you dropped your handkerchief!’ he said!”

Kitty jumped in with her version of the narrative. “More like chased you down the street for half a mile with it!”

“And then he introduced himself and offered to buy us both ices from that new confectionary shop that opened up—you know, the one with the pink lace curtains. It’s the most charming little place. They serve tea and all sorts of cakes and biscuits and—”

Mrs. Bennet interrupted “You were telling me about Mr. Wickham, dear?”

“Oh, yes!” Lydia laughed. “So, Mr. Wickham says, ‘I have never seen such exquisite young ladies as the ones I have met in Meryton!’ And he asked me if I planned on going to the assembly next week!”

Kitty nodded. “So I told him he ought to reserve Lydia for the first two dances, because she is very popular, and she might already have her dance card filled up by the time we arrive, and he said of course, she must promise to keep the first two for him, and for me to spare one for him also!”

Mrs. Bennet clutched the fichu scarf at her neck. “Oh, he sounds simply marvelous! I shall have to meet him soon, and your father too.” She stood up and hurried to the small desk in the corner and began rummaging. “I must find the little diary I keep my social engagements in. I need to see if there are any free evenings the week after next which I might set aside to invite Mr. Wickham over for dinner.”



“Oh, Miss Bennet is simply an angel!” Bingley gushed to Darcy. The two were enjoying a glass of brandy in the study. The ladies had taken advantage of the newly-repaired bridge to go into Meryton for shopping and diversion, and Mr. Hurst had settled in for a long nap.

“Miss Bennet is a charming girl, I will give you that,” Darcy replied. He sipped his brandy thoughtfully.

“Miss Bennet has been gone only an hour, and already, I miss her presence,” Bingley sighed.

“Mmm,” Darcy muttered.

Bingley noted his friend’s demeanor. “I think you are finding it hard to endure the loss of the *other* Miss Bennet, Darcy.” He grinned.

“If you mean Miss Elizabeth, then yes,” he sighed, “I suppose I am sorry to see her go, even if it is only three miles away back to her home.”

“I knew it!” Bingley clapped. “I knew you were sweet on her. Especially after the way you two looked at each other during that Romeo and Juliet scene. I congratulate you, man!” He slapped Darcy on the back. “When is the big day to be?”

Darcy gave a slight chuckle and took another sip of his brandy. “I haven’t made any offers yet, Charles. Do not get carried away.”

“But you like her, don’t you?”

Darcy swallowed. “I do.” He knew he was to be selling the lie, but somehow it seemed more of a truth at that moment.

“Haha, this is wonderful!” Bingley laughed. “Best part is, if I were to marry Jane— er, Miss Bennet— and you were to marry Miss Elizabeth, then we would be brothers!”

“If Caroline had her way, we would already be brothers.”

Bingley snorted. “Even I know that is never going to be a possibility. I have tried to tell Caroline, time and again, to give up. But she never does. The only way I think she will ever resign herself to losing you is if you marry another.”

“I think the same is true of my Aunt Catherine. She still operates under the delusion that I will one day wed her daughter.”

Bingley chuckled. “She hasn’t given up the notion yet?”

“For the past ten years, she’s tried to assert that she has some prior claim over me due to an agreement my mother supposedly made with her.”

“Utter nonsense.”

“Precisely,” Darcy nodded. “So then, you are thinking of proposing to Miss Bennet?” he asked, redirecting the conversation back to Jane and Bingley’s relationship.

Bingley blushed. “I don’t know. I mean– I like her! I like her a great deal. She’s the kindest, sweetest, most beautiful girl I have ever met. And I mean it, this time!”

Darcy nodded. Bingley had seen his share of lovely ladies over the past few years, and there had been quite a few he had deemed the most beautiful. Yet somehow, Bingley seemed to think this was different.

“But I do not know how she feels about me,” Bingley confessed. “She smiles often and laughs whenever I make a joke. But her manner is so reserved, and she shares so little about herself, I feel as though I hardly know her.”

“You do hardly know her,” Darcy agreed.

“And yet, couples have wed and gone on to have successful marriages on less knowledge of each other than Miss Bennet and I have, would you not agree? Perhaps... perhaps I ought not to wait too long. What if someone else comes along and proposes to her first? What if I delay and I miss my chance?”

“Then she was not the right one for you to begin with.”

“That’s just it– how do I know if she is the right one?” Bingley asked. “You’ve watched her, Darcy, I know you have. It’s what you do. You watch people. Have you seen anything, anything that might give you an indication as to what her feelings for me are?”

“I cannot say that I have.”

“And Miss Elizabeth– you are growing more intimate with her. Has she said anything about her sister to you?”

Darcy was evasive. “Nothing conclusive.” He shifted his gaze away from Bingley and took another gulp from his glass.

“You see— and here’s the thing—” Bingley stammered, “I am not certain whether Miss Bennet likes me for me, or for my five-thousand a year. How do I discern what her real feelings are?”

Darcy was silent.

“Darcy...” Bingley came closer and looked his friend in the eye. “Do you know something that you are not telling me? Something about Miss Bennet?”

Darcy took a deep breath before saying, “Now, what I am saying is only an observation. I have no right to claim it as fact.”

“Go on.”

“I have observed that Miss Bennet is a very dutiful sort of daughter, who will do whatever her mother tells her to. It is no secret that Mrs. Bennet wants her daughters to marry well. Even you have remarked on it.”

“True enough,” Bingley nodded. “But does that mean that Jane is only after my money as well?”

“I cannot say,” Darcy said. “But it does beg the question, would Miss Bennet do anything for the sake of her family? Their estate is entailed, and she and her mother and sisters will be virtually penniless when their father is gone. If her mother told her to marry well at any cost, would she do it, without question of love?”

“Hmm.” Now Bingley was silent, pondering his friend’s suggestion.



“It is well you have come home today,” Mrs. Bennet said to her eldest daughters. “For we have had a letter from your second-cousin, Mr. Collins. He is to arrive today!”

“So soon?” Elizabeth gasped. Mr. Collins was the relative upon whom the estate would devolve, thanks to the entail her grandfather had placed on the estate.

Mr. Collins had written some months ago just after his ordination, on the premise of wishing to heal the breach that had existed between his father and Mr. Bennet, and promising that he would visit as soon as his duties and his estimable patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, permitted him. His letters that followed had an effect on Mrs. Bennet; over the spring, her viewpoint had shifted from resenting this cousin, whom she had viewed as the usurper of her family from their rightful home, to seeing in him a potential for her daughters’ security. For in one letter, Mr. Collins had hinted that he hoped soon to marry, being urged to do so by his patroness, and his language was such that Mrs. Bennet felt there might be a possibility of choosing such a wife from among his Longbourn cousins, and then they might all be saved. She was sure he would never throw any of his in-laws into the hedgerows upon Mr. Bennet’s death but would provide for them and allow them a home at Longbourn for as long as they chose; though whether he would do the same for them as cousins was less certain.

From a financial standpoint, Mr. Collins was an eligible match. He had an income for life from the tithes of the parish to which he belonged, a substantial parsonage in which to reside, and upon taking possession of Longbourn, his income would increase by an additional two-thousand pounds per annum. Considering these advantages, it is small wonder that Mrs. Bennet had her sights on him as a prospective son-in-law without ever having met the man.

But Elizabeth had gathered from the language of his letters that he was an obsequious man, absurdly devoted to his patroness, and his manners altogether ridiculous. Her prejudice was such that she could hardly suppose him to be any different

in person and felt certain that even if he should turn out to be a handsome man, and despite all the material advantages he had to offer, she could not conceive of her or her sisters ever marrying him.

However, the promised visit had been delayed several times on account of her ladyship and various other impediments, and by the end of the summer, Mrs. Bennet had begun to think he would never come. She commenced again to complain of the unfairness of their estate being “taken away” from her poor daughters and to warn them of what their failure to secure a husband would mean once their dear father was dead. Then the arrival of Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy had all but put Mr. Collins from Mrs. Bennet’s mind, and Elizabeth had begun at last to think herself safe from the possibility of ever meeting him until this new development.

“I daresay his visit has been long enough in coming, Lizzy,” her mother answered. “It is not so very soon since his first declaration of intent to come to visit us.”

“Oh, I only meant that it is rather short notice, that he should be coming today, right on the heels of his letter announcing that such a visit was at last to take place.”

“Hmm, yes, however, this letter was dated a week past,” Mrs. Bennet nodded. “The flooding in Hertfordshire has caused all sorts of delays with the mail. Many letters were held up, both by our bridge being washed out, as well as the whole village of Frogmore, which you know is on the main road from London, being impassable because of the flooding. The backlog the postal service is experiencing must be unimaginable!”

“So, he is to come tonight, then, you say?” Jane asked.

“At four o’clock, the letter says, though who can say whether or not he will be a punctual fellow. I once knew a man who was perpetually late to everything, no matter the significance. Why, he was even late to his own wedding...”

Mrs. Bennet continued prattling, but Elizabeth hardly heard her. She was thinking on Mr. Collins visit with apprehension, wondering whether her mother would renew her schemes to marry her off to Mr. Collins, or whether, by virtue of her alliance with Mr. Darcy, she would be considered as on the verge of catching a better prize, and therefore ineligible to have Mr. Collins foisted upon her.

Chapter 7



True to his word, Mr. Collins arrived exactly as the hall clock chimed four. Mrs. Bennet commended him for his punctuality, which he declared he always strived for, since his patroness ‘always hated being made to wait for her dinner.’

Mr. Bennet greeted his cousin, whom he had never before met, and declared that he saw something of the young man’s late father in his appearance, which pleased Mr. Collins to hear.

Elizabeth surveyed the man as she and her sisters were introduced. He was young, perhaps five and twenty in age, with a round face that was not altogether unpleasing. But his servile posture as he bowed, combined with a contradictory air of superciliousness whenever he spoke, made her feel that he was every bit as ridiculous as his letters had portrayed. His simple attire consisted of a black waistcoat and trousers with a black coat on top, and his hair was slicked back with altogether too much pomade, giving him a greasy look.

He seemed quite taken with Jane from the moment he laid eyes upon her.

“Fair Cousin Jane,” he said to her at dinner, “I hope you will show me around your fine village during my stay. I saw a little of Meryton when I transferred from the mail coach to the hired chaise that conveyed me here, and I believe I did spy a quaint bookshop on the main road. I would love to see if they have anything of Fordyce’s there for my collection.”

Jane replied politely that she would be happy to show him around Meryton. He spent the rest of the meal dishing out compliments, mainly to Jane, but also about the features and the elegance of the room. He could ‘almost fancy himself to be in the great dining room at Rosings Park’, where his patroness presided. Every dish that was presented required a comment as

well, from the roast beef down to the treacle tart. Even the boiled potatoes, common enough in Elizabeth's opinion to go unnoticed, merited from him the remark that 'it had been many years since he had seen such an exemplary vegetable.'



Mr. Collins' suggestion to tour Meryton was taken the following morning. Accompanied by all of his 'fair cousins,' they walked the short distance of roughly a mile into the bustling little market town. Kitty and Lydia split off from the group, intending to call on their Aunt Phillips, who was sure to impart all the latest gossip. This left Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary to go with their cousin into the little bookstore. Mary immediately spied a new volume from Hannah More and was thrilled. Elizabeth browsed for some new poetry books or works by Shakespeare but did not find anything that was not already in her father's vast library. Mr. Collins was sorely disappointed to learn that there were no volumes by Fordyce to be had, not even a copy of his *Sermons to Young Women*.

"It is unfortunate," Mr. Collins said, "that they have none and that I have left my copy at home, for I had intended to read it to you all after dinner one evening."

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief, thinking herself safe, until her sister Mary piped up that she had a copy in her possession and would be all too happy to lend it to him.

They had just emerged from the bookstore and were heading towards Mrs. Phillips' house to rejoin the others, when Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy came into view, seated on horseback.

They dismounted from their steeds in order to greet them properly.

Mr. Darcy's greeting was warmer than usual, and there was something in his expression that made Elizabeth feel weak in the knees. She chided herself for such nonsense.

Mr. Bingley, on the other hand, behaved coldly. He was polite, as always, but his greetings to Jane and the rest of them lacked his usual convivial spirit. Elizabeth wondered what had caused him to be so out of sorts.

Mr. Collins was brought forward and introduced as their cousin who was visiting.

"I am ever so blessed to have such cousins as these!" he beamed, linking his arm with Jane's. "They are quite a delight! They have been showing me the town this fine morning, and I do declare, it has everything to offer that one can find in Hunsford, nay, even in Westerham!"

"You are from Kent, then?" Mr. Darcy tilted his head to the side.

"Indeed! I have recently been made the rector of Hunsford, in Kent, thanks to the generous patronage of Lady Catherine de Bourgh!"

Mr. Darcy's eyebrows shot up. "So, you are the new minister my aunt has spoken so highly of."

Mr. Collins expression changed into one of utter awe. He grasped both Mr. Darcy's hands and shook them firmly.

"My dear Mr. Darcy." His head bobbed. "I had no idea you were the nephew of my esteemed patroness! Silly me, I should have recognized immediately by your last name that you were the same person that Lady Catherine has spoken of many times in my presence." He blithered about the family connection and Lady Catherine's many virtues for several minutes, before Jane reminded him that they were to meet Mrs. Phillips and Lydia and Kitty.

"Of course. Where are my manners?" he laughed. "Cousin Jane," he said, taking her arm again, "do show me the way!"

Jane's cheeks pinked. She looked at Mr. Bingley. "Won't you gentlemen join us? You have yet to meet my aunt, I believe."

"No, thank you," Mr. Bingley bowed. "We would not inconvenience your aunt."

"I assure you; Mrs. Phillips loves nothing better than to fill her house with company. You would be welcome," Jane urged.

"Thank you, but I have other business to attend to," Mr. Bingley declined again.

He tipped his hat to her and mounted his horse.

Mr. Darcy bowed. "Good day to you, Bennet ladies, Mr. Collins." He smiled towards Elizabeth. Then, on impulse, he gave her a wink. Elizabeth suddenly found her heart pounding in her ears as she made to follow her cousin and sister toward their aunt's house. Darcy's distracting familiarity commandeered her thoughts away from her concern about Mr. Bingley's changed behavior towards Jane.



Jane led the way to their aunt's house with Mr. Collins attached to her arm like a leech. She could not seem to extricate him, despite stares from passing townspeople.

Aunt Phillips was more than happy to receive them all into her house and was pleased to meet the cousin of whom she had already heard so much. She invited them all to stay for tea and cards, which they readily accepted. Lydia and Kitty were already stuffing themselves with tea cakes and biscuits.

Elizabeth was hanging her coat and hat on the rack when she heard Jane take Mr. Collins aside and whisper to him, "I pray you do not display such familiarity with me. It is making us a spectacle."

“Oh, my dear cousin,” he replied, though his voice was hardly what one would call a whisper, “never would I bring down a spectacle on your head. I merely sought to give you a proper escort, as any man ought to do. I hope you will not think my intentions too forward if I ask to be your escort on the return trip as well.”

“Mr. Collins,” Jane hushed him, “It is too much! We hardly know each other.”

“Nonsense,” he waved, “we are family, which means there can be no barrier to intimacy no matter how short the acquaintance. After all, our family branches have been connected since long before either of our births.”

Mr. Collins sat near Jane on the long bench beside Mrs. Phillips’ dining table, and though she tried to scooch further away from him, he always moved a few inches towards her to match, until she was stuck in the middle of the bench with Mary on the other side and no room to put any more distance between them. She drank her tea in uncomfortable silence. Mr. Collins did not notice her discomfort. He maintained his dominance over the conversation with his endless chatter, somehow managing to point every subject back to Lady Catherine or Rosings Park.

A knock at the door sounded, and Mrs. Phillips rose to answer it.

“I hope you’ll forgive our forwardness,” a familiar voice could be heard. “Miss Bennet invited us earlier, and since our business was concluded early, we thought we might drop by for a bit.”

“Certainly, you are most welcome.” Aunt Phillips showed the men into the room. It was, of course, Bingley and Darcy. Jane’s face showed the most surprise, but she managed a smile. Extra chairs were brought over so the newcomers could join them for tea.

At this point, Mr. Collins began asking Jane a series of questions, forcing her to keep her attention directed towards

him in order that she might answer. Elizabeth engaged Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy in conversation to supply the lack. Kitty and Lydia were no help; they only wanted to gossip with their aunt.

“I thank you again for your hospitality to us this week,” Elizabeth said.

“Of course, it is our pleasure,” Bingley replied in a flat tone.

Mr. Darcy spoke up. “You have a real talent for acting, Miss Elizabeth. Were it not for the strictures of society, I could easily envision you on stage at Covent Garden.”

Elizabeth flushed. “I thank you for your compliment, Mr. Darcy, but I am a mere amateur.”

“Nonsense! You performed just as well as any actress I’ve seen in the London theaters, if not more so.”

Kitty and Lydia began clamoring for cards, and since everyone seemed to be finished with their tea, they moved to the drawing room. Kitty and Lydia occupied the first table. They were joined, on Mr. Collins’ insistence, by himself and Jane. Mary was eager to read the new book she had purchased at the shop and sat down by herself in the corner. Bingley, Darcy, Elizabeth, and Mrs. Phillips made up another table. Bingley hardly paid any attention to their card game. The whole time he kept glancing at the other table, watching Mr. Collins and Jane, in particular. His face was serious, and he chewed his lip.

“Has your family long been acquainted with Mr. Collins?” he asked Elizabeth.

“He has been known to us for some time, but we have officially met him only yesterday. His father and our father were first cousins. He is to inherit our estate,” she explained.

“I see,” Mr. Bingley said softly.

Despite being situated so close to Mr. Collins, Jane appeared to be having a good time. Her younger sisters’ antics

had lifted her spirits, and she was having a run of good luck in the cards. Kitty and Lydia whined that they were not getting any good cards and ribbed that she must have stacked the deck. Mr. Collins seemed so outraged at such a notion, he carried on about how there was no possibility Cousin Jane could ever conceive of such a thing, until Lydia finally pointed out to him that it was merely a joke.

Elizabeth tried to engage Mr. Bingley in a conversation about one of his favorite sports, bird hunting, but his eyes continually wandered back to Jane and Mr. Collins. Mr. Darcy, however, was happy to maintain an animated discussion with her over which birds were local to the Hertfordshire neighborhoods and how many of them they had seen or shot.

The party ended when the clock chimed and Kitty, who never missed a meal, reminded them all that they ought to get home for dinner.

“I am glad that you changed your mind about coming, Mr. Bingley.” Jane smiled and curtsied politely. “I hope we shall see you again soon.”

Bingley smiled for the first time that afternoon. “Yes. I expect that you shall. Good day to you all.” He bowed and donned his hat. Mr. Darcy followed suit.

“Such excellent, estimable men,” Mr. Collins remarked as he and his cousins started down the path themselves a few minutes later. “Of course, it is only natural that the nephew of Lady Catherine de Bourgh should be so genteel, as would any person he chooses to connect himself with.”



Elizabeth urged Jane to make it clear to Mr. Bingley where she stood with Mr. Collins, before it was too late. At Lizzy's insistence, the pair called in at Netherfield. Miss

Bingley and Mrs. Hurst received them, but the gentlemen were out. The visit was brief, but superficial. As they were preparing to leave, the gentlemen returned from their hunt. Mr. Bingley's greeting to Jane, in particular, was about as warm as a mountain blizzard. He bowed to her without even a trace of a smile, and when she expressed her thanks for the invitation to the ball and her looking forward to it, he merely said, "Yes, we will see you," in a manner that was so rude, even his sisters felt obliged to add something in the way of their being glad that the Bennets could come.

"If you will excuse me, ladies, I must get changed out of these muddy clothes. Good day to you." Mr. Bingley gave them the slightest nod before hurrying upstairs.

Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley rose to walk them to the door. While they were bidding Jane farewell, Elizabeth hung back and whispered to Mr. Darcy.

"Why is Mr. Bingley acting so coldly towards Jane?"

"Perhaps he has finally seen what she has really been after— his fortune."

Elizabeth was shocked, but she had no opportunity to refute what he said. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were waiting for her at the door, and it would not do to linger behind any longer.

Elizabeth fumed as she and Jane started down the path and across the bridge towards Meryton. What had Darcy meant about Jane being after Bingley's fortune? Surely, he didn't pay any heed to the rumors that their gossipy neighbors loved to spread. *Mr. Darcy must have planted the notion in Bingley's head, Elizabeth decided. He's become so paranoid about people after his wealth that he assumes anyone trying to get close to someone richer than them must have pecuniary motives, and he has transferred that notion to Bingley. It's his fault that Bingley has been acting so peculiar lately.*

"I did not even get a chance to speak to Bingley about Mr. Collins," Jane lamented, her footsteps slow on the path. "I

had hoped our call might be long enough that I could have a brief word with him.”

“At least you shall see him at the ball,” Elizabeth consoled Jane. “After all, he did promise you the first two dances.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Jane said, though her face was wracked with nervousness.

Elizabeth did not return home right away. In a foul mood after her encounter with Darcy and her foot blistering after one of her shoelaces broke earlier that morning, when she passed through Meryton, she decided her feet needed a respite. She told Jane to go home first and that she would follow soon. Elizabeth sat down on the edge of the circular fountain that graced the center of the town in front of the assembly hall. There were not many people around, except a few shopkeepers and the occasional cart rumbling past. Her foot was hurting so badly, she decided to ignore propriety for the sake of it. Pulling off the offending boot and her stocking, she rubbed the spot where a large blister was forming near her big toe.

A soldier in a red coat sat down beside her. “That looks painful,” he remarked.

Elizabeth jumped, and immediately began pulling her stocking back on, embarrassed that someone had caught her in such a state. “I am sorry, sir, I did not see you.”

“It is I who should be sorry. I did not mean to frighten you.” He chuckled. “Please, do not stand on ceremony on my account. I daresay I have seen worse feet than yours. Soldiers’ feet do not take kindly to hours upon hours of marching across the country in hessians. Some of the blisters my comrades and I have suffered— well, let me just say they are not a sight for ladies!”

Elizabeth laughed in spite of her sore feet and sour mood. “I shall take your word for it, sir.” She stuck her boot back on, but with half of the shoelace snapped off, the sides flapped open.

“That’s no way to go about wearing a boot, miss!” The redcoat exclaimed. “A soldier— be they man or woman— is only as good as the footwear they are shod in. One bad shoe can mean the difference between victory and death. With your boot unlaced, you are apt to gain even more blisters ‘ere you reach home. Come, we must get you a new lace.”

“Ere Napoleon overtakes me, you mean?”

The soldier chuckled. “Precisely!”

Elizabeth hesitated. “Oh, but I haven’t any money on me.”

“Never fear,” he shook his head. “It is on me. I cannot allow a lady to go home with her footwear amiss.”

“Thank you, thank you very much.” She rose to follow him, but he shook his finger.

“Tut, tut! Stay right where you are, miss, and continue nursing your blisters. I will fetch the lace and return.”

He did return in a matter of minutes, and soon had her boot relaced with the new lace.

“I do not know how to thank you,” Elizabeth smiled.

“You seem to be in a much better mood, miss.”

“I am. To tell you the truth, the broken lace and the blisters were merely the last straw to a very bad morning I have had.”

The soldier nodded. “I did suspect such. Do tell. Besides your blister, what has been the cause of your misery this morning?”

Elizabeth did not know why she felt she should open up, nor gave any consideration as to whether it was proper to, but she found herself telling him all about the trouble with her sister. No specifics were given, nor any names mentioned, but she gave enough detail to make it known that her sister was about to lose the suitor that she was in love with, and that the

suitor's closest friend was at fault for planting thoughts in his head that she was only after his money.

“Why is it that the wealthy always presume that anyone wishing to marry them is only aiming for their fortune?” Elizabeth grumbled.

“I quite agree,” her listener agreed. “Why, I myself was in a similar situation last summer. The lady I was in love with is someone I have known since childhood. For years, we only saw each other as brother and sister, and her own brother was like a brother to me also. Then, I chanced to meet her by the seaside, and for the first time, I saw her as a woman, and she saw me as a man. We fell in love and were planning to elope. But before it could take place, her brother interfered and barred us from marrying.”

“How cruel! Why would he do such a thing to an old friend and his own sister?”

“Because he believed me to be after her fortune. She is an heiress; when she comes of age, she will be exceedingly rich. Her brother could not fathom that I would truly be in love with her, and not her money. He warned me that if we went ahead and married against his wishes, he would never see either of us again, and that he would cut her off completely from her inheritance.”

“What an awful business!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

“It is.”

“And do you love her still?” Elizabeth asked.

“I shall always love her, I suppose. But I have given it up for lost. I know now that her brother will never give us his blessing. I would have married her without a penny to her name, but I could not marry her knowing she would be miserable if I did. She loves her brother very dearly, and it would destroy her to be cut out of his life.”

Elizabeth pressed her hand to her heart. “Love is such a sorry business, is it not? I feel deeply for you, sir.”

Just then, a bugle sounded in the distance, then repeated again.

“Dear me!” the soldier exclaimed. “I fear I have dallied too long. They are starting the training session and I shall be late. I must be off. Good day to you, miss!” The handsome soldier tipped his hat to her and hurried off in the direction of the camp.

Elizabeth rose from the fountain’s edge. “Wait!” She called after him. “I did not catch your name.” But he was already far enough away that all she could make out of him was his brilliant red coat.

Chapter 8



Elizabeth took her mother aside before dinner. “Mama,” she said, “you must do something about Mr. Collins, before he ruins Jane’s chances with Mr. Bingley.”

Mrs. Bennet was alarmed. “Whatever do you mean? He has only been here a day. How could he ruin her chances?”

Elizabeth relayed what had taken place that afternoon, and the apparent jealousy she had witnessed in Mr. Bingley.

“Why, if anything, that ought to spur Mr. Bingley on even more!” Mrs. Bennet gave a little laugh. “He sees there is competition for her affection. Perhaps it will be just the thing to entice him to propose, lest she get away!”

“Or it may drive him off entirely,” Elizabeth postulated.

Mrs. Bennet waved her hand as if shooing a fly. “Nonsense, Lizzy! If Mr. Bingley’s affections are so flighty, then perhaps we do not want him marrying Jane after all.” She smiled at Elizabeth. “Believe me, my dear, I never saw a man so much in love as Mr. Bingley. I do not believe he will be driven away by the mere presence of a cousin in our company.”

Nevertheless, Elizabeth urged her to speak with Mr. Collins about his forward behavior.

“Very well, dear,” Mrs. Bennet agreed.

Mrs. Bennet observed during dinner that Mr. Collins did, indeed, appear to be paying Jane extra attention, and he showed no signs of stopping, even though Jane’s body language displayed her desire to be anywhere but in the room with him. The following morning before breakfast, chance would have it that Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins were the only ones in the room. His conversation soon turned to his parsonage and his wish to find a mistress for it and he spoke

freely of his particular regard for Jane. Mrs. Bennet took it upon herself at this juncture to interrupt him before he could openly ask for her blessing and to suggest that she thought it likely for Jane to soon be engaged to a young gentleman thereabouts.

“She is all but spoken for,” she told him.

“I see,” Mr. Collins answered thoughtfully, and Mrs. Bennet satisfied herself that the hint was taken, and Mr. Collins would transfer his affections elsewhere.

“Elizabeth also has a suitor,” she told him, “but Mary, I believe, is quite unattached to anyone,” she went so far as to hint. Out of all her daughters, she did think Mary was the most well-suited for life as a clergyman’s wife.

Mr. Collins, however, had no interest in Mary, who was totally lacking in beauty and accomplishments. He wanted Jane, a beautiful ornament that he could display every Sunday and at every function Lady Catherine de Bourgh invited him to. He saw now that there was competition for her hand, and he meant not to lose to that other gentleman, no matter how fine or wealthy he may be. He had a distinct advantage, he thought, for being family and the heir to the estate, he alone could ensure that all the Bennet women were cared for regardless of their marital status. Besides that, he had the advantage of being in the house at that very time. A lady of Jane’s meager dowry could hardly afford to turn down any offer of marriage, even if she hoped for a better one. All he had to do was propose first, before the other fellow had a chance.

As soon as breakfast had concluded, he spoke to Mr. Bennet. “Might I request a private audience with Miss Bennet over the course of the morning?”

Mrs. Bennet stepped in. “Oh, I think that will be highly unnecessary. Whatever you have to say to Jane can be said in the presence of all of us, don’t you think?” She tittered.

But Mr. Collins would not be dissuaded, and Mr. Bennet, unaware of the situation and hardly supposing it to be improper, gave his consent. Jane knew exactly what was about to come. She grasped Elizabeth's hand. "Stay with me!" she pleaded.

Elizabeth spoke up. "If my dear cousin has no objections, I will remain in the room with Jane as chaperone."

Mr. Collins was a little miffed, but he smiled. "Of course, Cousin Elizabeth, you may stay, if only to calm your sister's nerves of excitement."

Nerves of excitement was hardly what Elizabeth would call them, but she was grateful to be allowed to stay in the room while the others filed out.

Mr. Collins wasted no time in going down on one knee.

"Cousin Jane," he began, "almost from the moment I first entered this house I singled you out as my future companion. It can be no surprise to you as to why. Your beauty, virtue, amiability, and other exemplary qualities make you a prize that any man should desire. I have no doubt of your suitability as a wife and mistress of Hunsford Parsonage and all that that entails. I cannot help but feel that you are everything I have been looking for, and that Lady Catherine de Bourgh will entirely approve of my choice in marrying you. But before I have run away with my feelings, perhaps I ought to state my reasons for marrying."

"Firstly, that it is the duty of a clergyman to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, it is my desire to secure a woman who can provide me with all the comforts a wife can give. And thirdly— though perhaps I ought to have mentioned this first— that it is at the urging of my esteemed patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh that I select a wife. I had thought from the beginning to choose such a one from among my cousins. For, since I am to inherit the estate, such an alliance will surely benefit everyone. And I promise that once we are married, no word shall be spoken about your lack of

fortune, for such a thing will not matter in the least once I come into my inheritance.”

“Furthermore, I promise that your family will all be well under my care. Your sisters, once they have been promoted from mere cousins to in-laws will always have a home at Longbourn with us for as long as they choose, regardless of whether they are able to marry. Your mother, too, may reside with us.”

Jane stood wooden, all the color drawn from her face. Elizabeth’s face was a mixture of horror and an attempt not to burst out laughing at what she had just witnessed.

Mr. Collins patted Jane’s hand, tightening his grip with his other hand. “Dearest Jane, if I may call you that, will you not answer, that I may count myself as being the happiest of men?”

Jane wrenched her hand from his, her face clenched tight. “I do not know how to answer you, Mr. Collins,” she said. “This is...this is all rather unexpected.”

Elizabeth wanted very much to answer for Jane, but she forced herself to keep her mouth shut.

“Your modesty does you credit, dear Jane. I can see that you are quite overwhelmed by the sudden violence of my affection towards you. If you need a moment to collect your feelings before answering, I quite understand.”

Jane took a step back from Mr. Collins. “Time,” she nodded. “I need time to consider your proposal.”

Elizabeth was irritated. Her impulse got the better of her. “Time? Why would you need time? Surely, you can answer him directly. Jane!”

Mr. Collins stayed her with his hand. “I thank you, cousin, for speaking up on my behalf. But there is no need to pressure your sister. I already know what her answer will be, and if time is what she needs to overcome the shock of my proposal, I am more than happy to grant it.” Satisfied with himself, he went directly to ask Mr. Bennet for his blessing.

Jane began shaking as a sob burst forth from her the moment he left.

Her sister looked at her incredulously. “Jane! What on earth were you thinking? Why did you not turn him down directly? Surely you do not mean to accept him?”

“I do not know!” Jane wailed.

“I am confused. I thought you liked Mr. Bingley! Would you give up any hope of marrying Mr. Bingley and shackle yourself to our obnoxious cousin instead?”

“I do like Mr. Bingley, Lizzy. More than that, I have fallen in love with him! But you saw how he behaved towards me yesterday. So cold, so stoic. All the warmth and affection gone from his voice. What on earth did I do to displease him? And here is our cousin, who will one day inherit this house and all that we own, who is offering to secure my life and that of my mother and sisters. I cannot so easily dismiss that!”

“But you will not be happy with a man like Collins!”

Jane sputtered, “What is happiness to me, when I can save my family from poverty!”

Elizabeth put her arms around Jane and let her cry upon her shoulder. “Jane, Jane. Dearest, sweetest, Jane! Do not sacrifice yourself for our sakes. It is not worth it. You cannot give up hope in Mr. Bingley. He likes you. I am sure of it!”

“Oh!” Jane sobbed harder. “If only I knew for certain that were true!”



It would have been well for Jane if she had declined Mr. Collins directly. He interpreted her request for time as a form of modesty, her not wishing to appear too eager to accept his offer. He considered it as only a matter of time before their

engagement was official and he soon began to talk of it as if it were a certain thing. But because she harbored doubts about her ability to make a better match and about Mr. Bingley's regard for her, and because by nature she would throw herself off a cliff if it would save her family, she could not be induced to make up her own mind as to whether or not she should accept him. The result of this was that Mr. Collins began to spread to their neighbors, through little hints of his, his belief of Jane's soon becoming his wife. These rumors carried like a contagious disease, until all of Meryton and the surrounding considered it as practically certain that Miss Bennet and Mr. Collins were engaged.

All this could have easily been avoided, if Jane had simply refused Mr. Collins, Elizabeth grumbled to herself.

Mrs. Bennet did not help matters. To have a daughter married was her singular goal, and the promise of security that Mr. Collins was offering was enough to keep Mrs. Bennet from ever despairing of the five-thousand a year that Jane might have had as the wife of Mr. Bingley. And no amount of urging from Elizabeth could keep her from being satisfied with the match and bragging about it or enable her to see Jane's misery for what it was.

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," Mrs. Bennet declared. "We do not know that Mr. Bingley would ever have proposed to her. We have seen it all before, you know, how flighty young men are these days. It is Jane's duty to do what she can to secure her own future and that of her sisters."

It so happened that the news of Miss Bennet's engagement reached Mr. Bingley's ears only the day before the ball. Mr. Bingley's anger was so great, that he was at first of a mind to call off the whole affair. But on further consideration, he decided that the best way to prove to Miss Bennet that he was unaffected by her marrying another was to keep his plan, and he even sent out additional invitations to all the eligible young ladies in the region.

“If she can cast me aside without a thought, then I shall show her that I, too, can find another sweetheart just as easily,” he declared.

To Mr. Darcy, it only proved that Miss Bennet’s motives were mercenary. If she could so quickly and easily accept the hand of her cousin, whose offer would guarantee her security and fortune, then her feelings for his friend must have been superficial.

While the anticipation of the ball was a source of apprehension for the two eldest Bennet sisters, it promoted feelings of delight for the younger ones. Mary, eager to show off the latest pieces she had been working on, practiced her piano music for a full two hours daily. Kitty and Lydia, who were no less wild for dancing than they were for handsome men, talked of nothing but what they were to wear and whom they hoped to dance with from the moment the invitations arrived.

“Mr. Denny has assured me that he wouldn’t miss the ball for the world!” Kitty exclaimed. “And Captain Carter and Colonel Forster have promised to be there as well.”

Lydia bobbed her head. “Harriet Whilding will be glad of it. She is positively mad for Colonel Forster. As for me, I only hope that Mr. Wickham will be at the ball this week,” Lydia exclaimed. “Then I could finally introduce him to you all. He is such a charming fellow. Twice now, I have seen him at Mrs. Phillips’ card parties, and he was at Colonel Forster’s dinner last week.”

“Oh yes, dear, it is such a pity that we were engaged with the Gouldings that time and did not go with you,” Mrs. Bennet crooned. “You must let him meet us at the ball, if he will attend.”

“He is sure to! Mr. Bingley has made sure to invite all the militia, so that there will be plenty of gentleman partners for all the ladies. I can think of no reason why he should not come.”

Chapter 9



It seemed that half the county had turned out for the Netherfield ball. Elizabeth had never seen so many carriages lined up around the great circular drive, nor witnessed so many people packed into every nook and cranny of the place. The previous residents of Netherfield had often entertained, but their parties were of the stuffy, boring variety, and by the time their finances had run dry, and they were forced to lease out their establishment, hardly anybody came to their soirees at all. Now that Netherfield had new tenants, especially handsome ones who were ever on the lips of the local gossips, everyone had a curiosity to come out and see the place.

Within minutes, Kitty and Lydia had been approached by two officers in red and were happily engaged for the first two dances.

Jane looked for Mr. Bingley but did not see him among the crowds. Elizabeth finally spotted him talking with Mrs. Jung and her nieces on the far side of the room.

“Go to him,” Elizabeth whispered in Jane’s ear. She dragged Jane by the arm, forcing their way through the crowds, until they reached Mr. Bingley. Fortunately, they caught his eye just as he turned towards them.

“Mr. Bingley!” Elizabeth greeted him, forcing herself to smile with as much warmth and friendliness as she normally displayed. “Thank you so much for inviting us to your ball.”

“Of course,” he answered without smiling. “It is ever a pleasure to see you, Miss Elizabeth, Miss Bennet.” He nodded to each of them. “I hope you will have a wonderful time this evening.”

Jane looked up at him with an expression of longing, eliciting just the barest upturn of the corners of his mouth. No

words could come out of her mouth. Elizabeth poked her in the ribs, which finally made her start to say his name. But Mr. Bingley had already walked away. He climbed onto the platform where the musicians were seated and, by nodding to the trumpeter to gather everyone's attention with a quick fanfare trill, welcomed them all to his ball and gave everyone notice to find their partners for the first set.

"Now, surely, he will come to claim you, and you will have the opportunity to explain yourself," Elizabeth told Jane. Mr. Collins approached them, bowing so deeply his nose touched his knees.

"Dearest Jane," he said in a sticky-sweet voice, "as your intended husband, I feel it only right and proper that we dance together the first two dances this evening."

Jane was taken aback. "I thank you for the honor, Mr. Collins, but as I have told you already, I have a prior engagement for this set."

"Yes, you have mentioned to me something about an expectation of opening the ball with Mr. Bingley. Correct me if I am wrong, but is that not him who is preparing to take the lead at the top of the set with that young lady?" Mr. Collins pointed to the front of the line where the dancers were arranging themselves for the first dance. Sure enough, Emily Jung was standing opposite Mr. Bingley. Jane's lip quivered, the despair of Bingley's betrayal written all over her face. The musicians began their sprightly tune and the dancers sprung in time to their beat.

"Of course," Mr. Collins said, "there is the possibility that you were mistaken about which set he was to dance with you. If that is the case, then may I have the honor of leading you in this set?"

Jane had no choice but to take his hand that was offered to her and allow him to lead her to the bottom of the set.

Elizabeth felt all of Jane's suffering as if it were her own. To endure such pain and humiliation was dreadful! For

Jane to not only be snubbed by Bingley after he had promised her the first set, but then to be obligated to dance with Mr. Collins instead was incomprehensible. Elizabeth wished that Jane had simply declined to dance with Mr. Collins, but she supposed that Jane must still be holding out hope that Mr. Bingley might repent and ask her to dance later. Some ladies might turn down a partner they disliked and then later accept a dance from another whom they did like, but Jane was too polite to ever do such a thing. If Jane were to decline a partner when she was not otherwise engaged, then her good manners demanded that she sit out all the dances that evening.

Jane looked perfectly miserable. Twice, Mr. Collins trod on her toes, and once, he caused her to bump into another couple. Meanwhile, Miss Jung looked jubilant on the arm of Mr. Bingley, clearly enjoying being the star dancer leading the set and having the honor of opening the ball with him. Bingley's face was a mixture of cold proudness and indignation, so unlike his usual self.

Elizabeth found she could no longer witness the dancing.

She headed towards the room with the refreshments, and suddenly found herself face to face with Mr. Darcy.

"Mr. Darcy. Good evening," she gave a stiff curtsy.

"Miss Elizabeth," he replied in kind with a short bow. "Might you...might you care to dance? I know you always favored a reel."

"I fear I am in no humor to dance at present." Scowling, she turned and walked away from Mr. Darcy, but he followed her down the corridor. Seeking privacy, she turned into an empty room off the corridor. Mr. Darcy shut the door behind them.

"What has put you in such a sour mood?" Darcy asked.

Elizabeth crossed her arms. "I should think it quite obvious. Your friend has behaved rather badly by my sister."

Darcy's eyes narrowed. "And I should think that your sister has behaved rather badly by my good friend!"

"Do explain."

"After being courted by Bingley for weeks, even staying at his house during the storm, all the while letting him think that his affections might be returned, she throws him over for your cousin at the first opportunity."

"She has not thrown him over for Mr. Collins."

"If that is the case, then why has she accepted an offer of marriage from him?"

"She is not engaged to Mr. Collins; she hesitated to turn down his offer because she felt she had no choice but to consider the match. But he has taken her request for time to consider the offer as an eventual certainty and is spreading rumors to that effect."

"Then it seems to me, she is only stalling in hopes of a better offer, but at the same time she does not want to pass up the one she has on the table until she is secure of a better one."

"How can you say that?" Elizabeth's voice went up. "She loves Mr. Bingley! She told me she does. You must help me to convince your friend that her feelings are genuine!"

"If she truly loved Bingley, she would not even entertain an offer from another man," Darcy argued. "Had your sister turned down Mr. Collins directly, I should be convinced of her regard for Mr. Bingley and be eager to help you promote the match. As it stands, I see nothing that proves she cares for him for any reason other than his money."

"Not all of us have the luxury of turning down a marriage opportunity for the sake of love— especially when it appears that our feelings are not returned! Ever since we departed from Netherfield, Mr. Bingley has behaved coldly towards her, which has made her doubt his regard for her. But what I cannot understand is why, after displaying such warm tenderness, which every day appeared to be growing, he should suddenly be so altered."

“Perhaps it finally occurred to him that Jane might not be so in love with him as he was with her. That her regard for him, while admirable, might stem more from a love of his five-thousand a year, than from a love of the man himself.”

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed. “You mean, *you* suggested such to him.”

“I did,” Darcy admitted without a shred of regret.

Elizabeth circled the room, her frustration mounting by the moment. “If you knew Jane like I do, then you would know there is not a mercenary bone in her body. When she loves, she loves wholly and completely, and she would not care if the man she loved didn’t have a half-penny to his name.”

“It is not only I who thinks such. The entire town has been talking of the advantageous matches that the Bennet sisters have made.”

“You think that because the match would be advantageous for Jane that there is no possibility of her loving him?”

“I did not say that. But after careful observation of her during the time of your stay here, I became convinced that her feelings were not equal to his. Her looks and manners were friendly, but reserved, without any symptom of peculiar regard for him; that though she received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them with any sentiment of her own. Then, to see her the very next day after leaving Netherfield, on the arm of another man— is it any wonder that Bingley felt he had been mistaken in her regard for him?”

“You are much mistaken if you think that Jane invited or in any way encouraged Mr. Collins to attach himself to her.”

“Then why even consider a proposal from a man like Collins?”

“She hesitated only because she knows what it would mean for our family if she were to accept. There is a very real danger that we shall all be in dire poverty one day— a poverty

which accepting Mr. Collins' offer would put it in her power to secure us from facing."

"So, you admit that she is only interested in making a financially prudent match!"

"Jane," Elizabeth seethed, "would not have even *considered* an offer from Mr. Collins if her confidence in Mr. Bingley's regard for her had not faltered after *you* planted it in his head that she was only after his fortune. Jane is the most selfless being I know. She would do anything for her family, even throw away her own happiness."

"You contradict yourself, then, madam. Either she is willing to marry for love at all costs, or she is willing to marry for money at all costs; it cannot be both." He made a gesture with his arms, slicing the air sideways with them to emphasize his point.

"Why must you willfully misunderstand me?" Elizabeth proclaimed in a near scream, throwing her hands up in exasperation.

"I do not misunderstand you at all. Jane may not want money for herself, but she wants it for her family's sake, and that is the same thing. To me, this only proves what I have always suspected, that your sister, acting under your mother's guidance, did all she could to put herself in Bingley's path from the start. That, had my friend made her an offer sooner, he would have been taken in by a woman whose primary goal is to obtain a match that will provide financial security for herself and her family."

"And this is your real opinion!" Elizabeth's temper flared. "I suppose you think my whole family is after nothing except catching wealthy men!"

Mr. Darcy stepped closer to her. "You yourself as much admitted it during our first meeting together. That your mother will stop at nothing to make wealthy matches for her daughters. Even your agreement to stage a pretend courtship with me might very well be false. For all I know, you mean to

use it to trap me into a marriage with you. The more my particular attention to you is witnessed by the neighborhood, the more it is expected that I would make you an offer. Perhaps your father would feel incumbent to defend your honor and give me the choice to marry you or face off against him.”

“Ridiculous!” Elizabeth sputtered. “My father, challenge you to a duel? Utterly preposterous! If this is your opinion of me, and of my family, then let me spare you any further thoughts that our courtship arrangement is some scheme to trap you into marrying me. Our arrangement is henceforth at an end!”

The door to the room they were in suddenly opened, and Charlotte Lucas entered.

“Eliza, there you are! I have been looking for you all evening.” Charlotte looked from Elizabeth to Mr. Darcy, a grin slowly appearing on her face.

Elizabeth was suddenly struck with the impropriety of being caught alone in a room of the house with Mr. Darcy and it sent a chill of fear into her heart.

Mr. Darcy bowed to them and left the room.

Charlotte must have guessed what Elizabeth was thinking. “Don’t worry, Eliza,” she reassured her friend, “I will not tell anyone you were here alone with him.” She winked.

“I can assure you, there is nothing of *that sort* going on between me and Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth’s cheeks were bright red.

“Of course not! But even if there *were*, I would not disclose your secret until you chose to make your engagement public.”

Elizabeth wished that Charlotte would wipe the smirk off of her face. She had been careless— too careless! If it had been anyone besides Charlotte who had found them...

Elizabeth shuddered to think that she might now be forced into an engagement with Mr. Darcy.

“Charlotte, I am so vexed! Mr. Darcy will not stir to help me convince Mr. Bingley of Jane’s affection for him. He even went so far as to call her ‘mercenary’!”

“Goodness, does Jane still have affection for Mr. Bingley? I had thought that all at an end, now that she has become engaged to your cousin. I did wonder at the quickness of it all, her switching from Mr. Bingley to Mr. Collins almost overnight. But then when I saw her dancing with that round fellow, who I assumed had to be him, I felt it certain that the rumors of their engagement must be true,” Charlotte said emphatically.

“That’s just it— Jane has not accepted him, but he has gone around spreading tales that they are engaged!”

“Oh dear. That is dreadful. But you know, Eliza, Mr. Darcy is not the only one who has had cause for speculation in regard to your family these days. I hear everything, as you well know, for my mother is the Queen Bee in regard to gossip, or rather would be if Mrs. Bennett and Mrs. Phillips did not challenge her for the ranking as such.” At this, Charlotte let out an amused laugh. Ordinarily, Elizabeth would have laughed at such a joke also, but here she found that she could not.

Charlotte continued. “There has been much talk in the neighborhood, ever since Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley entered the county, that the Bennet sisters are only after men of fortune. I am afraid to say, Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy both pursuing a Bennet sister at the same time, coupled with the apparent encouragement you and Jane have given them in return and the way that your mother has crowed over her triumphs in such, had given rise to the notion that the Bennet family are a rather mercenary sort of family.”

Elizabeth was shocked. It had never occurred to her that by agreeing to stage a courtship with Mr. Darcy, it had opened not only herself, but her entire family, to scrutiny. Their plan

had worked in one sense— it had taken him out of the running for all the other eligible young ladies and temporarily appeased her mother. But it was a double-edged sword. And it had pierced the heart of the person that Elizabeth loved most dearly in the world— her sweetest sister Jane. How could she possibly hope to prove to Mr. Bingley that Jane was not after his wealth? Elizabeth feared she had made an impossible mess of things.



The second set of dances was already under way when Elizabeth returned to the ballroom to look for her family. She spied Mr. Darcy out on the floor with Miss Bingley. His face looked like thunder, and he did not appear to be enjoying himself.

Caroline Bingley caught a glance at Elizabeth and gave her a smug look. As for Elizabeth, she couldn't care less who Mr. Darcy danced with. She was more concerned for her sister. Mr. Collins had pressed Jane into dancing with him for yet another set, but she did not look pleased in the slightest. Mr. Bingley was dancing with Theresa Jung this time. Lydia and Kitty were dancing with another pair of officers, oblivious to the fact that their sisters were suffering the most grievous shame while they enjoyed themselves.

After the second set ended, supper was served. Here, again, Elizabeth was forced to witness Mr. Collins lay claim to her sister as they sat beside each other at dinner. Why oh, why did Jane not put an end to the whole business!

Mr. Bingley was seated with Emily Jung, while Caroline Bingley had her way yet again by being next to Mr. Darcy. Aways down the table across from her, Elizabeth heard Lady Lucas remark to Mrs. Jung at how quickly Mr. Bingley seemed to have transferred his affection from Miss Bennet to

Miss Jung. Mrs. Jung agreed at the favorable change of circumstances for her niece and added that the Bennet girls must have really fallen out of favor during their recent stay, since Mr. Darcy had abandoned Miss Elizabeth for Miss Bingley as his choice of partner for the evening.

Elizabeth felt ashamed. Fortunately for her, she was seated beside Bucky Buckland, who said nothing to her as he chomped heartily on the courses of food that were laid before them.

As the party made their way back to the ballroom to resume dancing, Elizabeth knew that Mr. Collins would press Jane for a third set, which would confirm to everyone that they were certainly engaged. She did not have confidence in Jane's ability to refuse him. She turned to Charlotte for help.

"I cannot see what to do about Mr. Collins. At this rate, it will be absolutely impossible for Jane to get out of marrying him. She won't cry it off, even if she does hate him. She would be too worried about the repercussions. Mr. Collins is not the sort of man who would take to being jilted kindly, and we are entirely at his mercy when the estate passes to him."

Charlotte attempted to comfort her. "You would always have a home among friends, you know. And you have your mother's brother and sister, who can be depended on to ensure your survival."

"Yes, but what kind of life would that be?"

"Well, do not worry, Eliza. I already have a plan in mind." A gleam entered Charlotte's eyes

"What? What is it?"

Charlotte shook her head. "Better that you remain ignorant. But do not fear; Mr. Collins will soon be no obstacle to Jane's happiness."

Elizabeth followed Charlotte over to one of the fireplaces in the ballroom where Mr. Collins and Jane stood.

Elizabeth introduced her cousin to Charlotte.

“Always a pleasure to meet any friend of my fair cousins,” Mr. Collins bowed and kissed Charlotte’s hand.

“Likewise, Mr. Collins,” she smiled. “I hope that you have not already asked somebody to dance this set.”

“As a matter of fact, I was about to ask—”

“Splendid!” Charlotte interrupted him before he could say ‘Jane’. “I would be delighted to dance with you, Mr. Collins, so that we may become better acquainted.”

He gave a half-suppressed laugh. “Why, yes, that is exactly what I was, er, about to say. That is, of course, if my dear Jane does not mind my absence for a period.”

“By all means,” Jane encouraged. “Do get to know our dear neighbor.”

Charlotte gave Elizabeth a smile as Mr. Collins led her to take their spots in the line of dance.

With Mr. Collins out of the way, Elizabeth hoped that Mr. Bingley might take pity on Jane and ask her to dance. She took Jane by the hand and led her to where Bingley was standing, making sure to position Jane where he could see her. However, he pointedly ignored her, instead asking Mary King to dance. The slight could not be overlooked. Fighting back tears, Jane pushed her way through the crowds and sat down on a bench in the front hall.

Elizabeth came up beside Jane to console her.

“It seems he has truly moved on from me,” Jane sniffed.

Elizabeth stroked her sister’s back. “You must tell Mr. Collins that you have decided you will not have him!” she urged.

Jane pulled out her handkerchief as the flood of tears came. “What would it matter? It is clear that whatever feelings Mr. Bingley might have had for me have evaporated. I may as well ensure my family’s future and make the best of my life with Mr. Collins.”

Elizabeth's fists clenched. "Mr. Bingley is acting out of jealousy. I am sure that if you were to turn down Mr. Collins directly, he would run to your side once again."

"Or, he will leave the county, and I shall never see him again, and I will have lost my chance to save our family besides."

"That is a risk you must take, yes. But is it not worth it?"

"Is it? I am not certain." Jane shook her head. "There is already a rumor, it seems, that I am only after Mr. Bingley's money. I heard it spoken of by Mrs. Jung and Lady Lucas this evening. They did not know I overheard them, or I think they would have been more discreet in their choice of words, but some of the things they said about me— about both of us— were quite shocking."

"Yes," Elizabeth grimaced. "They were talking about us at supper as well." Elizabeth's heart was filled with regret.

Jane pulled out her handkerchief and dabbed her eyes. "I hope you will forgive me, Lizzy. I hate to spoil the party like this."

"Nonsense," Elizabeth said.

"Do you think Mama and Papa would mind terribly if I asked our driver to take me home and then return for you all later? I have a sudden wish to be gone from this place."

"Of course, dearest," Elizabeth replied. "I will tell them you are not feeling well, but that you did not want to spoil your sisters' fun."

Jane called for a footman to have their carriage brought around for her.

Elizabeth went to find a glass of punch. She hoped that somebody had been kind enough to spike it a bit. She could use something to take the edge off, what with the way this evening was progressing. Mary had already established herself at the piano in that room, loudly singing a chorus of "Slumber Dear Maid," ignorant of the snickers going around the room

from the onlookers. If only Mary had learnt to sing on-key with her playing!

A half-hearted round of applause at the conclusion of her piece was enough to make Mary feel that her audience deserved an encore. But as she launched into one of Beethoven's sonatas, her father stepped in, insisting that she let others take a turn exhibiting their talents.

I should inform my mother that Jane has gone, Elizabeth decided. Her mother was in the ballroom talking with Lydia, who had stepped away from the dance for a few moments to catch her breath. Elizabeth overheard them.

"Bless me, but there are so many handsome soldiers here tonight!" Mrs. Bennet gasped.

"Oh yes, Mama, there are!" Lydia agreed. "I have already danced once with Captain Carter while Kitty danced with Mr. Denny and we both saw Harriet Whilding down the line with Colonel Forster. But Mr. Wickham is nowhere to be found. I asked Denny and Carter if they had seen him, and they told me that Wickham had been obliged to be in town."

"Oh, what a pity!" Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. "I had so been looking forward to finally meeting the young man. You must invite him to dinner soon, so that your father and I can see him."

This prospect made Lydia excessively happy.

Lydia went back to the dancing, and Elizabeth informed her mother that Jane had felt unwell and had gone home. Mrs. Bennet was alarmed, at first, and thought that they should all go home as soon as their carriage returned. But Elizabeth persuaded her that it was only a headache, and as Jane did not wish to spoil her sisters' fun, they should stay until the end of the ball. Elizabeth wished that she had gone home when Jane did. Her youngest sisters might be having a fine time, but the evening had been anything but pleasant for her.



Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins were nearly through with their set when suddenly, Charlotte Lucas cried out and collapsed to the floor. The musicians and the dancers stopped and one of the officers asked her what was the matter.

“I have turned my ankle!” There were tears in Charlotte’s eyes.

“Oh, dear me, this is all my fault!” Mr. Collins wrung his hands. “I led you wrong, causing you to stumble. Quickly, we must fetch the doctor!” he turned to go, but Charlotte caught his hand.

“No! I will be all right. That is, if Mr. Collins would be so kind as to carry me somewhere I might rest my ankle.”

“Of course, of course.” With the help of one of the officers, Mr. Collins was able to convey Charlotte to the settee in the next room. There, he attended her, and someone brought her some ice to make a cold compress and helped her to elevate her foot with the throw pillows. Several times Mr. Collins suggested that he ought to locate Jane, but every time, Charlotte insisted that she could not do without his company. Mr. Collins was disappointed to learn, towards the end of the evening, that Jane had gone home without the family. He had fully intended to sit beside her on the carriage ride home and discuss all the events of that evening.

Chapter 10



Charlotte Lucas came by the next day, delivering another invitation to dine at Lucas Lodge.

“How is your ankle, dear Miss Lucas?” Mrs. Bennet inquired.

“Oh, it is much better, thanks to the careful ministrations of Mr. Collins.” Charlotte smiled at the rector, who grinned back and gave a little wave at her from across the room.

“Nevertheless, we shall not have you taxing it. Do come and sit down,” Mrs. Bennet insisted. Charlotte chose the seat which was conveniently next to Mr. Collins. She asked him some questions about his hometown in Kent, which conveniently led to the mention of his esteemed patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. On this subject, she was able to engage him for a full half-hour, before recollecting that she was needed at home.

“I do hope you will join your fair cousins at dinner, Mr. Collins,” Charlotte said, placing her arm atop his for support as she rose from the settee.

Elizabeth walked her friend to the front door. “What are you up to, Charlotte?” she whispered.

Charlotte merely smiled. “I told you, Eliza. I have a plan.”



Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley were engaged to dine with some of the officers at the Hollybush. As Darcy followed

Bingley's steed around the corner of the tavern, someone crossed his vision that made him startle. His eyes followed the red-clad fellow just before he disappeared from view. It couldn't be he. Could it? Darcy had not taken a good look at the man's face, but the resemblance from the back and the brief glimpse of the man's profile as he went past made Darcy shudder.

"Everything all right, Darcy?" Bingley asked as he tied his horse to the hitching post.

Darcy frowned as he dismounted his own stallion. "I am not certain. I thought I saw somebody that I knew."

"Oh, well, if he was headed for the tavern, perhaps we shall see him there."

Darcy followed Bingley into the dimly-lit tavern. The smell of stout liquor and unwashed bodies assaulted his senses. Raucous laughter mingled with the tinkling of the pianoforte in the corner, which was accompanying a buxom woman singing a bawdy drinking song, to the delight of the patrons. The sprinkling of red coats throughout the room told Darcy that most of the men were soldiers. Bingley led the way to their table, where a group of officers sat, sharing lewd jokes and ogling the barmaids in their low-cut dresses.

And right there, in the back corner of the table, was none other than Mr. Wickham.

"Bingley, there you are!" one of the officers called out to them.

Bingley introduced Darcy to the officer, whose name was Colonel Forster.

"We've had some new recruits," Colonel Forster told them. "This is Lieutenant Leonard Denny, joining us from Derbyshire, along with Lieutenant George Wickham."

Mr. Denny shook Darcy and Bingley's hands cheerfully. Mr. Wickham gave a polite nod, and Darcy saw his mouth tighten. Of all places, Wickham had to be here!

Darcy glared at Wickham as he sat down. Colonel Forster shared the latest updates on their military exercises and the possibility of their company moving to Brighton at the end of the winter, but Darcy scarcely heard any of it.

Darcy stepped outside to relieve himself in the alleyway next to the tavern. When he turned to go back inside, Wickham was there.

“I did not plan on being stationed here, you know. Nor did I have any idea you were visiting this part of the country.”

Darcy frowned. “So, you have joined the militia now.”

“Well, you did have me kicked out of Cambridge and gave away the church living that your father promised me. A fellow has to make an honest living somehow,” Wickham answered wryly.

“Honest?” Darcy scoffed. “You do not have an honest bone in your body.”

Wickham glanced to the side, his hands on his hips, and let out a low chuckle. “I sincerely regret that business with Georgiana. It was not my idea to keep things a secret.”

“I highly doubt that it was hers.”

“Whether or not you believe me, Darcy, I had wanted to come to you for your blessing. It was Georgiana who thought we should elope. But when you surprised her with a visit at Ramsgate, she lost her nerve. I suppose she was right about one thing, though. You never would have given us your blessing.”

“You’re darn right, I wouldn’t!” Darcy hissed. He took two steps forward while Wickham backed away from him, hands up.

“I am not here to fight you, Darcy. I merely wanted a chance to explain. I would never come between you and your sister. I couldn’t see the two of you fall out over me. I love her too much to let that happen. That is why I left.”

“You broke her heart!”

Wickham looked sober. "I know I did. I hope someday she can find happiness with another. Someone who suits her better."

"Someone who isn't after her fortune," Darcy spat.

"I told you before, I wasn't after her inheritance. I would have married her without a penny to her name. But I couldn't see her lose the love of her brother in the process. That is all, Darcy." Wickham tipped his hat and went back inside the tavern.

Lies, all lies! Darcy thought. Since he was a child, Wickham had a habit of lying to cover his own hide. It had started when they were five and seven years old when he had pointed the finger at Darcy over a batch of shortbread biscuits that had gone missing from the kitchen. It continued all through the years they were growing up. Wickham had lied about his preference for the church living that had been set aside for him and had left a trail of debts behind when he was expelled from Cambridge. Small wonder that Darcy did not trust the man as far as he could throw a twig. And to think that Georgiana had narrowly escaped being shackled to him for life! Darcy said a prayer of thankfulness that he had arrived in time to prevent their elopement. Lord only knows how quickly Wickham would have squandered her inheritance had he been able to get his hands on it.

Darcy was too irritable to return to their party. The boy who worked in the tavern came out to dump a bucket of dishwater. Darcy gave him a coin and told him to pass on a message to Mr. Bingley that he was feeling unwell and would return to Netherfield first.



The absence of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley was keenly felt that evening at Lucas Lodge.

“It is too bad that the Netherfield gentlemen had plans to dine with the officers, and that Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley were already engaged to dine with Mrs. King,” Lady Lucas said, “for now we are sparse, and there are not enough gentlemen present to make up a dance.”

Mr. Collins moved to sit beside Jane at dinner, but Charlotte said, “Oh no, Mr. Collins, you must take the seat of honor, between my mother and I.”

Mr. Collins appeared flustered. “Well— I! Of course, I would be happy to accept any honor offered by the lovely Lady Lucas.”

Charlotte kept Mr. Collins engaged with ample conversation the whole meal, drawing his attention back to her every time he so much as looked at Jane.

They played cards after dinner, but with no dancing, and only Mary’s horrendous music to listen to, they were in desperate need of other entertainment.

“Why do we not play hide-and-seek?” Charlotte suggested, a mischievous gleam in her eye.

Elizabeth’s eyebrow went up. “Is that not a little childish?”

Lydia, who had been growing especially bored and was irritated in full at having to listen to Mary clanking along the keys, said, “Oh, who cares if it is a child’s game! Let us all play!”

The older adults remained in the drawing room, but Sir William Lucas gave his full permission for them to roam free in the rest of the house so that they may play.

“What fun!” he chortled. “Young people always manage to have such a good time when they are together.”

“Jane, you be the seeker,” Charlotte suggested.

“Oh, no, not me!” Jane protested. “I can never find anyone, and I always end up wandering alone for half an hour or more.”

“Very well, we will draw for it,” Charlotte said. She fetched a deck of playing cards and took out all the face cards, fanning them out for each person to draw one. But when they drew, it was Jane who held the unlucky Queen of Spades.

“I am sorry for you Jane,” Charlotte said. “It appears you will be our seeker, after all.”

As they went out of the drawing room, Elizabeth whispered to Charlotte, “Did you stack the cards so that Jane would be the seeker?”

Charlotte looked at her and smiled. “Why would I do that?”

Jane stood in the center of the hall facing the grandfather clock, closed her eyes, and began counting to one-hundred. Elizabeth headed towards the cupboard under the cellar stairs, but she became distracted by the sight of Charlotte, leading Mr. Collins by the hand into the butler’s pantry off the dining room. What was she up to?

“Ninety-seven, ninety-eight,” she heard Jane counting. Elizabeth darted into the breakfast room. There was no time to find a better hiding place.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Jane called. She found Elizabeth quickly. “Lizzy! I thought for sure you would have a better hiding place than that. I heard you running past me at the last second, you know.”

Elizabeth shrugged sheepishly. “It has been too long since we played hide and seek in this house. I have forgotten all the good hiding places.”

Jane moved towards the dining room next, but Elizabeth headed her off. “Let’s check upstairs,” she said.

Jane gave her a teasing glare. “You aren’t supposed to give any hints. It is cheating.”

She turned to go up the stairs, but then they heard a “thud” come from the pantry. Immediately, she went to investigate the noise.

“It might only be a servant,” Elizabeth said nervously. Jane opened the door to the butler’s pantry and gasped. Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins were tangled together in the tight space with their lips locked. Mr. Collins’ cravat was disheveled, and Charlotte’s fichu had come untucked from the neckline of her dress. They broke their contact as soon as Jane saw them. Mr. Collins was positively mortified, but Charlotte looked rather satisfied with herself.

Lydia, Kitty, and Maria Lucas, who had all been hiding together underneath the dining room table, popped out.

“Why, Mr. Collins, what on earth are you doing in that closet with Miss Lucas?” Lydia exclaimed.

“I–I,” Mr. Collins stammered. He looked to Jane, on whose face was written a mixture of horror and relief. “Jane! I do not know what came over me. It... it seems that I was overrun by my feelings. Miss Lucas is most ardent! She took me into the cupboard, and, and...”

Maria Lucas stepped forward. “Do not blame my sister for your conduct, sir!” she chastised. “When my father hears of this, you can be certain he will defend her honor!”

“Miss Bennet– Jane!” Mr. Collins clambered out of the pantry and threw himself at Jane’s feet.

Jane took a step back. “Mr. Collins,” she said decisively, “you may consider all discussion of an engagement between us to be at an end.”

Elizabeth tried hard not to smirk.



With so many witnesses to his indiscretion, Mr. Collins had no other options. He and Charlotte Lucas were to wed posthaste, per her father’s orders.

As soon as a license could be procured, they married in a private ceremony at the church with only the Lucas family and the local minister present.

“Do not worry about your future security,” Charlotte told Elizabeth and Jane in private when she and her new husband came to pay their respects before leaving for Kent. “I have Mr. Collins’ ear; he will make sure that you are all well-provided for and that you may remain at Longbourn as long as you wish. Otherwise, his beloved patroness will learn the circumstances behind his swift marriage.”

As much as Elizabeth was relieved that Jane would not have to marry the odious man, she worried for Charlotte’s sake. “Your sacrifice means everything to us. But can you really stand to live with such a man?”

“Oh, I think I have the situation well at hand,” Charlotte assured them. “I have him wrapped around my little finger, and I intend to keep it that way.” She smiled.

“Come and visit me at Hunsford, whenever you can.”

Elizabeth hugged her dear friend. “I will,” she promised. Elizabeth watched as Charlotte boarded the carriage with Mr. Collins and drove off to her new life.

She turned back inside the house and went upstairs. The sound of someone sobbing reached her ears. Opening her bedroom door, she saw Jane, sitting on her bed in tears.

“Why Jane, whatever is the matter?” she asked.

“Mr. Bingley has left Netherfield Park. And it appears he does not intend to return.”

Chapter 11



“What do you mean, Mr. Bingley has left Netherfield? Where has he gone?” Elizabeth sat down on Jane’s bed beside her. She handed her the handkerchief that she kept tucked in the sleeve of her dress.

Jane blew her nose loudly. “Read it, and you will see.” She handed a tear-stained letter, written in an elegant, female hand.

The note was from Caroline Bingley. She regretted that they had not called to take their leave, but her brother’s sudden desire to quit the county, coupled with Mr. Darcy’s eagerness to see his sister again, had made them all eager to remove to London. She doubted whether they would return anymore that winter, but heartily welcomed Jane or any of her sisters to call on them should they happen to be in Grosvenor Square during the Season. Best wishes to all their family, etcetera, etcetera.

“Well, I never—!” Elizabeth exclaimed. The news of the Netherfield party’s sudden removal was a blow, indeed, one she did not foresee happening.

“Oh, Lizzy, I really thought he loved me. I did! It feels just like losing Mr. Grayson all over again!”

Elizabeth took Jane into her arms and let her pour out her tears all over her shoulder.



Jane would not leave her room for two weeks. When she finally did come downstairs, her disposition improved little. She barely ate and remained silent unless spoken to.

Elizabeth was scarcely any better. She seemed to be in a permanently foul mood. Her self-reproach over the effects of her courtship facade subconsciously manifested in her finding faults with everyone else. She snapped at Mary for practicing her Christmas carols too loudly. She bickered with Lydia and Kitty over trivial matters, and she could not stand to be in her mother's presence for more than five minutes before making a sarcastic remark.

December was a blur of social engagements. Card parties, balls, and dinner engagements filled the time, so that there was scarcely an evening free when there was not any entertainment to be had. During this time, Elizabeth and Jane at last met the lieutenant, Mr. Wickham, about whom they had heard so much. It was at a gathering which Mrs. Bennet held at Longbourn. Several of the officers of the militia had been invited including Mr. Wickham. Elizabeth was surprised to find that she had already met Mr. Wickham once, though she did not know it.

"Oh, it's you!" She exclaimed, recognizing him as the soldier she had met that day in the square. "I am sorry that I never learned your name that day."

"The fault is mine, Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Wickham bowed after they had been properly introduced. "I was sorely remiss in my manners that day. I do hope that you have had no further trouble with your boots since then."

"What's this about boots, Lizzy?" Lydia demanded. "And how do you know Mr. Wickham?"

Elizabeth explained how Mr. Wickham had come to her rescue over the broken shoelace.

Lydia's curls bounced as she bobbed her head. "Of course— one can always count on Mr. Wickham to come to a lady's aid when she is in distress. As it happens, I am currently in distress because we are all wild for dancing, but my sister Mary refuses to play anything but the dourest of Christmas carols. You must come to my aid in persuading her to play us a country waltz instead."

Elizabeth and Wickham both hid their smiles. Mary was playing “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,” while singing very loudly and badly.

Mr. Wickham took Lydia’s arm and led her over to Mary’s piano. “Of course, Miss Lydia, this will not do! At the very least, she must play something jolly such as ‘We Wish You a Merry Christmas’ or ‘Good Christian Men, Rejoice’!”



The week before Christmas brought the arrival of Mrs. Bennet’s brother, Mr. Gardiner, along with his wife and children, who came to spend the holidays with them.

It did not take long for Mrs. Gardiner to notice the strange moods of her two favorite nieces.

“Whatever has caused Jane and Lizzy to be so out of sorts?” she inquired of Mrs. Bennet.

“Oh, I am afraid it is all rather due to the recent departure of two gentlemen who were staying hereabouts.” Mrs. Bennet frowned. “I was so certain that both my girls were on the verge of marrying these men. But before it could come to anything, both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy left the county, not intending to return.” She said nothing of the debacle over Mr. Collins’ proposal to Jane, nor his sudden change over to Charlotte Lucas. As soon as Mr. Collins had been caught *in flagrante* with Charlotte, Mrs. Bennet had supposed, along with everybody else, that Mr. Bingley would renew his suit. She was as surprised as anybody when Netherfield was suddenly vacated.

“Mr. Darcy, did you say?” Mrs. Gardiner’s ears perked up.

“Why yes! Do you know him? He resides at Pemberley, in Derbyshire, not too far from your childhood home, Mrs.

Gardiner.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded. “I have not met the man, personally, but I remember the family. Old Mr. Darcy did a great deal of good for the people of Derbyshire in his lifetime. I hope his son will follow in his footsteps.”

“I am sure that he shall. Mr. Darcy is a very good sort of man. A little bit proud, but on his very first public appearance in Meryton, he singled out Lizzy as the only girl he danced with outside those of his own party. His friend, Mr. Bingley showed a marked attention towards Jane from the very first. I fear both my girls are deeply grieved at the loss of their beaux. London may seem brighter thanks to their presence, but here in Hertfordshire, it has grown rather dim.”

Mrs. Gardiner had an idea. “If it is to London that they have gone, then why not send Lizzy and Jane back with Mr. Gardiner and me when we return to Cheapside after the holidays? You know we are always happy to have them with us. Perhaps while in London they might reconnect with these two suitors, rekindle whatever they had before. Unless the damage to their relationships is irreparable.”

Mrs. Bennet tittered. “Oh, as to that, I cannot say. Mayhap my girls know something about the matter which I do not. But I do declare, I never saw two couples more in love than Mr. Bingley and my Jane or Mr. Darcy and my Lizzy. They were practically smitten with each other from the first!”

“If that is the case, we ought to put forth my proposal to the girls directly. I know Mr. Gardiner can have no objection to the scheme. If all else fails, the girls shall enjoy all that London has to offer for the Season.”

Mrs. Bennet agreed, and as Mr. Bennet had no objections either, they asked Jane and Elizabeth for their opinion.

Elizabeth readily accepted the offer. But Jane held reservations.

“I am not certain that I ever wish to meet Mr. Bingley again,” she said, pursing her lips. But her aunt held sway.

“You do not need to meet him at all, if you do not wish to. After all, you travel in different social circles. But let his presence in London not deter you from enjoying all that the town has to offer. It has been some time since you or Lizzy came to stay with us. I am certain that we can find much to divert your attention.”

Jane agreed; thus, the matter was settled.



The Gardiners remained at Longbourn until Epiphany. When they departed, they had in their charge two forlorn young ladies.

Their house in Gracechurch Street was compact, but tidy, exactly the sort of place one would expect a family in trade to reside. The three-storied residence sat atop Mr. Gardiner’s cabinetry storefront within walking distance from his warehouses. Dining room and kitchens on the first floor, drawing room and the master suite on the second floor, and the rest of the bedrooms on the third floor. Jane and Elizabeth’s cousins Maddy and Ruth moved to cots in the nursery with their younger brothers in order that Jane and Elizabeth might take the two beds in their room during their stay.

At Elizabeth’s urging, she and Jane went the next morning to call on Caroline Bingley in Grosvenor Street. But they were told by the butler that she was out.

“See, she means to drop the acquaintance,” Jane said as they left the Hursts’ residence.

“Perhaps she is really out,” Elizabeth said.

“No, I distinctly saw the curtain flutter on the upper window. Someone was there.”

“A maid, perhaps? We could call again in a few days or so,” Elizabeth suggested.

“Does that not defy social protocol?” Jane asked. “We left our cards. It is our turn to wait for her to return the call.”

“We could simply say we were passing through the area and wished to stop by.”

But their second visit a week later yielded no more pleasant results than the first. Again, they were told that Miss Bingley was not receiving visitors. Yet a few minutes after that, they saw a carriage stop in front of the Hursts’ house. Two ladies emerged, rang the bell and were admitted by the butler.”

“Now, I am convinced that Miss Bingley means to give us the cut,” Jane said.

“But that does not mean Mr. Bingley means to do likewise.”

“If that were true, then why does he not call on us at Gracechurch Street?”



“Now, then,” Mrs. Gardiner said to her nieces towards the end of their second week in London. “What shall we say to a night out at the theater, to celebrate your being here with us?” Protests were made over the cost of the outing, but Mrs. Gardiner insisted that they were overdue for a treat. Mr. Gardiner volunteered to remain home with the children so that his wife might chaperone the young ladies.

Elizabeth dressed in her finest gown, the creamy silk that she had worn on the night of the Netherfield Ball. She

hoped it would not remind Jane of that awful evening. Jane wore a silvery gray dress which matched her gloomy mood.

“I hope we shall not meet anyone we know at the theater,” she said.

“If you mean Mr. Bingley, you ought not to fear encountering him at any place,” Elizabeth replied with a decided air.

“Yes, you’re right.” Jane straightened her shoulders. “If we should happen across each other, I shall meet him indifferently, as acquaintances.”

Elizabeth felt that there was no possibility that Jane could ever view Mr. Bingley indifferently, but she did not argue.

The theater was not overcrowded, and they were easily able to find their seats in the upper balcony, which fortunately was at the front of that section and provided an unobstructed view over the railing. Mrs. Gardiner lent Elizabeth her opera glasses, so she might better see the show. Elizabeth scanned the crowds in the orchestra seating on the floor below, looking to see if she saw Mr. Bingley or Mr. Darcy or any other of their acquaintances. Jane was looking too, using Mr. Gardiner’s borrowed opera glasses in his absence. She suddenly gripped Elizabeth’s knee. Elizabeth turned her glasses towards the boxes where Jane’s gaze was held. There, in the second upper box, was Mr. Bingley, along with Caroline Bingley, Mr. and Mrs. Hurst, and Mr. Darcy.

“He’s here,” Jane whispered. She was clenching Elizabeth’s knee so hard that Elizabeth had to take her hand and pry it off. Jane did not apologize; merely moved her hand to hold the glasses with two hands instead of one.

Elizabeth studied the party in the box. Caroline Bingley had her arm wrapped around Mr. Darcy’s arm as she leaned in to whisper and giggle. His face remained stoic. Mr. Hurst was already dozing in his seat while his bored wife yawned and

fanned herself. Mr. Bingley's countenance was wooden, showing no trace of amusement.

Caroline took out her opera glasses and began spying on the crowds herself, no doubt looking for anyone of importance with whom she might try to insinuate herself at intermission. Moving her gaze to the Dress Circle on the first balcony, she tapped her brother's arm excitedly and pointed. Elizabeth guessed there was probably a peer or two in the audience that evening, though from her vantage point she could not see that part of the theater. Mr. Bingley took the glasses from Caroline and pointed them in the direction she had indicated. However, his gaze slowly rose up to the second balcony where he froze. Handing the opera glasses back, he kept his gaze fixed on the person who had captured his attention. Jane, too, stared back at him. Tears welled in her eyes. She turned back to her sister.

"I am dreadfully sorry, Lizzy, Aunt Gardiner. I cannot do this after all."

"But the play is starting!" Mrs. Gardiner protested.

Jane recollected how much her aunt and uncle had paid for the tickets and sat back down. She knew that if she left, Mrs. Gardiner and Lizzy would have to follow. She could not travel the streets of London alone at night.

The play was a comedy, but Elizabeth found she could not laugh at it. Fortunately, Mrs. Gardiner appeared to find it hilarious and was having a good time, but Jane was unable to enjoy the play. Jane seemed torn between watching the box across the theater from them and keeping her head pointed at her shoes, stifling back her tears. At intermission, Mrs. Gardiner said she needed to find the ladies' withdrawing room to refresh herself. Her nieces accompanied her. But as they emerged from the staircase that led to the mezzanine lobby, they came face to face with Mr. Bingley and company. He and his companions greeted them politely, but without any of the warmth that had formerly been.

Elizabeth looked at Mr. Darcy's face. There, too, was a trace of something resembling sadness or regret.

Elizabeth recollected her manners and introduced her aunt to their acquaintances. She was received with all due civility from them, but Elizabeth thought she could detect a sneer on the faces of Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Hurst as they curtsied.

“We did not expect to find you in London,” Mr. Bingley said in a tepid tone.

“The plan was only recently made, at my aunt and uncle’s recommendation,” Elizabeth answered. Jane had not yet found her voice.

Mr. Bingley surveyed Jane, noticing how the blonde tendrils framing her face made her look especially becoming. “You are looking well this evening, Miss Bennet,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Bingley.” The words were barely perceptible as they left Jane’s lips. She looked up at his deep blue eyes, searching for anything that might give her hope. But Mr. Bingley turned his gaze aside from her and bit his lip.

Mr. Darcy bowed to them. “The play will resume soon. We bid you all a good evening.” He took Caroline’s arm and headed for the door to their box. The Hursts followed behind him. Mr. Bingley gave one last glance at them, nodded his head firmly, then trailed behind.

As soon as they were gone, Jane fled to the nearest corner and began sobbing uncontrollably. Mrs. Gardiner put her arms around Jane and laid her head on her shoulder.

“That was not so terrible, was it? Mr. Bingley received you very civilly.”

“Very civilly,” Jane answered through her tears. “That is all I will be to him. A civil acquaintance. Nothing more. I thought that I could stand to be in the same room with him again, but I find that I cannot. Would you mind terribly if we called it a night?”

“No, of course not,” Mrs. Gardiner crooned. She glanced at Elizabeth and sighed in pity. Elizabeth could only return a

melancholy expression. Something had to be done about Jane and Mr. Bingley, but what?

Chapter 12



A few days later, Mrs. Gardiner suggested that they take the children out for a walk in Hyde Park. “The fresh air might lift your spirits,” she said to Jane.

“Thank you, but I will not join you,” Jane said. “You all go on without me. It is good for the children to get out and enjoy the mild weather today.” The air was cool, but the sun was out, and there was no snow on the ground. It was the perfect winter day to enjoy the outdoors.

Elizabeth regretted leaving Jane behind alone, but she went with her aunt to help with the children. Her uncle, whose trade was in furniture-making, had fashioned a cart for his wife. It was not nearly as fancy as the perambulators that the aristocrats had for their children to be pulled along by a pony or dog, but of a practical sort which could be pushed along the path with the baby inside. Mrs. Gardiner pushed her youngest, a boy of less than two years, along the path in his perambulator-cart while Elizabeth held tightly to the leading strings of the second boy, who was between the ages of three and four. Ruth and Maddy, who were six and eight, respectively, ran along the path ahead of them, chasing birds and squirrels and shrieking with delight.

Elizabeth had to keep a close watch over her charge, who wanted nothing more than to break free and chase after his sisters.

“Yes, I know you want to run too, Eddie,” Elizabeth said to the fussing boy as he tugged on the ribbons. “When you are bigger, you may run free as well. For now, stay close to me and your mama.”

“Squirr! There’s a squirr!” he yelled, pointing at a squirrel running across the lawn and up a tree.

“Yes, that is a squirrel, Eddie! Excellent job finding him. How many birds do you see? Can you count?”

The boy began jumping up and down trying to count them. “One, two, fwee, five, seffun, ten, eleffen.”

Mrs. Gardiner laughed. “We are going to have to work on his counting, I can see.”

The two girls raced back towards them after having run a distance ahead.

“Mama, Mama, can we please feed the ducks?” Maddy begged.

“Pleeeeeeease?” her little sister echoed.

“Of course, my darlings,” Mrs. Gardiner answered. She handed them the bag of stale bread scraps that her cook had given her. “Mind you do not fall into the pond.”

Eddie was thrilled he was allowed to partake in the activity too. He dropped crumbs for the ducks, who came out of the water and waddled near his feet, eager to nibble at the offerings.

“Here, duck, duck, duck!” he cried, then shrieked when a duck tried to nip at his hand. He darted back to his mother for safety and demanded to be picked up. Mrs. Gardiner had taken baby Robbie out of his cart, so she handed him over to Elizabeth so she could hold her other son. Young Robbie babbled excitedly and pointed at the birds. “Duh, duh!” he said, trying to say “duck.”

“Du-ck. Du-ck,” Elizabeth enunciated slowly for him.

The boy tried again. “Duh-kuh,” he said.

“Good, Robbie!” Elizabeth praised.

Mrs. Gardiner smiled. “You will be a natural mother one day, Elizabeth.” She looked down the path a ways. “Is that not your friend Mr. Darcy, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth glanced in the direction her aunt indicated. Sure enough, Mr. Darcy was walking down the path with an

elegant young lady whom Elizabeth had never seen before. She felt a twinge of jealousy, but quickly dismissed it. The young lady walked with a regal air, taking care not to trod on her fine walking dress. Her blonde curls glistened in the sunlight. She held tightly to Mr. Darcy's arm as he leaned closely to talk to her, a clear sense of familiarity between them. As they neared the place where Elizabeth and her relatives were, he caught sight of her.

"Miss Elizabeth! Fancy seeing you again."

"Likewise, Mr. Darcy." Elizabeth composed herself quickly.

The woman beside him gave him a quizzical look.

"Er, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, allow me to introduce to you my sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy."

Miss Darcy was pleased to meet Elizabeth. "My brother has told me much about you."

"Only terrible things, I am sure," Elizabeth teased.

"Oh, no, he has never spoken a word except in your praise!" Miss Darcy said, alarmed.

"Forgive me." Elizabeth chuckled. "I am rather in the habit of speaking in jest." She quickly introduced her aunt and the children to Miss Darcy.

"Shall we take a turn around the park together?" Mrs. Gardiner suggested.

"I should be delighted," Mr. Darcy replied. "That is, if you have no objections, Miss Elizabeth."

"None at all." Elizabeth forced herself to smile and mentally told the butterflies in her stomach to settle down. After the sharp words they had spoken to each other at their last meeting, Elizabeth wondered why Mr. Darcy would even speak to her, let alone agree to walk with her.

Mrs. Gardiner attempted to get her children to continue their walk, but they were far too engrossed in feeding the ducks and watching the fish in the pond to be persuaded.

“Go on without me, Lizzy dear,” she said to her niece. “The children and I will be waiting for you at this spot when you complete your lap around the park.”

“The Bingleys and the Hursts are not with you today,” Elizabeth observed as she fell into an easy pace beside Mr. and Miss Darcy. “Are you not staying together here in London?”

Mr. Darcy answered, “They are at Mr. Hurst’s residence on Grosvenor Street. Georgiana and I have a house of our own not far from them.”

“I see,” Elizabeth said. She cast Mr. Darcy a sideways glance to see if his expression bore any animosity towards her. But his countenance remained pleasant.

Georgiana spoke next. “Are you enjoying your stay in London, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth replied that she was.

“We have been in town for nearly two weeks now, with my aunt and uncle Gardiner. In fact, we saw your brother a few evenings ago, at the theater.”

“Really?” Georgiana turned her head to Mr. Darcy. “My brother did not mention seeing you.”

“I see a great many people I know when I go to the theater. I do not mention them all to you, especially those you are not yet acquainted with.” Mr. Darcy smiled at his sister.

Their awkward small talk continued until Georgiana spotted some friends and waved to them. “Oh look, Will, there is Miss Armitage and Miss Nickel. I will go on and say ‘hullo’ to them. Do continue your conversation with Miss Bennet.” Georgiana picked up her skirts and hurried to catch up to her friends.

Elizabeth felt the hairs on her neck bristle, and she was not sure whether it was due to the chilly January wind or being essentially alone with Mr. Darcy for the first time since the Netherfield ball.

Turning to Elizabeth, Darcy commented, "I heard about Mr. Collins' marriage to Miss Lucas. I must say, I was surprised by the news."

"You are not the only one, Mr. Darcy. It seems that Mr. Collins' ardor for Miss Lucas outstripped his infatuation with my sister. After the Netherfield ball, his affections transferred overnight."

Quite literally, Elizabeth thought.

"What a strange turn of events," Darcy remarked.

"Indeed."

They walked for a while without speaking. Elizabeth wanted to say something, to offer some kind of explanation after their clash at the ball. She mulled over in her mind what she ought to say, unsure how her words would be received. They were about halfway around the pond when Elizabeth spoke again.

"Mr. Darcy, it is my belief that Jane would never have gone through with marrying Mr. Collins, no matter what advantages he offered. She loves Mr. Bingley far too much."

Mr. Darcy nodded. "I observed her a little at the ball, and I do believe I detected her regard for him there in the sorrow she had at being passed over by him, but I was too proud to admit it."

"If you had seen how she behaved at the opera last night, after you all had gone, you would be utterly convinced of her feelings for him. Jane is in agony, Mr. Darcy. The kind of agony one can only feel when one is separated from the person he or she loves."

"Bingley, too, has not been himself. He sulks all day, barely says a word. He won't touch his dinner, save for a few bites."

Elizabeth kept back a smile. His behavior sounded exactly like Jane's had over the past few weeks.

“I am still angry with you, you know, for your part in suggesting to Mr. Bingley that Jane might only be after his money.”

“Yes, I know,” Darcy answered.

“You could have asked me, as a friend, whether my sister had indicated any feelings for him, and I would have been straightforward with you.”

Elizabeth walked a few paces before continuing. “However, it has been suggested to me that I might also be partly to blame. By making it appear that we were courting at the same time that my sister was being courted by Mr. Bingley, I gave our neighbors the impression that Jane and I were no better than the fortune-hunters you told me you were eager to avoid. Had these rumors not reached Mr. Bingley’s ears, he might not have begun to doubt that his affections were returned.” There was a pang in her heart that still lingered over her part in Jane’s misery.

Mr. Darcy bit his lip. “In this, I cannot allow you to shoulder all the blame. As you recall, it was my idea that we feign our courtship, and I did all that I could to make those around us believe our act.”

Mr. Darcy cleared his throat. “I am ready to help you reunite my friend and your sister, in whatever way I can, Miss Bennet. If you have any ideas how we might go about it, I am listening.”

“They must meet again,” Elizabeth answered. “But how, and where, I am not certain. We do not frequent the same circles, and our meeting at the theater last night was pure coincidence.”

“But what if there were to be another...coincidence?” Darcy mused. “What if we were to stage a meeting between them, somewhere where they might be forced to interact with each other?”

Elizabeth thought for a moment. “My aunt has spoken of taking the children to see the Royal Menagerie sometime

during our visit here. Jane loves animals. I know she would not pass up the opportunity to see such rare creatures.”

“Excellent idea!” Darcy exclaimed. “I have not been to the menagerie since I was a small boy, and I confess, I have never taken Georgiana to see it. I am certain that if I propose the idea to Bingley, he will want to come along.”

They arranged a time and a day when they thought it likely to work out that their two parties should “accidentally” meet.

They returned to the spot where Mrs. Gardiner and the children were, about the same time that Miss Darcy bid her friends adieu and rejoined them.

“I thank you for the pleasant walk, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth said.

“Likewise, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy answered.

“Miss Darcy, it was a pleasure to meet you,” Elizabeth curtsied.

“The pleasure was all mine, Miss Bennet.” Georgiana Darcy beamed. “I do hope we shall meet again soon.”

“I am sure that we shall,” Elizabeth smiled in return.



“Yes, a visit to the Royal Menagerie sounds lovely!” Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed when she heard where Elizabeth wanted to visit. “Edward and I have been meaning to take the children for some time, but there never seemed to be a good opportunity.”

“I understand it is a little bit expensive, though,” Elizabeth said.

“A little,” Mrs. Gardiner nodded, “but we can afford it.”

“Jane and I would be happy to pay our own way. We have some pin money saved up.”

Jane nodded her head in agreement.

“Nonsense!” Mrs. Gardiner shook her head. “You are our guests. We will not hear of you using your own money for this outing.”

Jane confessed an eagerness to see the exotic birds. She had heard there were several varieties of parrots on display, and a peacock besides. The children were excited too. Eddie wanted to see the lions, while his sisters hoped there might be some gentler creatures. They were a little terrified of the thought of seeing a vicious lion. But their father told them that all the animals were kept in cages, and that they should be perfectly safe so long as they did not go too near to the bars.

But the day they were to go to the menagerie, a sudden rainstorm blew in, which turned to snow as the temperature dropped. No chance of an outing that day.

“Drat this wintry weather!” Elizabeth cursed, looking out the window at the streets, which were becoming impassable with snow.

“Lizzy! I am surprised at you, uttering a swear word like that,” her aunt reprimanded. “You may be disappointed that our outing is postponed, but there’s no need to utter such language in front of your cousins.”

Elizabeth apologized, then stomped up to the room where she and Jane were staying.

“No menagerie today,” she said to Jane, who was getting dressed.

“Why?”

“Have you seen the weather outside?”

Jane peeked out the window. “Oh dear, that is disappointing. Well, we are sure to have fair weather again soon, and I am certain we will have a chance to visit the menagerie before our stay here ends.”

Elizabeth was sure she was right, but her scheme with Mr. Darcy had all come to ruin. Now, how could they be sure that Jane and Bingley would run into each other on the same day? She needed a new plan, and quickly.



February 1, 1812

Dear Mr. Darcy,

Kindly meet me at Russell Square Garden at five o'clock this evening, if you are able.

E.B.

Darcy read the short, handwritten note that his butler, Morris, handed him. The note came to him several days after the snow had made any thought of going to the Royal Menagerie impossible. There was still snow on the ground, but the roads at least were beginning to thaw, and what little remained had been sufficiently packed down by the traffic of heavy carts and horses so that the main thoroughfares were once again navigable by passenger coaches and other hackneys.

Darcy had been thinking for the past few days of how to reach Elizabeth, since their planned meeting failed to go through. He dared not send a letter to her through the post, lest it be intercepted by her aunt and uncle and her reputation stained by it. But it seemed she had found a way to get a missive to him instead. *Rather bold*, he thought, *but effective*.

There was a knock at the door. Mr. Darcy heard Caroline's shrill voice and Mrs. Hurst's nasally one as Morris let them in.

He crumpled the paper and threw it in the bin just as the ladies were shown into the room. "Hullo, Mr. Darcy! How are you this morning? It is a bit chilly, is it not?" Caroline said breathlessly, tossing her coat to the butler and kneeling down beside the drawing room fire.

"Yes, it rather is," Darcy muttered.

"I would not have left my house in such weather," Mrs. Hurst sniffed, sitting down on the sofa with a great flounce of her skirt, "but *this lady* insisted we call upon you as soon as the road conditions permitted."

"And where are Mr. Hurst and your fine brother this morning?" Darcy asked the ladies.

"Charles would not stir," Caroline said. "He mopes about the house all day. I fear he is still pining for that Bennet chit. Mr. Hurst went to the club as soon as the roads were clear. I imagine it was to get away from *her*."

Mrs. Hurst glared at her sister. "Or to get away from you. You've been more disagreeable than I have, as of late."

Mr. Darcy groaned and poured himself a glass from the decanter on his side table. The bickering at Hurst Place had grown increasingly bad since their arrival in London, both between Mr. and Mrs. Hurst and between Mrs. Hurst and Caroline. He wondered why the Hursts did not send Caroline away to live with some aunt, or whether Mr. and Mrs. Hurst might eventually live in separate households. They certainly did not make a picture of marital bliss.

"Anyways," Caroline continued, "Charles said that though he would not join us, he could see no impropriety in our coming here. After all, we are here to call upon Georgiana." She smiled coquettishly. Seeing Georgiana certainly was not Caroline's motive in coming, though he supposed she had to maintain some sort of pretense for the sake of propriety. Nevertheless, he said, "In that case, I shall fetch her directly." He set his drink down, grateful for any

excuse to escape the room. But his departure was not needed, for Georgiana appeared at the doorway just then.

“Miss Bingley, Mrs. Hurst, I am glad you have come.” She gave them each a warm hug which Darcy was sure they did not deserve.

Caroline spoke. “Georgiana, I wondered if you might help me persuade your brother to go with us to the British Museum. They have many wonderful curiosities on display; ancient artifacts and Greek antiquities and the like, or so I am told by Mrs. Miller. Would it not be fun to see them?”

“Indeed, it would!” Georgiana exclaimed. “Oh, please say we can go, Will!”

Before Darcy could answer, Caroline interjected, “we cannot go right away, unfortunately. I have many calls I need to make; I am quite behind, thanks to the weather. But we can collect you both this afternoon around, say five o’clock?”

Darcy recalled Elizabeth’s note and the time she had indicated they should meet.

“I am afraid I cannot join you, if that is the case. I have business to attend to.”

“Business? Whyever should you have business at this time of year?”

“Contrary to your belief, Caroline, my life is not one solely of leisure. I have business at all times of the year, and I too have been delayed in some important matters due to the snowstorm.”

“Well!” Caroline huffed.

“Why don’t you take Georgiana to the museum in my absence?” Darcy suggested. “I have been many times, but she has not. It would do her some good to have a ladies’ outing today.”

The ladies agreed and promised to return for Georgiana later that afternoon.

“It’s settled then,” Darcy said. But Caroline eyed him suspiciously.



Darcy found Elizabeth waiting for him on one of the benches in the middle of the garden. Darcy’s boots crunched as he walked along the snow-covered path. She turned her head and saw him coming and began to rise, but he bade her remain where she was. He sat down on another bench just beside hers.

Darcy could not put his finger on the feeling that he was experiencing, being near to her again. Ever since their chance meeting at the theater, something had stirred up inside him, something vaguely akin to that feeling that he had during her extended stay at Netherfield. He knew it had been inane of him at the ball to suggest that Elizabeth had any pecuniary motives for staging a courtship with him. His irrational anger had been replaced by regret for letting his own fears get the better of him in that regard.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, a little awkwardly.

“Of course.” He looked around, expecting Mrs. Gardiner or Jane to be nearby. “Where is your escort?”

“I came alone.” Feeling some explanation was needed, she added, “I did not want my sister or my aunt to know that we are co-conspirators. It would raise questions that I would rather not answer.”

Darcy nodded. In truth, he was far from disappointed that she came by herself. The thrill of meeting her in secret reminded him of the early days of their pretend courtship. Besides, there was no one around who knew them, so what harm could it do?

Elizabeth shifted her legs on the bench to a more comfortable angle. “Our plan for a ‘chance meeting’ at the menagerie did not work.”

“No, it did not,” Darcy gave a little laugh. “Leave it to Mother Nature to divert Cupid’s arrows.”

Elizabeth chuckled at his comment. “Can you think of any other place we might bring them together— Bingley and Jane?”

Darcy proposed a few occasions, but none were to Elizabeth’s liking. She and her sister were not invited to Lady Judith Brooks’ coming-out ball, nor were they likely to gain entrance at Almack’s, and they had just been to the theater and Hyde Park.

“It is just as well,” Mr. Darcy sighed. “Bingley scarcely stirs from his chamber anymore.”

“Jane too,” Elizabeth said. “I can hardly get her to stir out of doors. She has been despondent ever since Mr. Bingley quitted Netherfield Park.”

Darcy’s breath fogged up in front of him from the cold. It was a little chilly to sit on the cold stone bench. “Shall we take a stroll around the square?”

Elizabeth nodded. She took Mr. Darcy’s arm, and they began making a circuit around the perimeter of the park.

“Mr. Darcy, there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you,” Elizabeth began. “You once remarked to me that Jane’s manner was always so reserved, that you could never detect any symptoms of her affection for Mr. Bingley.”

“It is true. I was deceived by other reasons too, as you know, but my own observation did little to contradict the rumors I was hearing. I now know that your sister is merely shy, and that I should have been less quick to judge.”

“Jane *is* shy by nature, but there is more to it.”

Mr. Darcy looked at her and waited for her to go on.

“About seven years ago, our family was invited to spend the Christmas holidays at my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner’s home. Jane, who was only fifteen at the time, had just come out into society. There was a young man, the son of a business associate of my uncle’s, who became enamored with her. He was among the up-and-coming *nouveau riche*, much like Mr. Bingley.”

“My mother, of course, wanted the match to take place very badly. She encouraged Jane to spend as much time with the man as she could, to flirt with him, to make him fall in love with her. And we all thought that he did. He wrote her poetry, paid her compliments, called on her nearly every day—did all but declare himself to her.”

“And then, just as suddenly as his flirtations had begun, they ceased altogether. He stopped calling and was mysteriously absent at events. When we returned home, we thought perhaps he might write to her. But just a few weeks later, we learned from my Aunt Gardiner that he had married a wealthy heiress. Jane was devastated. She had allowed herself to fall head over heels for him, only to have all her hopes and dreams dashed. So, if she has been hesitant to be open with her affections for Mr. Bingley, it is because she feared that the same thing would happen again.”

Darcy sighed. “And Mr. Bingley’s going away so suddenly without a word made it seem that he had done the very same thing.” He understood now just how devastating Mr. Bingley’s sudden change of attitude towards Jane had been.

“Yes,” Elizabeth answered soberly. “She does love Mr. Bingley, though. More than she ever loved the other fellow, I believe.”

“And Bingley returns her feelings, though he has been just as afraid to show it,” Darcy said.

“Then we must find a way to get them together. We cannot let them go on in their misery.”

“The menagerie is still a good plan, I think,” Mr. Darcy said. “If only we can manage to pull it off.”

“But how?” Elizabeth asked. “We can scarcely count on the weather. It betrayed us once already.”

Darcy thought for a moment. “How did you manage to send me that missive earlier? I assume you did not send it by regular post, for fear of discovery.”

“I hired the little boy who delivers our newspapers. He was quite happy to make the trip for the two shillings I gave him.”

“Two shillings!” exclaimed Mr. Darcy. “For that price, I should think the lad would be happy to go all the way to Dover for you. Next time you hire him, tell him I shall be happy to pay the sum on your behalf.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I could not ask that of you.”

“Please. For me, it is a small price. But a lady such as yourself can have very little pocket money, I am sure, and I daresay you have not asked your uncle for the money.”

She agreed, and Darcy asked her to write to him and name the day whenever her family should choose to try again for the menagerie. He would do everything in his power to drop whatever plans they had and bring Bingley to the place on that day.

Darcy was happy they had a new plan in place. He would do anything to raise his friend’s spirits and reunite him with his love, and it seemed that Elizabeth was determined to do the same for her sister.

Elizabeth rubbed her hands together and shivered.

“You are chilled. We must find you someplace to warm up. There is a little shop near the square. Will you not join me there for a cup of tea or cocoa while you warm yourself?”

“No, thank you. I had better get back before I am missed.”

“Where is your carriage then? Let me walk you to it. This path can be a little slippery. It is not as worn down as the main roads are.”

“I haven’t any carriage,” Elizabeth replied. “I walked here.”

“All the way from Gracechurch Street?” Mr. Darcy was incredulous. “But that is over three miles!”

“I am well accustomed to walking such distances at home.”

“Yes, but that is in the sleepy little town of Meryton. Here in London, anything might befall a young lady such as yourself. I had expected your uncle’s manservant to be waiting nearby with the carriage, but here I find you have come unchaperoned. This is unacceptable. You must allow me to deliver you home safely in my carriage, for my own peace of mind.”

“Your concern does you credit, Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth was grateful for his offer. Truthfully, she had been dreading walking all the way home in the cold.

Darcy took her by the arm and led her to where a comfortable coach bearing the Darcy crest waited at the edge of the square. As he helped her inside, he failed to notice a familiar carriage pass by them on its way to the British Museum. But the keen eyes of the redheaded woman inside it did not fail to recognize Darcy’s carriage and the two people entering it as she peered out her window.

Chapter 13



Georgiana approached her brother the following day. “Did your business happen to take you near the British Museum yesterday?”

“Er, near there, in Bloomsbury. Why?” Darcy answered.

“Well, I did not happen to see it myself, but Miss Bingley looked out the window of the carriage as we were passing by Russell Square Garden. She said she could have sworn she saw you entering the Darcy carriage there.”

Darcy chose his words carefully. “I had a business meeting with someone. Perhaps she saw me as I was leaving.”

“If your business was so near to the museum, why did you not join us when you had concluded?”

“In truth, I did not know when my meeting would end, and I did not want to hold you all up in waiting for me to finish my business before we could go. It was better for you to enjoy the museum without me.”

Darcy felt nervous. If Caroline had spotted him, had she seen Elizabeth too? Georgiana made no mention of another person. If Caroline had said something to her, then he knew he could count on Georgiana to be discreet about it. But Caroline was another story. If she had seen him getting into a closed carriage with Miss Elizabeth, and no chaperone in sight, that bit of gossip in her hands would be like a lit taper next to a keg of gunpowder. He regretted being so careless as to let this happen.

He changed the subject. “Why do we not renew our plans to go to the menagerie, now that the weather is improving again?”

Indeed, though there was still snow on the ground, the temperature had risen to where it was on the day that Mr.

Darcy had walked around the Serpentine Pond with Elizabeth.

“Yes, tomorrow would be an excellent day for the Royal Menagerie,” Georgiana agreed.

A note was dispatched inviting the Bingleys and the Hursts to join them, which was answered in the affirmative.

Darcy also sent a note to Gracechurch Street via his valet. He did not know why he hadn't thought of it before. Communication with Elizabeth would have been so much easier, and they might have avoided the possibility of being spotted together in public unchaperoned. His valet went in plain clothes rather than his usual livery, so as to avoid suspicion. The valet returned an hour later with a reply from Elizabeth confirming the outing would take place. Now all Darcy needed to do was to pray that the fair weather would hold.



The weather proved to be every bit as satisfactory as they had predicted. Sunny skies, and not a cloud in sight. The Hurst's carriage came to collect Darcy and Georgiana at half past ten, and they were off. Georgiana was as excited as a small child on St. Nicholas' Day. Darcy had to remind himself that though she was nearly sixteen and would soon be making her debut in society, that she was very much still a child at heart. *And yet, she has already suffered so much heartbreak for one so young,* Darcy thought.

Darcy paid for their tickets at the gate. The Royal Menagerie was housed within the Tower of London on the bank of the Thames. A small plaque near the entrance read that animals had been housed there since the reign of King

John in the thirteenth century. Caroline opened her parasol and rested it along her shoulder.

“Oh, look! It is an elephant!” Georgiana cried. She raced over to look at the large, lumbering, gray beast. Mr. and Mrs. Hurst followed at a distance. Caroline clung to Darcy’s arm and bade him take her to see the “filthy beast.” Mr. Bingley walked behind them, holding his hands behind his back, his expression calm but happier than Darcy had seen him in weeks.

The elephant stuck his trunk through the bars, and Georgiana reached out a timid hand to pet it. She giggled with delight.

“Careful, Georgiana,” Darcy cautioned.

“He does seem to be a gentle sort of beast,” Bingley mused, “though I would hate to be trampled by those large feet.”

Caroline refused to get too close. She held a gloved finger to her nose. “The smell here is awful,” she said.

The corners of Darcy’s mouth turned up. “Did you expect anything different from a place that houses animals?”

After Georgiana had her fill of entertainment from the elephant, they headed to see the exotic birds. As they rounded the corner, they came face to face with the Gardiners and their nieces.

Bingley’s jaw dropped at the sight of Jane. She was holding hands with a little boy, her smile lighting up her whole face as she laughed at the antics of her little cousins.

She stopped in surprise when she saw Mr. Bingley in front of her.

The two stared at each other for a minute before they recollected their manners.

“What a surprise to see you all here,” Jane said. This time her smile was forced. She grabbed Elizabeth’s hand and tried to calm her nerves.

“Likewise, Miss Bennet,” Mr. Bingley replied. He took off his hat and gave them a slight bow.

“My aunt you already know.” Jane gestured to Mrs. Gardiner, who curtsied to them. “And here is my uncle, Mr. Gardiner.”

“How d’you do?” Mr. Gardiner shook hands with the gentlemen.

Mr. Darcy stepped forward. “It is a beautiful day for the menagerie, is it not?” It took all his willpower not to wink at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth cocked her head at Caroline. “It has been some weeks since we last met you at the theater, Miss Bingley. My sister and I called on you several times at Grosvenor Street when we first arrived in town but were told you were out or feeling unwell. Did you never happen to see our card that we left?”

Miss Bingley tittered. “Oh, my butler must have forgotten to give it to me. I shall have to have words with him. He has been very absent-minded as of late.”

She reclaimed Darcy’s arm. “Come Darcy, we must let the Bennet sisters and their family enjoy their outing in peace. We were about to go see the exotic birds, were we not?”

“We are heading to see the birds, as well,” Elizabeth said.

“Well, since we are all here together, why do we not all go along as one big party?” Darcy suggested. Now was the moment of truth. Would Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet be amenable, or would one of them object?

Both of them looked awkwardly at each other. Finally, Mr. Bingley said, “I can think of no reason why we should not all see the animals together.”

“Yes,” Jane said nervously. “After all, why not?” She laughed.

It was like watching a play, Darcy thought. Bingley held out his arm to Jane, who timidly accepted it. The pair led the way, with Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner and their children next, followed by the Hursts. Mr. Darcy offered his arm to Elizabeth, which left Caroline and Georgiana to trail behind.

When Bingley had first heard about Jane's engagement having been called off, he was incredulous. Then, he had been unwilling to accept Darcy's adamant that Jane truly cared for him. Darcy could not reveal his source, naturally. But it seemed that Darcy's words had worked to unravel Bingley's mistrust of Jane. He had admitted to Darcy, only the other night, that if he had the opportunity to meet her again, he would give Miss Bennet another chance. Let time and intimacy prove her true feelings for him. Seeing them arm in arm, Darcy hoped that this marked a new start for his friend.

"Look at the scarlet plumage on that parrot!" Jane exclaimed to Mr. Bingley. "Isn't it spectacular?"

Bingley tried to coax the bird to speak for her. "Hullo, parrot. Say 'hullo' for us, will you? Hullo. Hullo," he repeated.

"Awwk, hullo!" the bird cheerfully copied Bingley's greeting.

Jane laughed. "How delightful!"

Mrs. Gardiner, who always had some sort of snack tucked away in her bag for the children, pulled out a handkerchief tied around a pile of white, flaky biscuits. She handed them out for the children to feed to the birds. Baby Robbie chose to eat his instead, shoving his chubby fits into his mouth along with the snack. The rest of the children were delighted when the parrots and other birds nibbled broken pieces of biscuit right from their hands.

"Mind you don't let them nip you, now," Mrs. Gardiner cautioned.

Darcy watched as Elizabeth tried to coax a beautiful, bright-blue peacock into unfurling his tail. He was more

interested in pecking at the crumbs she tossed into the cage, however.

Caroline pushed her way in between Bingley and Jane and picked up one of the biscuits that little Eddie had dropped. She held it between the bars towards the scarlet macaw. "Talk, bird! Talk!" she commanded.

The parrot reached down from its perch and grabbed the biscuit from her fingers, pinching some of Caroline's skin in the process with its beak.

"Ouch! It bit me!" Caroline recoiled.

Bingley laughed. "Should have listened to Mrs. Gardiner, sister!"

Caroline huffed. "These birds are boring. Let us go see something more interesting. I propose we visit the cats next."

They wandered over to the leopards' pen. Three beautiful leopardesses resided within. One was prowling around and around in circles. The other two dozed lazily, one on the floor, and the other on a large hammock-looking piece of leather that had been stretched across the corner of the pen.

"Now here are some beauties," Caroline praised the feline beasts.

"Keep your distance, and don't cross the outer railing," Darcy warned. "These animals have been known to attack guests who are foolish enough to provoke them."

His injunction was enough to send Eddie wailing. He begged his mother to pick him up, but she was already holding Robbie, not having brought her perambulator-cart with her that day. He did not want his father either, and screamed when Mr. Gardiner picked him up. He finally calmed down when his cousin Elizabeth took him into her arms.

The commotion awakened the other two leopards, and they came over to the edge of the pen with interest.

Caroline noticed Jane standing with her back towards her, engrossed in watching the cats. Folding her parasol, she

leaned over the outer railing and poked it through the bars at the first leopard. Darcy saw her try to taunt the cat towards Jane. “Here, kitty, kitty, kitty.”

The leopard pawed at the parasol, snagging the lace trim with her claws. She yanked, and only just managed to get the parasol back from the cat’s grasp.

Caroline watched as her brother put his hand possessively on the small of Jane’s back as he pointed out the unusual markings that one of the leopards had around its eyes. Jealousy welled up within her at their closeness. Pretending to trip, she bumped into Jane, hard. Jane, who had been leaning a little over the railing to see the leopards better, lost her balance and went tumbling over. She shrieked. The leopard closest to her, spotting the plumage on Jane’s bonnet, stuck her paw through the bars and swatted at it playfully, eliciting more screams from Jane. She tugged the end of the ribbon to free it from her head, and the leopard snatched it right off, pulling it into the cage. Bingley jumped over the rail and swooped Jane up into his arms, carrying her back to safety. The leopardess grabbed her prize bonnet in her mouth, took it off to the corner, and sat down with the hat between its paws as if to gloat over the other leopards that she had got a toy and they hadn’t.

“Are you all right, Miss Bennet?” a worried Bingley asked.

Jane was still shaking after her frightening incident. “Yes, thanks to you, Mr. Bingley. I am no worse for the wear, save the loss of my favorite bonnet.”

Caroline, who had not expected things to get so out of hand, was visibly frightened. She pressed her hand to her heart. “Goodness me! What an awful incident! It is good that no harm has come to you, dear Miss Bennet.”

But Elizabeth had seen the whole thing. “Save your pity, Caroline. It was you who pushed Jane over the rail. Had Jane been wounded or worse, it would have been entirely your fault.”

“I...I...” Caroline stammered.

The others could only look on with a mixture of shock and horror.

“Try anything like that again, and I shall feed *you* to the leopards!” Elizabeth threatened.

Mrs. Hurst tittered. “Come, now. Surely it was an accident!”

“Yes, yes, an accident!” Caroline echoed. “I never meant for her to come to any harm. Truly!” She began to quiver. She mumbled something like an apology to Jane, who assured her all was forgiven, though lightning still flashed from Elizabeth’s eyes.

Darcy thought to mention that he had seen Caroline taunting the leopard with her parasol, but the look of remorse on Caroline’s face made him decide to keep silent. Perhaps she had underestimated the danger she had put Miss Bennet in and regretted it. She would be dealt with later, regardless.

Mr. Bingley turned back to Jane and her family. “I must offer my sincere apologies for my sister’s behavior. It is unacceptable. Please, allow me to make amends by offering to have you all come to dinner with us at Hurst Place later this week. That is, if my brother-in-law is amenable.”

The Hursts were all too happy to have the Gardiners and the Bennet sisters join them, to mitigate their shame over Caroline’s stunt.

They decided to defer seeing the rest of the menagerie for another day. Jane was still too shaken up to enjoy any more that day. Mrs. Gardiner put her arm around Jane and escorted her.

As they walked towards the exit, Darcy and Elizabeth let the others get ahead of them. Once they were out of earshot, Darcy whispered to Elizabeth, “There is something I need to tell you. Caroline recognized my carriage in Russell Square the other day and said something to Georgiana about it. There is a possibility that she saw us together.”

Elizabeth's eyes widened in alarm. "Then let us hope that she hasn't."



"I cannot believe how quickly things are turning around for me," Jane said as she dressed for dinner on Thursday evening. "One minute, all was lost, but now it seems that Mr. Bingley still holds some regard for me." Her cheeks flushed at the thought of him.

"More than a little regard!" Elizabeth smiled. "I believe him to be quite in love with you still."

"Do you really think so? Oh, I hope you are right!" Jane embraced Elizabeth tightly. "But what of you and Mr. Darcy? I know he favored you last autumn. Is there any chance for the two of you?"

"One never knows," Elizabeth murmured, fastening a pair of pearl earrings to her ears. The return of the amiable partnership between her and Darcy, albeit with different motives, had triggered questions in her mind. Were they friends now? He had always maintained that he was not looking for a wife and would prefer to spend his days as a bachelor. Had he perhaps changed his mind about that? *That is silly*, Elizabeth told herself. *Besides, it is not as though I am looking for a husband, so what would it matter if he did choose a wife? It would not be me he would choose.*

Still, she was finding it harder and harder to dismiss the feelings she had when she was around Mr. Darcy, and the kind way that he treated her whenever they met. She recalled the looks he had given her at the Serpentine Pond and in Russell Square. They were warm and endearing, with no trace of any resentment after their argument the night of the ball. He couldn't be...falling in love with her, could he?

A blush crossed her face, making her turn away so that Jane could not see it while she schooled her expression back into a nonchalant one.

Leaving the children under the care of the housekeeper, the Gardiners and the Bennet sisters arrived at Grosvenor Street at exactly eight o'clock. Elizabeth thought that the fashionable set dined rather late; at home, she was used to dinners at six. She could not tell whether her stomach rumbled from hunger or from nerves after hearing about Caroline's remark to Georgiana the other day. Had she seen them together in Russell Square? Elizabeth was sure she must have. But what that portended, she did not know.

Hurst Place was an elegant dwelling, a little more spacious than the house at Gracechurch, with fine carpets and crystal chandeliers. Elizabeth was glad she had brought her second-best dress, which had recently been made over with a new overlay in light green chiffon dotted with floral embroidery. The overlay split down the middle to show off the original pink satin material underneath and tied up with a pink sash. Jane looked very well, too, in a gray-blue silk that brought out the color of her eyes. Yes, Elizabeth thought, at least the Bennet sisters need not be ashamed to appear in Grosvenor Street in their present attire.

Jane could have been dressed in rags, and she would have looked no less becoming to Mr. Bingley. The look of awe and admiration had returned to his eyes as she sat beside him during the meal. Elizabeth glanced at Mr. Darcy, who nodded in approbation at the couple's happiness. The blush had returned to Jane's cheeks, her scare at the menagerie quite forgotten in the midst of her lover's attention. Mr. Bingley poured the wine for her, and insisted he carve the meat for her himself. Never was her plate allowed to be empty, nor for her to go wanting for any dish she might like to try. It was evident to anyone who looked that the two were quickly rekindling their romance.

At the same time, Darcy was doing his best to get back into Elizabeth's good graces after their falling out. He sat

across from her at dinner and paid her more attention than anybody else. He worked a few subtle compliments into their discussions and was pleased at the hint of blush that rose to Elizabeth's cheeks in response. He also made sure to include his sister in their conversations. Georgiana seemed to like Elizabeth very much. She asked many questions about her family and her hometown, and she did her best at every turn to recommend her brother's good qualities to Elizabeth.

Meanwhile, Caroline's envy was turning her as green as the revolting dress she wore. She gripped her wine goblet tighter. Turning to Mrs. Gardiner, she asked, "Do you and your family often frequent Russell Square Garden?"

"Why, no, I cannot say that we do," was Mrs. Gardiner's reply.

"Only, I thought for sure that I saw your niece there the other day, along with someone who looked rather like Mr. Darcy. I could have sworn I saw them entering a carriage that bore the Darcy crest on it."

Caroline turned her face towards Elizabeth and gave her a wicked smile that told her she knew exactly what she was about. Judging by the look on Darcy's face, he had heard Caroline's remark as well and understood its implications. Elizabeth felt her blood run cold. So they *had* been seen! And now, Caroline was making no scruples about bringing it up to others. How many had she gossiped to, already? Who knew what Caroline Bingley might say to anyone, in order to harm Elizabeth's reputation?

Elizabeth looked across the table at Bingley and Jane, so happy together as they chattered away over their dinner. It was not only her prospects that would be ruined. How could Bingley be expected to propose to Jane if her sister was thought to be a "loose woman"? All her efforts to restore her sister's happiness would be for nothing. If only she had never accepted Darcy's offer of a ride. Luckily, the others seemed ignorant of Caroline's meaning.

After they had all moved to the drawing room, Mrs. Gardiner expressed a wish to hear Miss Darcy's playing along with Miss Bingley's singing, both of which she had heard so much about. While everyone was distracted, Elizabeth returned to the dining room on the pretense of having left her reticule behind. Darcy slipped out of the room and followed her.

Elizabeth wasted no time. "Caroline did see us," she said under a hushed tone. "Just as you feared."

"I know." Mr. Darcy sighed, raking his hand through his thick, dark hair. "This is a problem, indeed. Miss Bingley is a jealous sort of woman, and she has had her cap set at me for a long time now. She views you as a threat, and she also seems to have taken a dislike to the idea of your sister and her brother being together. She would not hesitate to destroy your reputation if it would prevent you or your sister from ever entering into a respectable union with a gentleman."

"That is what I feared." Elizabeth frowned.

"There is only one thing for it, Miss Elizabeth," Darcy said. "You and I must get engaged."

Chapter 14



“Engaged?” Elizabeth’s eyebrows shot up. “You must be mad, Mr. Darcy!”

“There is no time to waste. Caroline has already hinted at what she knows. She may, at any time, begin spreading rumors, ruining your chances in society, if she has not already. The only way to stem the tide would be to announce that we are already engaged, and have been for several weeks.”

Elizabeth was too shocked to say anything.

Darcy picked up her reticule from the chair where she had left it and handed it to her. “They will miss us if we are gone too long. Let them not find us alone together here,” he urged.

“And what if I do not wish to marry you?” Elizabeth said angrily. “Am I to be forced to wed you merely to save my own reputation? I thought you, of all people, detested the notion of a loveless marriage!” Elizabeth’s head was spinning. If the proposal had come with a declaration of love, she might have been swept away by the rising tide of her own emotions that had been gradually swelling within her. But this felt more like an insult. An obligation. The very kind they had wanted to avoid from the beginning. It squelched the tide and made her feel repulsed that she had entertained any notion of his being in love with her.

Darcy shook his head. “The engagement, like our earlier courtship, would be a farce. A ruse, meant to throw everyone, including Caroline Bingley, off of us. We keep up the pretense for several weeks, then you can pretend that you have changed your mind, or that your father’s terms were not acceptable to me, and we break it off. You see it all the time, where one or the other of an engaged couple decides to cry it off.”

“Yes, but I fail to see how that will salvage my reputation in the process.”

“Think about it. Caroline will have nothing to accuse us of. No one thinks anything of an engaged couple riding together or meeting alone in a park. There are liberties which an engaged couple may take which a man or woman may not otherwise take during the courtship period.”

“That is precisely the trouble,” Elizabeth answered. “People will presume that we *have* taken liberties, including the sort which would cause others to condemn me as ‘damaged goods’ should we break off our engagement.”

“I believe it can be done without it coming to that,” Darcy assured her, tugging at his cravat, which had suddenly grown tight. He forced himself not to imagine any of the sort of *liberties* which Elizabeth had implied.

Darcy continued. “In Meryton, where you have been known your whole life, your reputation as an upstanding woman of purity should guard you against too many suspicions. And as for Caroline, she will be gone by the time our engagement ends. The Hursts are traveling to their estate in Scarborough in a month or so, and she means to go with them. The danger is here, now, where Caroline knows everyone of importance and where she can make your reputation go up in flames quicker than a dry field struck by lightning.”

Elizabeth hesitated. A deep furrow appeared on her brow as she contemplated the alternative to his proposal. *Why does it have to be this way?* This was not the way she had ever imagined things to be. Either she would fall in love with someone who would sweep her off her feet and she would be glad of his proposal, or she would remain a spinster. Not this. Not getting engaged out of necessity, even if it *was* to be only temporary.

“Believe me, if there was another way, I would do it.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “It seems I have no choice then.”



They returned to the drawing room. Caroline was still giving her best impersonation of an opera diva while Georgiana accompanied her on the piano. Mr. and Mrs. Hurst each had a glass of wine in their hands, although Mr. Hurst looked like he might fall asleep at any moment and drop his on the carpet. Bingley and Jane had sequestered themselves in one corner and were whispering to each other. The Gardiners were the only ones truly paying any attention to the musical performance. Mrs. Gardiner gave Elizabeth a smile and made room for her on the sofa. Mr. Darcy decided to remain standing next to the sofa.

Caroline and Georgiana finished their performance. Caroline gave a large, sweeping curtsy in response to the applause that followed, while Georgiana gave a modest bow of her head from the piano seat.

As the clapping that followed died down, Darcy pulled Elizabeth to her feet beside him.

“I hope you will pardon my interruption,” he said, “but Miss Elizabeth and I have an announcement to make.” He took her hand, and Elizabeth forced herself to give as genuine a smile as she could manage.

Mr. Darcy continued. “It is my great pleasure to tell you that I have asked for Miss Elizabeth’s hand in marriage, and she has accepted.”

Everyone except Caroline was pleased. Bingley let out a cheer, and Jane immediately rose from her seat and went to embrace her sister.

“I knew there was something between you two! Oh, I am so happy for you!”

“Bless my soul!” Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed. “I guessed that there might be some feelings between you both. Your mother will be so pleased.”

“Of course, Mr. Bennet must still be applied to,” Mr. Darcy nodded, “but I have every reason to hope for a favorable answer from him.”

Mr. Gardiner chortled. “If he does not readily give his consent, my sister will ensure that he does!”

Georgiana was ecstatic. “I will have a sister at last!” she exclaimed.

Mrs. Hurst woke up her husband, who added his congratulations to the mix along with his wife.

“You sly devil!” Mr. Bingley slapped Mr. Darcy on the back as Mr. Hurst went to open a bottle of champagne that he had been saving for a special occasion. “Why did you not let on that you were sweet on Miss Elizabeth? I know you were warm to her back in Hertfordshire, but I had sensed that your interest had cooled. When did it revive?”

“After she arrived in London,” Darcy answered.

“Well, you’ve all but stolen my thunder,” Bingley grinned.

“You mean, you—”

“I have asked her, while we were in the corner, and she has accepted,” Bingley whispered. “I was going to make an announcement after Caroline’s performance, but you beat me to it.”

“Well do not let my announcement keep you from it! We cannot have too much good news,” Darcy said, low enough that only Bingley could hear.

After the toasts to Elizabeth and Darcy’s happiness were made, Bingley cleared his throat.

“Well,” he said, taking Jane’s hand and facing the rest of them, “I expect Mrs. Bennet will now have *two* weddings to plan!”

“Truly?” Elizabeth squealed, grabbing her sister. “Oh, I am so happy for you both!”

Jane looked happier than Elizabeth had seen her in many months, and Bingley wore a grin from ear to ear.

For the second time that evening, congratulations were due.

“I had better go and fetch another bottle of champagne, then,” Mr. Hurst remarked, eliciting laughs all around.

The Gardiners were exceedingly happy, of course, especially Mrs. Gardiner, who seemed to think a large part of the credit was due to her for facilitating the matches. The only one who seemed truly unhappy was Caroline. She put up a facade for her brother’s sake, but whenever she thought no one was looking, her face turned to a frown. Elizabeth noticed, however. “So, you are to gain a new sister also, Miss Bingley. A pleasing thing, is it not?”

Caroline gave another of her half-hearted smiles. “Indeed. Jane is such a dear girl. What a wonderful thing for Charles to have found her. And you, marrying Mr. Darcy, what a fine thing. We shall all be like one big family.”

“In a manner of speaking, I suppose we will,” Elizabeth answered.

Caroline gave her a congratulatory peck on the cheek and hissed in Elizabeth’s ear. “Well played, *Miss Eliza*.”

Out loud, she said, “I hope you’ll remember me when you are settled at Pemberley. Louisa and I would be happy to come visit you anytime.”



If Mrs. Bennet had been ecstatic the morning after the Meryton Assembly, she was the cow that had leapt over the moon now. According to Lydia, she had fainted when the letters had arrived from Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy asking Mr. Bennet for his blessing. No sooner had she roused, than she went into a frenzy. First, she put on her bonnet and ran straight to Lucas Lodge to gloat to Lady Lucas, then to Aunt Phillips', and then to every neighbor in a three-mile radius.

Mr. Bennet, of course, gave his consent immediately. Elizabeth and Jane were sent for, and the Gardiners were to bring them back to Longbourn as soon as Mr. Gardiner's business was concluded.

"I expect we will be returning to Netherfield soon, also," Mr. Darcy told Elizabeth on her last day in London. The weather was once again fair— for winter, at least— and they were strolling around the Serpentine Pond in Hyde Park, much as they had before when Elizabeth had come with her aunt and cousins.

"Mr. Bingley has asked you to stay with him again, then?" Elizabeth said.

Darcy nodded. "It seemed the most practical solution, since we must all be in Hertfordshire for the weddings, and Netherfield has more than enough space. Georgiana will come, too."

"Begging your pardon, but did you say *weddings*, plural? Have you forgotten that *our* wedding is not to take place?" Elizabeth reminded him.

"I have not forgotten," he said softly. He cleared his throat. "I will stay until after Jane and Bingley's wedding, then I will take Georgiana up to Derbyshire. You may use any excuse you like to call off our engagement." He turned to face Elizabeth.

"Miss Elizabeth, I—" he broke off mid-sentence.

“Yes?” She looked up into his deep brown eyes. Unknown feelings stirred up inside her, making her belly slightly nauseous.

“I hope you know,” he gulped, “I hope you know that I would go through with marrying you, were it truly required for the sake of your honor.”

“For the sake of my honor,” Elizabeth repeated, nodding. “Yes, I believe you would. I know you to be an honorable man.” She suddenly wished that he had said something along the lines of how he loved her, and how he would marry her if she loved him in return. Why had that thought crossed her mind? She did not love him. Did she? Their partnership was strictly a business arrangement, meant for the benefit of the two parties. A partnership that would soon end.



“Now, my dears,” Mrs. Bennet said in her mixture of sweetness and business, plopping down on the sofa beside Jane and Elizabeth with her diary at hand. “When shall we have your wedding? I cannot do anything until the date is set, you know”

“Jane and Mr. Bingley need not wait; any time after the Banns are read,” Elizabeth said. “Mr. Darcy and I, however, plan on a longer engagement.”

Mrs. Bennet went into a tizzy. “Why ever for?” she fussed. “If anything, I should think your wedding might be sooner than Jane’s, what with Mr. Darcy’s connections. But I had thought that the two of you had decided on a double wedding!”

Jane blushed. “Oh, let us have a double wedding, Lizzy! I can think of nothing more delightful than that.”

“Well, I, er...” Elizabeth could not find her voice.

Mrs. Bennet pressed her lips together, her eyes twinkling. “I see how it is. I completely understand, dear,” she patted Elizabeth’s leg. “You want to have your own special day, without having to share with your sister.”

“Yes, that is it,” Elizabeth recovered.

“It is only natural. After all, you have had to share nearly everything with your sisters for all of your life. Why should you not want the most important day of your life to be set apart for your own self?”

Elizabeth nodded. “And besides that, Mr. Darcy and I did not want to steal the attention away from Jane and Mr. Bingley by marrying ahead of them. We will not have our Banns read until after their wedding takes place,” she said firmly.

“Very well, dear, have it your way,” Mrs. Bennet smiled sweetly. “Now, Jane, dear, has Mr. Bingley said anything to you about whether he plans to pursue a license? It would be so *en vogue* to have a candlelight wedding in the evening.”



About a week after Elizabeth returned home, a letter arrived at Darcy House. Darcy sighed when he saw the familiar de Bourgh crest on the letter that Morris handed him. Letters from his aunt were never pleasant. *I wonder what she wants this time*, Darcy thought as he broke the seal with his silver letter opener.

My dear nephew,

I have just heard a rumor, which I hope you will soon confirm has no truth in it, that you are to be married to some girl that you met in Hertfordshire. My rector tells me that his cousin Miss Elizabeth Bennet, who is practically penniless and will be homeless once the estate passes to him, is the unfortunate object of your affection. Please tell me this is not true. To align yourself to someone with no means and no connection, whose family is in trade, would be an absolute outrage to the name of Darcy.

Furthermore, I must remind you of the promise made between your late mother and myself, that one day you and your cousin Anne would align yourselves in marriage. While I am aware that no formal engagement has yet to take place, it is an event that is hoped for by all, especially dear Anne, who has long considered it to be settled, as I have. It would impugn your honor, therefore, were you to cast her off for another, and it would wound Anne's heart— and mine— considerably.

Of course, all this is assuming there is any basis for the rumors which have reached my ears. I beg you to write to me swiftly with the truth of the matter, that my heart may be at peace on the subject.

I look forward to your annual visit to Rosings this April. Do mention to your cousin Richard that my offer for him to accompany you on this visit still stands.

Yours sincerely, etc.

LADY CATHERINE DE BOURGH

Darcy threw the letter in the fire. It seemed that his aunt still clung to her delusions of his marrying Cousin Anne. Well, she would be disappointed. Darcy was no more in want of having his cousin for a wife as he was any of the other ladies of the *ton* who had sought him. His love for Anne was of a familial sort and he was certain it would never develop beyond that.



Mr. Darcy remained in London up until the week of Jane and Bingley's wedding. Bingley, of course, set off for Hertfordshire only a day after the Bennets and Gardiners, with his sisters and brother-in-law in tow. His letter to Darcy spoke of little else but his lady love and the news that they had secured the church in Meryton for the ceremony on the second Saturday in March.

Mr. Darcy might have been rather lonely in London without his friends there, were it not for the company of Georgiana. In truth, he missed Elizabeth; her vivacious wit, her lively temper, her expressive eyes, and that unruly curl of hair which always refused to lie in place. He recalled how she looked down by the Serpentine Pond, her pert lips parting just slightly when he had told her that he would have married her anyway if honor demanded it. *Why did I not simply tell her I would have her, if she wanted me?* He shook his head. No, such thinking was foolish. She had made it clear she did not want him. Everything they had done up to this point was merely a means to an end. Firstly, to throw off the scheming mothers and the unwanted attentions of Miss Bingley, then to reunite Bingley and Jane, and now to ensure that Elizabeth could walk away with her reputation intact. He was sure that once he was out of the picture, Elizabeth would have no difficulty finding a man who more suited her tastes than him. Another vision of Elizabeth assaulted him, the memory of her reciting from the balcony as Juliet, her long hair caressing her delicate form in that white dress. Darcy sucked in a deep breath. He would miss her, once their farce of an engagement was over.

Georgiana must have noticed him daydreaming as she entered the room. "Missing a certain dark-haired Someone?" she teased.

Darcy looked up from his desk. "Pardon?"

“Only one more day until you see her again.” Georgiana smiled. “Have you decided when your own special day is to be?”

Darcy shook his head. “There will be time for us to work that out after Bingley’s wedding. Is your trunk packed?”

Georgiana nodded. “Nelly just packed the last of my things.”

“Good,” Darcy said.

“Are you prepared for our trip?” she asked him in turn.

Prepared? No, Darcy was not prepared for what he knew would be his last week with Elizabeth. But at the same time, his heart ached to see her once again. “I am ready,” Darcy said.

Chapter 15



Darcy and Georgiana set off early enough the next day to reach Netherfield by noon. After a bite to eat and a rest, Georgiana asked her brother if she might be able to spend some time with Elizabeth that day.

“We are due at Longbourn for dinner, but I doubt that Mrs. Bennet would mind if we called at Longbourn sooner than that,” Darcy answered. He was just as eager to see Elizabeth again as she was, if not more so.

“Actually,” Georgiana blushed, “I was hoping for some time with just Elizabeth, you know, to get to know my future sister-in-law. I thought perhaps she might be willing to accompany me shopping in Meryton to select some new gloves before the wedding.”

Darcy felt disappointed, but he could hardly blame his sister for wanting that. Without any reasonable excuse as to why she could not, he agreed to send her alone in the carriage to fetch Elizabeth from Longbourn, knowing she would be in good hands with Elizabeth for company when they reached the village.

Elizabeth was delighted to accept Georgiana’s invitation for a little shopping trip. The Darcy driver dropped them off outside the glover’s shop in Meryton, promising to return to collect them in two hours’ time.

While they were in the shop, Kitty and Lydia came in. They had been shopping in Meryton since the morning, and their arms were laden with parcels and bags from their purchases.

“Lizzy, you did not tell us you would be going shopping today also,” Lydia exclaimed.

“I did not know until this afternoon, myself,” Elizabeth answered. She introduced Georgiana to her sisters.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Georgiana said. “Now I have met all of Miss Elizabeth’s sisters, save one.”

“Mary did not want to come,” Kitty complained. “She said she does not care for shopping, or officers. I do not know how we got such a dull sister!”

“Did you come in that fine carriage we saw parked down by the town livery?” Lydia asked. When Georgiana nodded, she went on to say, “Good, then you won’t mind, Lizzy, if we give you some of our packages to bring home for us. They are getting dreadfully heavy, and we have no carriage of our own.” Without waiting for a response from her sister or Georgiana, she and Kitty each shoved half the things they were carrying into Elizabeth and Georgiana’s arms.

“You won’t mind giving us a ride home, either, will you?” Kitty asked.

“Ooh, we should stop by the confectionery shop for some ices before we head home!” Lydia suggested. “Only, you will have to lend me the money, Lizzy, I am afraid I spent all mine.”

Georgiana paid for her gloves, and they stepped outside. Lydia began waving. “Oh, look! There are Captain Carter and Mr. Wickham! Yoo-hoo!”

The gentlemen came over. Georgiana’s face turned pale.

Captain Carter greeted them all warmly. Mr. Wickham nodded politely, his eyes moving back and forth from Georgiana to the others.

“We are just on our way to the confectionery shop to buy ices.” Lydia’s curls bobbed as she gave a little bounce. “Won’t you gentlemen join us? It will be our treat!” she exclaimed, clearly forgetting that she had just asked her sister for money.

The gentlemen declined, saying that they had other business to attend to.

“What a shame that they could not come!” Kitty and Lydia both lamented.

The confectionery shop was small; Kitty and Lydia sat at one table, where they kept up an animated conversation with each other, peppered with loud laughter.

This suited Elizabeth and Georgiana just fine, however.

“I noticed the way that you and Mr. Wickham looked at each other just now,” Elizabeth pointed out. “Do you know each other?”

“It goes deeper than that,” Georgiana said. Her face was awash with emotion, as if she were struggling to decide how much she should say.

Georgiana looked ashamed. “You are going to be my sister soon, so I suppose I do not mind telling you this. I was in love with Mr. Wickham last summer, you see.”

“In love? But...but you are so young.” Elizabeth felt guilty for allowing Georgiana to confide in her under false pretenses, but she let Georgiana continue.

“Yes. Too young to marry, my brother thought. But even if I had been out in society, my brother would not have approved of the match. He was convinced that George— that is, Mr. Wickham— was only after my money. He forbade us from ever marrying.”

“How cruel!” Elizabeth was shocked. She might have been young, but how could Mr. Darcy get in the way of his own sister’s happiness? She suddenly recalled the first meeting she had ever had with Mr. Wickham. He had told her a similar story. Now, Elizabeth put together that Georgiana was the young lady he had spoken of.

“I am afraid it is my fault that Will does not trust anyone,” Georgiana said.

“Your fault?” Elizabeth asked. “How could it possibly be your fault?”

“Because of what I did. George wanted to wait a year or two until I came out into society. He wanted us to remain secretly engaged while he finished his education and established himself as a lawyer. Then he would go to my brother and make his case to marry me. But I did not want to wait. I convinced George that we should elope. He loved me; he would have done anything for me. So, we planned to go to Gretna Green and get married in secret. But my brother got wind of our plans and put a stop to everything. I am to inherit thirty-thousand pounds when I come of age. If I eloped, then there would be no marriage contract, and everything I own would immediately become the property of my husband.”

“So, your brother believed that the elopement was your *fiance’s* idea, not yours,” Elizabeth surmised, “in order to get his hands on your fortune.”

“Precisely,” Georgiana nodded.

Now it made sense why Mr. Darcy was so skeptical of anyone wanting to marry into their family. What brother would believe that there was no monetary incentive involved to marry his sister when the stakes were so high and the threat to his sister’s reputation so precarious? Of course, Elizabeth did not blame Georgiana for wanting to elope. Despite her youth, she would not have been the first girl in the throes of love to do so in order to marry without her family’s consent.



Darcy could not keep his eyes off of Elizabeth during dinner. Though dressed very simply in a plain russet gown with no lace or trim, she looked no less radiant than she had in the pink and green dress she had worn at Hurst Place. Bingley looked equally smitten with his bride to be. Jane wore a pale

peach gown that matched her creamy skin. Bingley seemed to be relishing the increased liberties allowed him as her *fiancé*. When they had arrived, he boldly greeted her with a kiss on the cheek, causing her blush to deepen.

“How are you liking being back in Hertfordshire, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth asked him over a forkful of roast beef.

“I like it very much. There are some sights I am yearning to see, which I was unable to see on my previous trip, due to our sudden departure.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. As I recall, you once promised to show me the view from Oakham Mount, Miss Elizabeth.”

This piqued Georgiana’s curiosity. “Oakham Mount? Is it very high?” she asked.

Elizabeth smiled. “Little more than a big hill. One can easily walk there from here. The climb is not too steep on the western slope, and you can see the whole surrounding area from the top.

“I would like to see the view from there as well!” Georgiana exclaimed.

“It is an excellent view,” Mrs. Gardiner supplied. “You ought to all go, while you are here in Hertfordshire.”

“Perhaps we might all go tomorrow,” Elizabeth suggested. “What say you, Jane?”

“If Mama has no need of me, I do not see why not.” Jane turned to her mother, who giggled.

“I have no need of *you*, Jane, dear. You ought to go with your sister and show off the scenery to our guests. Your other sisters may stay and help me with the wedding preparations.”

Lydia huffed. “But Mama! Kitty and I were planning on going into Meryton tomorrow.”

“Hush!” Mrs. Bennet scolded. “You can go into Meryton anytime. Your sister is only getting married once.”

“But it is not Lizzy’s turn to get married yet. Why does she get out of helping with the wedding decorations and favors?”

Mrs. Bennet gave her youngest daughter a small kick beneath the table.

“Lizzy knows the path up the mountain the best,” Mrs. Bennet smiled. “She will be an excellent guide for your party.” Changing the subject, she turned to Mr. Darcy.

“I am *so* glad you will be joining our family soon, Mr. Darcy! Lizzy tells me that she didn’t want your wedding to eclipse dear Jane’s, which of course makes perfect sense. She’s so generous, my Lizzy. Do give me a hint though: are you thinking of having the wedding here in Hertfordshire or would you prefer to have it at Pemberley?”

Before Mr. Darcy could answer, Elizabeth jumped in. “Oh, Mama, I almost forgot to tell you, Lady Lucas called earlier and said that she will have two more added to her number for the wedding.”

“But the wedding is in six days! I have already borrowed as many chairs as I can from the neighbors, and I have just finalized the seating arrangements for the wedding breakfast. You must go back tomorrow and tell her that her added guests simply *cannot* come.”

Elizabeth grinned. “But the two who are coming are Mr. and Mrs. Collins. Since it is our own cousin and dear old friend who are coming, I was sure you would not mind. Surely you would not deny them a place at Jane’s wedding?”

“Oh,” Mrs. Bennet tittered. “Well, if it is *them*, then I suppose we must make room somehow. Even if it *was* a little odd, how swiftly Mr. Collins jilted Jane for Miss Lucas. Oh well, it all turned out for the best in the end, did it not?” She smiled at Mr. Bingley.



Mr. and Mrs. Hurst had no wish to take a long, hot, and dirty walk up a measly hill, and declared that they would stay behind at Netherfield. Having seen the Peak District, they felt that no landscape could compare, and they wondered why two residents of Derbyshire would be so eager to see such a place. Caroline Bingley, however, expressed a keen desire to see this mount that Elizabeth had spoken of so highly.

They headed out late in the morning from Longbourn where Darcy, Georgiana and Caroline met Elizabeth and Jane with their aunt and uncle in the garden before setting off.

The pathway through the little wood that bordered Longbourn's fields was rough and a little muddy from the rains a few days before.

Elizabeth had her aunt and uncle to thank for keeping Caroline out of her hair.

"I fear my footwear may not be equal to the climb," Caroline complained. "Perhaps if Mr. Darcy would be so good as to lend me his arm, that I might not stumble on the pathway?"

"Mr. Darcy will have his hands full attending to his sister and his *fiancée*," Mr. Gardiner said, "but I would be happy to lend you my other arm."

Reluctantly, Caroline accepted the arm that was offered, while Mrs. Gardiner held onto her husband's other arm.

"Mrs. Hurst tells me your family is from Scarborough," Mrs. Gardiner said, drawing Caroline's attention to her. "We often have business in those parts. Tell me, are you acquainted with the Miller family?"

Elizabeth had to smile, seeing how Caroline was completely waylaid by the pair. She and Mr. Darcy, along with Georgiana, led the way as the path gradually sloped upwards,

the woods thinning away to sparse trees that dotted the hillside. Elizabeth glanced backwards. Jane and Bingley were far behind, clearly enjoying the chance to take a leisurely stroll together yet again.

The hill became slightly rockier near the top. They had to pick their way carefully among the rocks that jutted out as the path grew steeper.

“I can see the top!” Georgiana exclaimed. She let go of her brother’s hand and raced up the rest of the hill ahead of them, she soon disappeared from sight over the crest of the hill.

“Watch your footing!” Elizabeth warned. But just as she said it, her own foot stumbled over a large, uneven rock. The ankle turned wrong with a sharp “pop” feeling. Elizabeth felt her leg crumble beneath her. Were it not for Mr. Darcy’s strong grip on her arm, she might have slid down the hill.

“Ow!” she cried.

“Elizabeth! Are you hurt?” Mr. Darcy helped her over to a large rock where she could sit down. His face was worry-stricken.

“I have twisted my ankle.” Elizabeth fought back tears as the pain grew increasingly unbearable.

He examined her swollen ankle. “I am afraid it may be sprained.”

The Gardiners and Caroline caught up with them.

“Oh dear! Lizzy, you are hurt!” Aunt Gardiner raced to her niece’s side.

“I twisted it a bit, I am afraid. I will be fine once I rest a while.” She rubbed the part that was swollen and winced.

“I fear you won’t be walking on it again today.” Her uncle shook his head. “I will carry you back down the hill and have your mother fetch the apothecary.”

“But what about seeing the view from the top of this mount?” Caroline asked.

“Miss Bingley is right,” Elizabeth said. “You’ve come this far. You may as well go the rest of the way. I can wait here until you return. Besides, someone must fetch Miss Darcy. She is already at the top.” She was determined not to let on how badly injured she was.

Caroline smiled, thinking for a moment that she might have a chance to view the land with Mr. Darcy by her side.

But Mr. Darcy said, “You all go on to the top. I will stay here with Elizabeth. We can see enough of the view from here.”

Elizabeth flushed at his use of her Christian name without the title “miss” in front of it but said nothing.

Mr. Gardiner nodded. “Well, if you’re sure. But Mr. Darcy and I will be carrying you down the mountain. No arguments, if you please.”

Elizabeth pursed her lips and bobbed her head. Clearly, the pain was more than she was willing to admit, but she still had her pride. A little turned ankle ought not to spoil the entire outing!

Jane’s alarm echoed their aunt and uncle’s when she and Bingley reached the pair. “How can you even think of remaining whilst we enjoy the view? You ought to be elevating it and putting a compress on to reduce the swelling.” At Elizabeth’s protests, Jane removed the thin scarf adorning her neck. “At least let me tie up your ankle with this.”

Kneeling down, Jane lifted Elizabeth’s foot onto her knee, eliciting another wince from the patient. She tried her best to wrap the scarf around it tightly, but as soon as she lowered the foot, the scarf began to slip off again. “Oh, I fear I am no good at this!” Jane clicked her tongue.

Mr. Darcy spoke up. “If you will allow me. Begging the intrusion.” Emboldened only by everyone’s assumption of their engagement— or else he never would have allowed

himself such an impropriety— Mr. Darcy carefully took Elizabeth's foot onto his own knee and redid the wrapping. This time, he made sure to secure the scarf very tightly, almost to the point of cutting off Elizabeth's circulation.

A small smile appeared on Elizabeth's face. "You would make a fine nurse, Mr. Darcy."

"Mr. Darcy, I am expecting that as soon as we get her home, you will ensure that a slab of ice is brought in from the ice house to put on that foot," Jane commanded.

Mr. Darcy bowed his head low. "Of course, Miss Bennet. And I will ride to fetch the apothecary myself."

Mr. Bingley tapped Jane's arm. "Come Jane. Let us hurry to see the view from the top so that we might assist in bringing your sister down the mountain again. The others are surely nearly ready to return, we are so late in coming." Jane nodded, and took her *fiancé's* arm, lest she also stumble and suffer the same fate as Elizabeth.

Now that the pair was alone, an awkward silence filled the air.

"You really needn't remain by my side," Elizabeth muttered, ignoring the throbbing pain from her ankle. "The view from the top is much better."

"I am already looking at the best view." The words tumbled out of Darcy's mouth before he could stop them. He quickly covered his tracks. "Besides, we must keep up appearances. As your *fiancé*, I could not be seen to abandon you."

Elizabeth gave a slight nod. "I suppose so."

Fixated on Elizabeth's injury, they had not had any time to examine their surroundings. Now, with idle time to spare, they gazed out on the fertile countryside below.

"You really can see quite a distance, even from this height," Darcy remarked.

“I am certain the view is nothing compared to the peaks in Derbyshire.”

“That I will concede, but then again, I have been up Kinder Scout, which is the highest elevation in the district—about three times this height.”

Elizabeth looked at him in surprise. “I did not take you for a mountaineer, Mr. Darcy.”

“Will. Please, call me Will.” Suddenly feeling a bit bashful, he added, “If we are to maintain the pretense of this engagement, we ought to call each other by our Christian names, at least.”

“I am not certain I can think of you as anything other than a ‘Mr. Darcy’.” Elizabeth chewed the inside of her cheek.

“Then call me ‘Darcy’, if you will. ‘Mr. Darcy’ sounds too formal, even for acquaintances such as us.”

“Very well, then. Darcy.”

Returning to their former subject, he said, “In the year I spent in between Eton and Cambridge, I spent much of my time exploring the wilderness of Derbyshire. I climbed most of the ranges in the Peak District at that time.”

“That must have been something,” Elizabeth mused.

“Indeed. The views truly are unparalleled. Not to suggest that the view from this mount is not pleasant also,” he quickly added.

“I would love to visit the Peak District sometime, so that I might compare,” Elizabeth said.

Mr. Darcy was silent for a moment. “Well, if you ever have a chance to visit Derbyshire, I would be pleased to be your guide.”

Elizabeth drew in a breath. The reminder that their union was soon ending cut sharply for both of them.

Elizabeth blinked back the mist clouding her eyes and looked out over the horizon.

Chapter 16



Mr. Jones, the apothecary, declared that Elizabeth's ankle was indeed sprained. He ordered her to stay off of it for three weeks and to avoid long walks and strenuous activity for another three to four weeks.

"But Jane's wedding is in four days!" Elizabeth complained. "How am I to stand up with her if I cannot walk?"

"We must get you a chair, or perhaps a pair of crutches," Mr. Jones said.

After asking around the neighborhood, they were able to procure a wheeled chair from the family of the late Mrs. Barker, who had used it in her final years.

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose in distaste at having to be wheeled around like an invalid, especially in the chair that had belonged to an old lady, now dead, but if it meant that she did not need to be carried everywhere, she supposed it was an improvement.

Due to the difficulty of needing to be carried up and down the stairs, Elizabeth spent most of her time in the drawing room, reading. Her father brought her a supply of his favorite books, which pleased her greatly. Elizabeth was engrossed in one of them when Lydia and Kitty came downstairs, one of them on a hunt for her favorite bonnet so she could wear it to Meryton. They walked past her as if she was invisible, in the middle of an argument with each other.

"Where were you last night?" Kitty demanded in a tone which she thought was hushed, but which Elizabeth could understand perfectly even from halfway across the room.

"Shh!" Lydia put her finger to her lips.

"That is the second time you came to bed late. I won't always cover for you, you know!" Kitty hissed.

Elizabeth had no clue what was going on, but she was not sure she wanted to know about whatever mischief they might be up to.



“There is a gentleman caller for you, sir,” the butler at Netherfield Park told Darcy. “One of the officers of the militia. He wouldn’t give his name, but he hoped you might grant him an audience.”

Darcy went to the parlor, expecting it to be Colonel Forster or one of the other men that he and Bingley had been acquainted with the previous fall. The last person he expected it to be was Mr. Wickham.

“What are you doing here?” Darcy’s eyes narrowed. Luckily, Georgiana was in the music room practicing the pianoforte. He hoped that she would not come downstairs and see Mr. Wickham before he could get rid of him.

“I heard that you were back in town and staying here at Netherfield Park.”

“What do you want then? Money, I suppose? You’ve run up more debts?”

Wickham hesitated. “No, no debts.”

“But you do want money,” Darcy conjectured.

“I want you to help me get back into Cambridge and finish my last term there. You have connections there to make it happen, and the funds to assist me in my endeavor.”

Darcy huffed. “Why?”

“I hope that once I finish, I can be ordained. Perhaps after a few years of serving as a curate, I will be lucky enough to secure a permanent church living.”

“I thought that you had decided that the church life did not suit you. And I wholeheartedly agreed with that assessment.”

“Things are different now,” Wickham said, folding his hands behind his back. “My situation has changed.”

“What has changed? As far as I can tell, you are the same as you always were,” Darcy scoffed.

“I know I have been far from perfect, but I want to turn over a new leaf. There’s a girl, a wonderful girl, who comes from a good family. I want to marry her. But I cannot give her the life she deserves in my current occupation.”

“Isn’t her dowry big enough? It must be fairly sizable to tempt you.”

“Not at all; a mere thousand pounds is all.”

“Only a thousand? Then her father must be giving you the old ‘pistols at dawn’ threat if you don’t marry her.”

“Can you really not believe that I would ever marry for love?”

“No, I cannot. A wastrel like you is incapable of loving anything but money.”

Darcy walked over to the wall to ring for the butler and have Mr. Wickham shown out.

“Please, Darcy,” Wickham begged. “I know we have not been friends in a long time, and I know you still blame me for what happened with Georgiana last summer, but I need something better than what the militia pays.”

Darcy wanted nothing more than to be rid of Mr. Wickham for good.

“The only thing that I will do for you is to pay for you to join a battalion headed for the war in France.” Darcy took out his wallet and began counting the bills. “I believe my cousin’s commission was somewhere in the neighborhood of £450.

That ought to be enough to set you up with a regiment, provided you don't waste it on women or drink."

Wickham reluctantly took the money from Darcy. "My thanks to you, Darcy." He swallowed, his face clearly disappointed.

"No thanks necessary. Send my regards to Napoleon. I hope that his forces will do me a favor and dispatch you straight to hell where you belong."

Wickham left, and Darcy was glad to still hear the strains of Beethoven coming from the music room. *When will I ever be rid of this thorn in my side?* Darcy complained to himself. Just when he thought Wickham was out of his life permanently, the man always seemed to turn up, and it was never a good thing.



The rest of the week flew by. Elizabeth had never helped plan anyone's wedding before. She had no idea how many myriad tasks needed to take place, even for a simple country wedding with their family and closest friends. Being waylaid with an injury, Elizabeth got roped into helping her sisters wrap little packets of candied almonds as favors. Her fingers ached from cutting out dozens of circlets from remnant satin, stuffing them with as many almonds as she could fit and tying ribbons around them. She did not know how many local families her mother expected would attend, but Mrs. Bennet had been dipping almonds by the dozen for weeks now. She counted four and twenty families who they knew intimately, but even if every member were present, that would still not account for the number of favors they were making. Elizabeth suspected that they would be eating almonds for months following this event. Perhaps if stored properly, they could be repurposed for Mary's wedding some day?

The day before the wedding, Jane found Elizabeth in Longbourn's drawing room, surrounded by fabric, ribbons, and trays of almonds.

"I see Mama is planning to feed the army along with all of Meryton," Jane chuckled. She sat down beside Elizabeth and joined in.

"Mr. Bingley has called every day since his return to Netherfield," Elizabeth remarked.

Jane blushed. "Yes, he has."

"You seem very happy."

"I am, oh, I am!" Jane nodded furiously, a huge grin lighting up her face. "And to think, only a few weeks ago I was in despair, thinking he was lost to me forever. Now, I am to be the happiest of women!"

Elizabeth smiled. "I am happy for you. Truly. You and Mr. Bingley seem to be made for each other. I have every reason to believe you will be happy together all of your days."

"I would not have believed it before. My every dream, every wish, has come true. I love Charles so much. But what of you, Lizzy? Are you happy to be getting married?"

Elizabeth kept on filling the pouches of almonds. "I am as happy as I wish to be."

This answer did not satisfy Jane. "Do you love him, your Mr. Darcy?"

Elizabeth gave a forced laugh. "What is not to love? Mr. Darcy is everything a young man ought to be, and more."

"You did not answer my question."

Elizabeth picked up the pace on filling the favors. "We ought to finish these, so the drawing room can be cleared. Mama will be wanting this room thoroughly cleaned before the wedding breakfast."

"Lizzy," Jane said in as stern of a tone as her sweet voice could manage, "are you only marrying Mr. Darcy for his

money and to appease Mama?”

“Goodness, no! Wherever did you get an idea like that? What a thing to say, really.”

Jane scooted closer to Lizzy’s wheeled chair and placed a gentle hand on her leg. “I have observed you with Mr. Darcy. I perceive that you regard him very highly.”

“That is true. You know I could never marry anyone that I did not regard highly. I am not like Papa, after all.”

“Papa regards Mama more than you give him credit for. But that is beside the point. I can see that you care for Mr. Darcy very much.”

Elizabeth gulped.

“But,” Jane continued, “for some reason I cannot puzzle out, your behavior towards him lacks the warmth that Bingley and I share.”

“Not everyone behaves like a pair of lovesick puppies,” Elizabeth quipped.

“Is there some reason you are holding back from Mr. Darcy?”

“Holding back? Why, I am holding back nothing.”

“Falsehoods do not become you, Lizzy. It will not do to enter into a marriage with your feelings held captive in a jar. You must go into it with both hands open, your soul bared for that person to see.”

Elizabeth’s eyes misted over. “Is that how it is with you and Mr. Bingley?”

Jane nodded. “Once we opened our hearts to each other and shared our real feelings, we knew each other in a way that we never had before. It is like the two of us are one soul.”

“And soon, you will be one flesh as well,” Elizabeth added.

Jane's face turned the shade of cooked beetroot. They were both spared from continuing that conversation when their mother entered the room and insisted that they needed to clear out the rest of the favors because they were having company for dinner.

"Mr. Bingley?" Jane asked.

Mrs. Bennet shook her head. "He sent a note expressing his regrets. He and Mr. Darcy had to go into London on an errand. Though what could be more important than spending time with his bride, I do not know. No, I saw Lady Lucas when I was in Meryton with Hill, getting the rest of the food for tomorrow. Her daughter and son have arrived, so I was obliged to extend them an invitation for dinner tonight."

Elizabeth perked up. She would see Charlotte again!

Being confined to her chair, Elizabeth did not bother to change clothing before their guests arrived. She had just enough time to finish tying the rest of the favors and clear all the mess away while Jane put on a more formal dinner dress before the guests arrived: Sir William and Lady Lucas and Mr. and Mrs. Collins.

"Oh, my dear Eliza! You are hurt!" Charlotte cried when she saw Elizabeth waylaid with a hurt ankle.

"I am quite all right," Elizabeth said as her friend bent down to embrace her and kiss her cheek. "It is merely a sprain."

"What a pity, you will be in this chair for Jane's wedding, then. Still, I must hear the tale of how it happened sometime."

Mr. Collins stepped forward. "What a pleasure to see you again, good cousin!"

Elizabeth extended her hand towards him, expecting him to kiss it. Instead, he copied his wife and gave her a hug and a kiss as well.

“Oh, er, it is lovely to see you as well, Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth mumbled, her skin reddening from the neck up to her ears.

She wondered if he would greet the rest of his cousins the same way. Jane appeared, looking lovely in a sprigged muslin dress.

“Ah, Cousin Jane! You are looking well,” Mr. Collins complimented. “And may I offer you my most sincere congratulations on your upcoming nuptials.” He leaned in, intent on giving her a hug likewise, but his wife cleared her throat. She whispered something in Mr. Collins ear, making his cheeks turn pink. He took Jane’s hand with his own and kissed it, appropriately. Thereafter he offered the same greeting to the rest of his cousins and to Mrs. Bennet. To Mr. Bennet, he merely shook his hand.

Elizabeth hid an amused smile at this turn of behavior.

Despite being seated across from Charlotte, Elizabeth had little opportunity to speak to her over the course of the meal. Mr. Collins was beside her, and he insisted on dominating the conversation. His windy speeches, peppered with “Lady Catherine insists...” and “thanks to the goodness of Lady Catherine...,” reminded Elizabeth why she was grateful that neither she nor any of her sisters had the misfortune of being his wife. More than once, she stole a glance at Charlotte to see how she bore it. However, Charlotte had the good sense not to hear most of what her husband said, and now and again, she would redirect his comments with “My dear, do you not think...”.

At one point, Mr. Collins turned to Elizabeth directly and said, “It occurs to me that I have been overly remiss. I had heard, through my dear Charlotte,” he grinned at his wife, “that you also are to be married! Let me not be the last to offer you my heartfelt congratulations on that prospect!”

Elizabeth mumbled something to the degree of thanks, but Mr. Collins hardly heard her as he rambled on.

“I understand that your intended is the nephew of my venerable patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mr. Darcy, of Pemberley, whom I met during my visit last autumn.”

Elizabeth merely nodded.

“And I thought to myself, ‘What a fine thing it is that my excellent cousin will be united with such a man, who comes from a long line of noble masters of the house of Pemberley, the nephew of the great Lady Catherine de Bourgh and a grandson of the Earl of—’”

“Yes, yes, I know all this,” Elizabeth interrupted him, her shame growing by the moment.

Mr. Collins chuckled. “Forgive me, I am run away with my words, as my dear wife often points out that I am apt to do.” He shot another simpering look across the table. “As I was saying, I mentioned all of this to her ladyship one afternoon, thinking that she would be as delighted as I am of the connection between our families. However, I got the distinct impression that she was less than pleased with the news. I had assumed that her nephew would have written to her directly to announce your engagement. But it seems I had—inadvertently, of course— let the cat out of the bag, so to speak.”

Elizabeth frowned. She had yet to meet Mr. Darcy’s aunt, and knew nothing about her, save from the many descriptions given by her cousin. Darcy should have written to his aunt before she learned of his engagement from someone else, but why would the lady be displeased on account of the news? Elizabeth had done nothing to offend the lady. Could her objections spring from Elizabeth’s family’s ties to trade? Not that it mattered; their engagement would soon be over anyway, but it irked Elizabeth to think that she could be so disliked by someone she had never even met.

Mr. Collins never ceased talking, of course, so Elizabeth missed some of what he was saying while musing these thoughts. Her ears pricked up, however, when she heard him say, “And then of course, I recalled that once upon a time, her

ladyship had intimated her hopes for her own daughter, Miss Anne de Bourgh— have I ever mentioned the estimable Miss De Bourgh to you? No? Well, her ladyship had said that she hoped for a marriage between her daughter and Mr. Darcy. They were all but betrothed since birth, she said.”

Elizabeth was stunned. Mr. Darcy, engaged to his cousin, Anne de Bourgh! Why had he never mentioned this before? And, if he was engaged, why the need to put on a sham engagement with her? What was Mr. Darcy intending to accomplish, after all?

Mr. Collins must have sensed Elizabeth’s disquiet. “Of course, if that were true, I have no reason to suspect he would make an offer to *you*, dear cousin, so naturally, I suspected that the idea of their betrothal may have stemmed more from Lady Catherine’s hopes and wishes.”

For Elizabeth’s own part, she heartily wished that Mr. Collins would remain silent on the subject! As it was, his discussion was so loud, it had drawn the attention of nearly everyone at the table, who were wholly embarrassed for Elizabeth’s sake.

Thank heavens for Charlotte!

“My dear,” she said, changing the subject abruptly, “Mrs. Bennet and I were just discussing the wedding music for Saturday. Do you not think it would be very fitting if Miss Bennet were to walk down the aisle to ‘Trumpet Voluntary’? My brother could play it on the trumpet— he’s very good, you know—and it is quite the thing these days.”

“Ah, yes,” Mr. Collins agreed. “I think I know the one you mean. Is it by Purcell?”

“Clarke,” his wife corrected. “The Prince of Denmark’s theme, as it is also known. What do you think, Miss Bennet? Ought I to persuade my brother Matthew to play it for your march? It would be quite regal.”

Jane answered in the affirmative, but Elizabeth scarcely heard her. Her mind was too absorbed by what Mr. Collins had

disclosed. The conversation thereafter was centered on the wedding plans, and Mr. Collins thankfully had no more to say about her engagement to Mr. Darcy.

Later, when the ladies removed to the drawing room, Charlotte sought Elizabeth out in the corner. "I do hope my husband was not wrong in mentioning your engagement to Lady Catherine. I had understood it not to be a secret."

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, it is not a secret. We have not made a spectacle of it, but he was not out of line in bringing it up to anyone."

Charlotte took it a step further. "Then your discomfort comes from Mr. Collins second remark; that Lady Catherine once told him she planned for Mr. Darcy to marry her daughter."

Elizabeth could not speak.

"I hope you know," Charlotte continued, "that Lady Catherine speaks her mind on a great many subjects."

"So I have gathered."

"Yet her wishes are not always acted on by those around her— save for my husband, that is."

Elizabeth could not help a chuckle. "That must be trying for you."

"Mm, I have learnt how to manage him. In time, he has come to regard my opinion as equally weighty as her ladyship's, if not more so. I suspect my sway will grow over the years, especially once Lady Catherine has no more livings to dispose of."

Illumination on Mr. Collins' toadying behavior at last! There must be an incumbent whose living Mr. Collins hoped to add to his current income, Elizabeth conjectured. Greedy man!

"As I was saying," Charlotte resumed, "just because his aunt wishes it so does not mean that Mr. Darcy ever had any

intention of marrying his cousin. He must be in love with you, Eliza, or he never would have made you an offer.”

Oh, but she knew that was not true! Elizabeth felt an unknown pang in her heart. But why? Why should that matter? She knew perfectly well the reason for their hoax. In just a few days, it would all be over, and Mr. Darcy would be free to marry anyone he liked, including his cousin. Why should she care if he was betrothed since birth? Or if he was not, that he had neglected to tell her that his family would already be set against their match without ever meeting her.

“I hope you will keep your promise to me.”

“Hmm?” Elizabeth raised her head.

“To come to Hunsford,” Charlotte said. “You and Mr. Darcy would both be very welcome, you know. Our guest bedroom is small, but comfortable. Though I suppose you might stay at Rosings instead, if his aunt should choose to get over her disappointment.”

Elizabeth smiled weakly. “I will make mention of your offer to Mr. Darcy.”

“Excellent,” Charlotte beamed. “Now, I must go down to the kitchens and ask Mrs. Hill for her recipe for those ratafia cakes we had. They really were quite scrumptious.”

Chapter 17



Jane and Bingley's wedding day finally arrived. The weather was unusually calm and clear for a day in March. Just the perfect sort of day to be married.

Elizabeth had yet to speak to Mr. Darcy regarding what she had learned from Mr. Collins. She had seen him only briefly when they had stopped in on their return from London to inquire after Elizabeth's condition, and there were too many people to speak to him alone.

Mr. Bingley's purpose in going to London was to procure a wedding ring. When he and Darcy had called that night, he slipped the little gold band on her finger to try it on. Thanks to a discreet borrowing of an old brass ring of Jane's—surprisingly accomplished by Mary's help—the ring was sized such that it fit perfectly on her slender finger. Jane showed it to Elizabeth before taking it off. It was wrought of gold in a delicate scroll pattern, and it had a small, round-cut garnet in the center, encircled by pearls, and two heart-shaped garnets on the sides.

“Oh, Jane, it's exquisite!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “It must have cost an absolute fortune!”

“I told Charles he spoils me too much, but he insisted. He wants it to be the first of many great family heirlooms we will hand down to our children.” Jane blushed. The ring was then returned to Bingley before Mrs. Bennet could crow over it, and Bingley gave it in keeping to Darcy, who would safeguard it as the best man until the ceremony.

Jane looked positively angelic the morning of her wedding. Her mother had insisted that no extravagance be spared for her eldest daughter. A new gown had been made up of pale blue satin, embroidered with pink rosettes and trimmed in white lace. She had a new wedding bonnet also, white in

color and trimmed in blue ribbons and pink roses to match the gown. Besides that, she had new shoes, stockings, and undergarments, and a whole wedding trousseau to take along on the wedding journey. Poor Mr. Bennet nearly suffered an apoplexy when he saw the bills.

The ceremony was simple and short. Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Phillips had decorated the church with candles, ribbons, and spring wildflowers that the younger girls had collected for them. Mary pushed Elizabeth, the maid of honor, down the aisle in her wheeled chair and positioned her near the front of the sanctuary, opposite Mr. Darcy, who was standing as best man beside Charles Bingley.

Matthew Lucas had been persuaded by his sister Charlotte to play his trumpet. He sounded the fanfare, and the congregation stood and turned for the entrance of the bride. As he began the triumphant strains of Clarke's voluntary, accompanied by Mary on the church's piano, all eyes were on Jane, beautiful and glowing as she floated down the aisle. All eyes, except for Elizabeth's. Her gaze was fixed on the groom. The look on Mr. Bingley's face was full of awe and love for his bride, as if he had never seen a more beautiful creature in all his life. He quickly brushed a tear from his eye, a huge grin spreading across his face as Jane reached the altar. They exchanged their vows. Mary played a hymn (thankfully she did *not* sing!) and the minister quoted some verses from the Holy Scriptures. Then he pronounced Jane and Bingley to be 'husband and wife' and the two shared a tender kiss to the applause of the congregation.

Mrs. Bennet cried tears of joy throughout the whole ceremony, but on the carriage ride back to Longbourn, she fussed.

"Did you see how few families were in attendance? Hardly anybody came besides the Lucases and the Gouldings and Mrs. Long."

"That is to be expected, Mama," Elizabeth tried to console her. "Weddings are usually for the family and closest

friends of the bride and groom.”

“But I invited everybody in the neighborhood!” Mrs. Bennet wailed. “We dine regularly with four and twenty families of all shapes and sizes. I expected at least half of them to make an appearance. I have ordered a feast for the wedding breakfast and now there will be nobody to eat it!”

“Mama, a good half-dozen families came, besides our own family and Mr. Bingley’s and Mr. Darcy and his sister, which is more than I expected. I imagine we will still be at fifty guests or so, when all is said and done.”

“Yes, my dear,” Mr. Bennet added. “Longbourn will be stuffed to the gills as it is. I wish you had not invited half so many people. Our own party and the Lucases would have been enough.”

“At any rate, you needn’t have worried about making space for Mr. and Mrs. Collins, for there will be chairs aplenty for them,” Elizabeth commented.

“Yes, and my seating charts are all ruined,” Mrs. Bennet pouted.

“Throw out the seating charts, Mrs. Bennet,” her husband told her, “and let people sit where they will. It is better that way, anyhow.”

Mrs. Bennet huffed. “Oh, very well. But Jane and Bingley must sit in the seats of honor I prepared for them.”

How Mrs. Bennet had imagined she could host more than fifty people is beyond anyone’s comprehension. She had borrowed every card table and chair her neighbors were willing to spare, and still there would not have been seats for all if every person invited had come.

“My seating chart had allowed for a first and second seating. The guests would have eaten in turns, with the first group making way for the second when they had finished,” Mrs. Bennet answered smugly when questioned about it. Elizabeth was thankful such a ghastly scenario had not been played out. As it was, there were just enough seats for

everyone that came. The long table in the dining-parlor had been laid out as a buffet and card tables had been set up in the breakfast room, the small parlor, and the drawing room. Mr. Gardiner helped Elizabeth move her wheeled chair next to one of the tables in the drawing room while Mrs. Gardiner brought her a plate of food from the buffet.

Seated where she had a full view of Jane and Bingley enjoying themselves at the feast, sitting together happily, cutting their cake, sharing their first toast as a married couple, Elizabeth could not help but feel a pang of jealousy. She was happy for them. Certainly, she was. Why this sudden feeling, then?

She overheard her mother crowing to Lady Lucas.

“Yes, this wedding is everything I thought it ought to be. Jane and Mr. Bingley are so well suited for each other! And soon, we shall have another wedding to plan.”

A sickening feeling sank to the bottom of Elizabeth’s stomach. Her mother would be disappointed soon. There was no remedy for that. There would be no other wedding to plan, at least, not from her quarter. She looked over to where Mr. Darcy was. The kind man was helping Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Bennet to move some of the tables and chairs out of the way, now that people had finished eating, so that there might be space for the bride and groom to have a dance together. She watched his strong figure push a heavy mahogany card table over to the side of the room, telling their manservant, whom Mrs. Bennet had called in to help, that he had everything well in hand. Then he straightened up, stretched out his chest and back from the exertion, and grinned before picking up a stack of chairs.

With a start, Elizabeth realized her heartache stemmed not from the knowledge that she would disappoint her mother, but from the loss of something more dear: Mr. Darcy himself. Somehow, through all of their pretense and masquerading that they were in love, she had truly fallen in love. This man, who would do anything for his dearest friend, who was willing to

lower himself to the role of a servant at somebody's wedding, who would pretend to be engaged to save her reputation— this man had worked his way deep into her heart, and there he would stay for a long time yet. And she was about to lose him.

Elizabeth looked up at her Aunt Gardiner, trying to keep her lip from quivering. “Would you wheel me out to the garden please, Aunt? I feel I am in need of some fresh air.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded, placing her hands on the chair, but a voice interrupted.

“I can do that.”

Elizabeth's head turned. It was Mr. Darcy. Mrs. Gardiner gave way to the gentleman, who took the chair firmly in his hands and wheeled it out along the pathway he had made by moving the tables.

Out in the garden, the youngest Lucas children and the Gardiner children were playing together, chasing one another in some type of game and enjoying the sunshine.

Mr. Darcy settled Elizabeth's chair in the shade of a large cherry tree. She expected him to return to the party, but instead, he sat beside her on the stone bench.

Elizabeth watched the children at play, not daring to speak, lest her emotions betray her.

Mr. Darcy also remained silent for a few minutes. At last, he opened his mouth. “Georgiana and I return to Pemberley tomorrow.”

Elizabeth nodded. “It will be good to be home again, after so long.”

“Yes,” he softly agreed. “I have been away in Hertfordshire and London these six months now. Georgiana tells me she misses our lake.”

Elizabeth steeled herself for what she knew must come. “So this is it, then, the end of our partnership. The end of our fake engagement.”

“I suppose it is.” Mr. Darcy looked at Elizabeth and sighed. “It has been a pleasure, Miss Bennet.”

“Likewise.”

She offered her hand to him, and he shook it.

“I hope that—” Mr. Darcy broke off.

“Yes?” Elizabeth’s eyes looked up at his. Her breath caught in her throat. She wished he would say something, anything, that might give her an indication that he felt something more than cordiality towards her.

Mr. Darcy drew in a breath. “I hope that if you are ever in Derbyshire, you will call at Pemberley. Even if I should not be at home, my housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, will be happy to offer you a tour. You are welcome at any time.”

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy. I wish you all the best.” Elizabeth looked up at the pink blossoms of the cherry tree, willing her tears to stay behind their dam. Taking a big swallow, she said, “I suppose now that your engagement to me has ended, you are free to honor your aunt’s wishes that you marry your cousin.”

“My cousin?” Darcy blinked. “I hope you know, Miss Bennet, that there has been no official engagement between me and Miss de Bourgh. If there were, I would not have done you the dishonor of making any sort of pretense of a union between us.”

“I know that. Nevertheless, you are free now, to pursue a match with her, or with anyone else whom you desire, for that matter.”

“Yes.” Darcy looked down. “As are you. I hope that the next time an eligible man comes into your society, he will court you in earnest.”

Elizabeth felt her tears threatening to burst forth again. “Mr. Darcy, I—”

Just then, Mrs. Bennet came hurrying along the path towards them. “Oh, Lizzy, there you are! I have been looking

everywhere for you. Jane and Mr. Bingley are about to depart for their wedding tour. You must come and see them off!”

That ended their discussion. Mr. Darcy pushed Elizabeth’s chair around to the front lawn so she could kiss her beloved sister goodbye and throw rose petals at the happy couple as they set off. Mr. Bingley had arranged for them to spend several weeks by the seaside; another gift that he had been secretly planning for his bride.

After the newlyweds were gone, the rest of the guests began departing. Mr. and Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley left directly for Scarborough and the others to their homes. In the commotion, Elizabeth did not realize that Mr. Darcy and Georgiana had gone back to Netherfield without saying goodbye to her. They would leave first thing in the morning for Pemberley.

“Goodbye, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth murmured to herself.

Chapter 18



There was another carriage outside Netherfield when the Darcys returned after the wedding. Darcy groaned when they drew close enough that he could see the crest on it.

“It is Lady Catherine’s,” Georgiana observed. “I wonder what she could be doing here.”

“Curious, indeed,” Darcy nodded.

The footman at the door informed them that a visitor was waiting in the morning parlor for Mr. Darcy. Mr. Darcy handed his coat and hat to the footman while Georgiana made herself scarce.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh was sitting on the settee in the morning parlor, wearing a frown.

“Hullo, Aunt, what a surprise to see you here,” Darcy greeted with a bow.

“Is it? I am certain you can be at no loss to understand why I have come,” she retorted.

“On the contrary, I cannot account for it,” her nephew answered.

“I trust the newlyweds are on their tour then?”

“They are. We have just sent them off.” There was a look of amusement on Darcy’s face.

Lady Catherine leaned on her brass-topped cane for support as she stood up. “You failed to answer my letter, Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

Darcy decided to play coy. “Which letter? You send me regular correspondence. You will have to be more specific.”

“You know precisely the one I mean, Darcy. And do not try to pretend that it was lost. I paid extra to have whoever

received the letter on your behalf sign a notice, which was then returned to me, confirming receipt. The notice bears the signature of your butler in London.”

“Then perhaps therein lies the error, for as you can see, I am here in Hertfordshire, and not in London. How did you manage to find me?”

“My rector informed me that you would be here, attending the wedding of Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet.”

“Ah yes, Mr. Collins. Ever your faithful informant. As to the letter, I really must speak with Morris. He’s been quite remiss in not delivering it to me.”

“Humph! Well, if you insist on pretending that the letter never came into your possession, then I shall not beat around the bush further. Before Mr. Collins departed for Hertfordshire for his cousin’s wedding, he informed me that there was a rumor that you also were engaged to one of his Bennet cousins, a Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Tell me, is there any foundation for such a rumor? Did you make her an offer?”

Darcy looked straight into Lady Catherine’s eyes. “I did.”

Her nostrils flared. “And what,” she spat, “would possess you, a man of sound mind, to make such an offer? Were you taken in by her?”

“I was not.”

Lady Catherine began shaking.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Only, that if I am engaged, it is no business of yours.”

“No business of mine? May I remind you; you have been all but betrothed since birth to *my daughter*, your cousin Anne. Are you so willing to cast her off for this little chit? This little *nobody* from Hertfordshire with hardly a penny to her name?”

“The engagement between Anne and myself has never been made official.”

“Nevertheless, it was your mother’s dearest wish, and mine. Would you dishonor your own mother’s deathbed wish?”

“Her deathbed wish was that I be happy, as told to me from her own mouth while I was at her bedside.”

Lady Catherine’s incense was growing. “So then, you mean to marry this Bennet girl? Heaven and Earth, are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted? You will do no such thing, Fitzwilliam Darcy—”

“I love her!” The words burst from Darcy’s mouth before he could contain them. He had not even had time to consider what he was saying, but he knew that the declaration had sprung from the deepest place of his heart, where his feelings rang truest. And that same truth pierced his soul like a sword. Love her? Yes, he did. He did indeed. But it was too late.

Lady Catherine dismissed him. “You are not in love with this girl. You cannot be in love with her! It is merely an infatuation— nothing more. Your duty is to your family. If you have even one shred of sanity left in you, you will dissolve this union immediately, while there is still time to salvage your reputation.”

“There will be no need,” Darcy almost whispered.

“No need? There is every need! Come to your senses, Darcy!”

“There is no need, Aunt, because our engagement is already at an end.”

“It is—what did you say?” Lady Catherine stammered, blinking at him.

“We were engaged for several weeks; I won’t deny it. Anybody in these parts can tell you. But Miss Bennet has

ended our engagement only this morning. It seems she has changed her mind about marrying me.”

“Well!” Lady Catherine put her fists on her wide hips. “Why did you not tell me this earlier, and save my breath?” A satisfied smile replaced her scowl. She settled back down onto the sofa, setting her cane down beside her. “I do pity you, Darcy, for having your heart broken by her. But clearly, she isn’t good enough for you. I would not waste time pining over the loss. You must move on, now. Anne is quite ready for you to do your duty by her. I will expect to announce your engagement when you come to visit me next month.”

Mr. Darcy had no more fight left in him. If he could not have Elizabeth, he might as well face the music and succumb to his aunt’s wishes for him. He was fond of Anne, after all, and Pemberley needed a suitable mistress. He could not spend every season dodging scheming mamas and fortune-hunting ladies. He knew his aunt’s main objective was to keep the fortune in the family, but as the saying goes, ‘better the devil you know’.

“Very well, Aunt Catherine. Make the arrangements.”

“There’s a good boy! Soon, you will be calling me ‘Mama’ instead of ‘Aunt.’”

Lady Catherine gathered her things and headed for the door.

“Give my regards to Georgiana and tell her I am sorry I did not see her. She will understand.” With that, Lady Catherine limped out to her carriage and was off.



“Is she gone?” Georgiana peeked out from the formal drawing room adjacent to the parlor, where she had been hiding.

“Yes, she is gone,” Darcy smiled. His sister had never outgrown her fear of their aunt.

Georgiana sat down on the settee next to her brother. “I heard your conversation, you know.”

Darcy drew in a breath. “So you know, then.”

“I am ever so sorry that Miss Elizabeth called off your engagement. I was rather looking forward to having her as my sister.”

“Yes. Miss Elizabeth is an excellent sister, by all accounts,” Darcy nodded, his expression dour.

Georgiana scooched closer. “If you love her, then why did you let her go?” she asked gently.

“It is difficult for one as young as yourself to understand.”

Georgiana’s eyes cast to the floor. “I may be young, but I know a little of what it is to be disappointed in love.”

Darcy shifted uncomfortably. “That is different.”

“Not really. Only in your case, you have some recourse. In mine, I had none.”

“Miss Elizabeth does not love me,” Darcy said.

“Are you certain of that? My observations tell me differently.”

“Whatever you observed was merely an act.” Darcy grunted. “At any rate, we shall be off in the morning, and I will not be seeing her again. We shall spend four weeks together at Pemberley, and then I shall be going down to Rosings to make my engagement to Cousin Anne official.”

“I did hear that part too,” Georgiana nodded. “So, I will be getting a new sister, after all.” Her tone sounded, to Darcy, a good deal less enthusiastic than when she had talked of Elizabeth.

“Yes.” Darcy pursed his lips, feeling less enthused himself.



“What a success the wedding was!” Mrs. Bennet hummed cheerily as the servants tidied up the mess left from the wedding and put the drawing room back to rights. The borrowed tables and chairs were being loaded into wagons from the neighbors who came to fetch them, and a maid was sweeping the crumbs from the wedding cake off of the floors while the housekeeper boxed up all of the extra food to be taken to the poor.

“Quite a lot of hullabaloo,” Mr. Bennet answered, happy to have his favorite chair back. “I will be content if we do not have any more weddings in this house for another year or more.”

“Oh, Mr. Bennet! How can you tease? You know we are to have another wedding soon! It is Lizzy’s turn, now that her sister is married.”

“Then she may have her wedding at Pemberley, for it is a good deal larger than our home, and there may be more guests of Mr. Darcy’s set than ours, at any rate.”

“Quite so, but supposing that Lizzy should want to be married in our own parish, with her own friends and neighbors in attendance?”

“Then I leave it to the bride to decide where the wedding is to take place. But I beg you, Mrs. Bennet, not to upheave my drawing room again. Hold the breakfast at the Meryton Assembly Hall, if you will, or ask her sister and brother if they might lend them the use of Netherfield, for it is certainly larger. I do not know why you insisted on Jane’s wedding taking place here, rather than there, in the first place.”

Lizzy had been sitting quietly during this whole exchange. Everyone had seemed to have forgotten that she was still in the corner in her wheeled chair. But now she spoke up.

“Mama, Papa, before you get too carried away planning my wedding, there is something I ought to tell you.”

“Then tell me quickly, my love.” Mrs. Bennet sat down in a chair beside Elizabeth, expecting her to say something about her preferences for the wedding.

“I did not want to steal away any attention from Jane on her special day, so I have waited until now to say this: Mr. Darcy and I are no longer engaged.”

Mrs. Bennet’s face went from eagerness to horror. “What?! This cannot be!”

Mr. Bennet frowned also. “Has Mr. Darcy done something to dishonor you? Do I need to call him to account for your sake? Duel him, sue him, whatever the case may be?”

“No, Papa, Mr. Darcy has done nothing.” Elizabeth shook her head. “I have called off the engagement of my own accord. I simply changed my mind about marrying him, and I told him so, when we were in the garden together.”

“Well then UN-change your mind, young lady!” Mrs. Bennet scolded. She chewed her knuckles. “Mr. Darcy will still be at Netherfield. You can go to him, beg him to take you back. It is not too late! Mr. Bennet, call the carriage to take Lizzy to Netherfield, immediately.”

Mr. Bennet shook his head. “I know my daughter well enough to know, if she has made up her mind, there is a good reason for it. Lizzy, as long as you say that there is no need for me to defend your honor, then I will let the matter be.”

“Thank you, Papa.” Elizabeth smiled.

Mrs. Bennet was not satisfied, however. “But why? Lizzy, why would you change your mind about him? If there has been some disagreement between you two, can you not overlook it? What has he done that you cannot forgive?”

“Mama, there has been no argument, and I repeat, Mr. Darcy has done nothing to warrant this. I am afraid this is all my fault. I was rather dazzled by the prospect of his vast estate and fortune, and I accepted him without really thinking things through. After some reflection, I realized that I could not marry a man whom I did not love, even a rich one who could provide me with every material comfort.”

“Plenty of people marry without love!” Mrs. Bennet argued. “People do it every day! It does not mean that they are doomed to a loveless marriage. Why your father and I barely knew each other when we were wed, but I knew his affection for me would grow in time. And now look at us— the picture of marital bliss!”

Elizabeth hardly thought her parents the picture of marital bliss, but this was no time to argue that. She supposed there must be some small affection— they had five children, after all— but she rarely saw any signs of it.

“Mama,” Elizabeth said firmly. “You know my mind is already made up. Besides, how would it look if I were to go crawling back to Mr. Darcy after I had so adamantly refused him? Do you think your daughter should have no dignity?”

“I suppose you are right,” Mrs. Bennet agreed. She was in tears now. She took out her handkerchief and blew her nose loudly. “But you should know what pains you have caused me, ungrateful child! You have no compassion on my nerves! It would have been better if you had never accepted Mr. Darcy, if you were only going to disappoint my hopes for you in the end.” At that, she left the room, wailing and carrying on.

Chapter 19



Elizabeth had her younger sisters to thank, this time, for spreading the news about her so quickly. Lydia and Kitty thought it a good joke that their sister could accept a proposal one day, then turn around and toss it out so soon after. “Mama says she’s a great fool, and she does not know how she can stand to look at her anymore,” Lydia had told Maria Lucas the day after Jane’s wedding.

Kitty nodded. “Of course, it was a great surprise when Lizzy announced her engagement in the first place. We had all thought things had ended when Mr. Darcy left town.”

Maria Lucas, in turn, had told her mother, which is how Charlotte learned of it. She came over as soon as she could to console her bosom friend.

“I am glad to see you out of that chair,” Charlotte remarked when Elizabeth came to the door on a pair of crutches. After several days in a chair, Elizabeth was more than ready to begin moving again. Uncle Gardiner made her an excellent pair of wooden crutches to use, even padding the tops of them with lamb’s wool to protect her underarms. All day she had hobbled around the house to better acquaint herself with them.

“I am glad to be out of it too,” Elizabeth remarked. She eased herself onto the sofa next to Charlotte and set her crutches aside.

Elizabeth asked Charlotte how she was settling in in Kent. Charlotte was all too happy to talk of the comforts of home, her parish, and the trials of raising chickens and pigs.

“Our pigs are forever getting out into the garden,” she said.

When asked how long they would be at Lucas Lodge, Charlotte told her, “We are staying another three weeks, and then we will be going home to Kent. You would be more than welcome to come with us, if you like. Your ankle should be well by then, I would think.”

“That is very generous of you,” Elizabeth answered. “I had rather thought you would be returning home sooner than that.”

“Well, we had hoped— oh, never mind.”

“No, what were you going to say?”

“We had hoped to stay until your own wedding, thinking it would not be long after Jane’s. But obviously, that is not to be the case.” Charlotte murmured.

“No, it is not,” Elizabeth agreed.

“Anyways, I do not believe any of the rumors.”

“What rumors would those be?” Elizabeth’s brow furrowed.

“Oh, just utter nonsense.” Charlotte waved her hand as if swatting a fly.

“No, tell me, what is it that you heard?”

Charlotte looked rather sheepish. “I happened to be in the room when Mrs. Goulding called upon my mother, and they talked of your broken engagement. Mrs. Goulding seemed to think you had been terribly used by Mr. Darcy, for him to have broken off your engagement and left right after your sister’s wedding. But of course, my mother would not allow that he had taken any liberties with you during your brief engagement.”

“Certainly not,” Elizabeth answered. “And I hope that you will pass on to your mother that it was I who called off the engagement. We— that is, I— decided that we would not suit each other after all.” Elizabeth said pointedly.

“I see,” Charlotte answered, observing her friend’s face to discern if there was any trace of regret. “The point is,” Charlotte continued, “If you are in need of a diversion after your love troubles, I would be happy to provide such.”

Elizabeth smiled and clasped her hands. “Well, I am as much in need of an escape from Mama’s scolding and fretting as I am needing a diversion. I do believe I shall accept your offer.”



Mrs. Bennet was reluctant to let her daughter go to Kent. “First you throw away a perfectly good marriage opportunity, and now you want to go running off to Kent with a broken ankle?”

“Mama, my ankle is only sprained and should be recovered by the time we leave. And besides, it will be good for me to get away from Meryton for a while. There has been too much gossip about me.”

“And whose fault is that?” Mrs. Bennet huffed. Elizabeth did not have to answer. Just then, Lydia burst into the room, sobbing, and ran straight into her mother’s arms.

“Why, child! Whatever is the matter?” Mrs. Bennet asked as she stroked her youngest daughter’s hair.

“The militia are being sent to Brighton. Of all places, Brighton! I cannot bear it! My dear Wickham, gone from me.”

Kitty was distraught too, over the loss of Mr. Denny, but her anguish nowhere near compared to that of Lydia, who felt all the pangs of separation from her love.

“When do they go, dear?” Mrs. Bennet asked Lydia.

“I have only just heard the news. They march out today! How can they leave on such short notice?” A fresh round of

sobs sent her burrowing her face into her mother's bosom.

"I am very sure they had no choice in the matter, Liddy," Elizabeth tried to console. "When the army gives directives, they must obey, posthaste."

"There must be some urgency, for them to be needed so quickly," Mary supplied.

"Well, whatever it is, I wish that they were not going. I wish they would remain quartered here in Meryton forever!"

"Come, child, perhaps there is still hope!" Mrs. Bennet consoled. "Perhaps Mr. Wickham may yet call on you to take his leave and secure your hand before he departs."

But Mr. Wickham did not call to take his leave, nor Mr. Denny, nor did any of the other officers who had made such an impression on the youngest Bennet sisters. Kitty and Lydia were despondent for weeks, and not even their daily visits to Meryton could distract them.



Much as Elizabeth enjoyed being in Charlotte's company again, a full day's journey confined in a post-chaise with Mr. Collins was trying. He talked non-stop the whole journey, mainly meaningless topics in which Elizabeth had no interest. More than once, Elizabeth wished that they had taken the mail coach or the stage, which, though more uncomfortable than a private chaise, would have taken half the time to journey. In the late morning between rest stops, Elizabeth pretended to sleep, and after Charlotte pointed out to her husband that their friend was sleeping, he dropped his voice low enough that after a while, Elizabeth fell asleep in actuality. In the afternoon of the journey, however, Elizabeth found no respite from his chatter as she was too sore and uncomfortable from sitting in the carriage to be able to fall asleep.

As they passed through the town of Westerham, Mr. Collins' excitement grew.

“There! You see that towering steeple? That is the Church of St. Mary the Virgin. Aside from Rochester and Canterbury Cathedrals, a finer church cannot be found in Kent. Just look at the magnificent quatrefoil window designs! Also, you cannot see it from here, but there resides, above the altar, a stunning mosaic of the Last Supper, which rivals any of the frescoes and stained glass one might find at Rochester or Canterbury.”

Elizabeth had seen neither the Rochester Cathedral nor the famed one in Canterbury, nor did she know whether or not there might be other churches finer than this one in Kent, but she smiled and nodded, nonetheless.

Mr. Collins rambled on. “And that lovely abode with the crawling vines, standing next to the church, is the parsonage.” He said this with an envious gleam in his eyes.

“Is it as large as your home in Hunsford?” Elizabeth asked.

“Much larger. Nearly twice as large, in fact, with a vastly superior garden. Do not mistake me dear cousin, I am endlessly grateful to Lady Catherine for bestowing on me the current home in which I reside. She did after all, give me the best living in her gift which was available at the time. But how I rue that it had not been this living which was vacant in my hour of need. Such a fine place! Eight bedrooms, and two sitting rooms! Twelve acres of farmland! And it even boasts a little hermitage next to the gardens!”

“But is your own parsonage not adequate as a temporary residence? After all, you expect to come into possession of Longbourn, which is of about equal size, with even more farmland.”

“Ah, dear cousin, while it is true that I am the current heir, my inheritance may be a long time in coming. For your father— may he live forever! — is still relatively young, and

though your mother fears his imminent passing at any moment, he may very well live twenty, or even thirty years more, Lord willing. And unfortunately, I fear that the size of my dwelling, while perfectly adequate for a family of two, might not be able to sustain the burgeoning growth I expect to see over the course of the next few years.”

“Do you plan to have many children, then?” Elizabeth glanced at Charlotte. But aside from a slight pink tinge that arose to her cheeks, her composure did not change.

“Oh yes,” Mr. Collins answered. “I fully expect to have a large brood running about within the next ten years.”

After another half-hour or so, they entered the village of Hunsford. As they drew along the lane leading up to the parsonage, an impressive carriage approached from the opposite direction. Mr. Collins rapped on the roof, and their chaise rolled to a stop just as the stately barouche came alongside them. The barouche driver also stopped. From where she sat beside Charlotte in the enclosed coach, Elizabeth could see the passengers in the barouche, who were riding with the top open, but they could not see her. In the forward-facing seat was a tall, stately matron with gray hair and an elaborately plumed hat. Opposite her sat a small, thin woman with a sallow complexion.

Mr. Collins stuck his head out the window of the coach and addressed them.

“Lady Catherine! Miss de Bourgh! What a fine thing to see you out and about on this lovely afternoon! As you can see, we have just returned home from Hertfordshire after my cousin’s wedding and visiting with my wife’s parents.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Lady Catherine said without any inflection in her voice. “I trust your journey went well, seeing how you have arrived home in one piece. We are on our way out to dine with the Greenburys this evening, so I cannot pay you a call. Do come to my home for dinner tomorrow. My cook will not be put out by having guests on so short a notice,

and we will go to no extra trouble on your account, so you needn't worry about that."

Mr. Collins chuckled. "Your ladyship is too kind! But I must make mention, we have brought along a guest with us from Hertfordshire. My cousin, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I hope you will not mind having her as an addition to our party."

Lady Catherine stiffened. She pursed her lips before saying, "Of course, you must bring your cousin with you. I am curious to meet her." Lady Catherine rapped her cane on the side of the carriage, and her driver continued on.

Mr. Collins pulled his head back in and turned to the ladies. "Oh, what a delight! Lady Catherine is ever the picture of affability and condescension! To think— on only your second day here, you shall meet Lady Catherine and dine with her at Rosings! I am over the moon! Now, you need not be concerned about your apparel, dear cousin. Just put on whatever you have brought that is the best. Lady Catherine likes to keep the distinction of rank preserved."

Elizabeth thought that she would certainly not go to any extra trouble to dress up for Lady Catherine. She thought it interesting that Lady Catherine should be curious to meet her, as she was equally curious to meet this 'great figure' that she had heard so much about. She wondered if Lady Catherine would still be displeased with her, now that she was no longer engaged to her ladyship's nephew.



Lady Catherine surveyed Elizabeth as if she were appraising a horse she wanted to buy. She circled around her, eyeing her features, before settling down on the sofa, placing her cane to the side.

“So, you are Elizabeth Bennet,” she stated.

“I am, your ladyship.” Elizabeth made the smallest curtsy. Before their arrival, Mr. Collins had waxed poetic about the grandeur of Lady Catherine’s drawing room, the marble parquet flooring of the entry hall, the plush carpeting and the chandelier fixtures. Seeing it all in person, Elizabeth found the ostentatious decor to be a bit too garish for her liking, almost as if the decorator were trying to make a statement that screamed “I am fabulously wealthy!” Too many vases, sculptures, busts, paintings, and knick-knacks of all sorts vied for her attention, and carpets, drapes, and upholstery in bold, clashing colors and hideous patterns assaulted her senses.

The great lady herself was garbed in a decadent maroon gown that dripped with beads, braided trims, and lace. A massive necklace, heavy with jewels, covered her throat. Her turban had so many feathers sticking out from it, that Elizabeth wondered that some bird might not mistake her for its mate and try to land on it.

Elizabeth was introduced to Anne de Bourgh, Lady Catherine’s daughter, and to her companion, Mrs. Jenkinson. In contrast to her mother, Miss de Bourgh wore a simple gray dress of an elegant cut, finely trimmed but lacking the pretentious display of her mother’s attire. But what struck Elizabeth the most was that Miss de Bourgh was seated in an intricately carved wooden chair on wheels, not too dissimilar from the one that Elizabeth had used during her convalescence.

“I would rise to greet you, Miss Bennet, but as you can see, I am unable to do so,” Miss de Bourgh smiled.

“That is no matter,” Elizabeth returned her smile and gave a more genuine curtsy.

The bell rang for dinner, and Mrs. Jenkinson wheeled Miss de Bourgh into the dining parlor after her mother while the rest followed. The dining table was just as grand as Mr. Collins had described, able to seat up to twenty people with

ease. Elizabeth tried to imagine how it might look when the whole table was filled with guests at a dinner party. For now, they were seated at one end, with Lady Catherine at the head and Mr. and Mrs. Collins on her right side, Miss de Bourgh and Elizabeth to her left. Mrs. Jenkinson sat on the far left, next to her charge.

As the footmen brought out the first course, Miss de Bourgh asked Elizabeth about her favorite pastimes.

“Mostly reading and taking long walks,” Elizabeth answered. “I love to explore the countryside.”

“Is there much to see in Hertfordshire in the way of nature?”

“Plenty of woodland trails to see. And then of course there is our hill, Oakham Mount. The view from there is—” Elizabeth stopped short, remembering the last time she had been up the hill. The view she was picturing was not the woods and fields of the countryside, however, but Mr. Darcy’s face while they sat up there on that rock.

“Miss de Bourgh, won’t you try the soup?” Mrs. Jenkinson suggested. “The broth is very hearty today; lots of vegetables, but not too much fat.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jenkinson,” Miss de Bourgh replied, taking a small sip of her soup. She turned back to Elizabeth. “You were saying about the view from Oakham Mount?”

“The view is rather lovely,” Elizabeth finished. “But the climb can be a little bit treacherous. In fact, that is how I sprained my ankle recently.”

“Oh dear!”

“Yes, I was waylaid these last three weeks while it healed. I spent the first week confined to a wheeled chair and another two weeks on a pair of crutches. I could not wait to be back on my feet again.”

Anne nodded slowly. Elizabeth covered her mouth, realizing she was speaking to a person who had likely been

confined to a chair for far longer and might always be so.

“Oh, I am sorry. I did not mean to be insensitive.”

Miss de Bourgh shook her head. “You are not at fault. It is what it is.”

Mrs. Jenkinson interrupted her charge again. “You haven’t eaten any of your cabbage yet. You are not feeling unwell, are you, Miss de Bourgh?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jenkinson, I am quite well.”

“I can see that you do not like cabbage very much. Here, try the Brussels sprouts instead.” She took the tongs and began placing the roasted sprouts onto Miss de Bourgh’s plate one by one until Miss de Bourgh raised her hand to signal that she had enough.

Elizabeth felt sorry for her, being treated like a child by her companion.

“Have you been infirm all your life?” Elizabeth asked.

“Not always.” Miss de Bourgh said wistfully. “I suffered a paralytic disease as a young child, and it left me unable to walk. I still recall how it felt to run and play along the seashore. My family used to go every year to our summer home by the seaside. Every morning, I would run down the sandy bank that led from the house to the beach and splash my feet in the water, before my mother could catch me and scold me for being unladylike, or before my nanny could try to sit me down and make me eat my breakfast.” Anne giggled.

Tilting her head towards Elizabeth, she said, “I should love to take a walk with you sometime. Obviously, I won’t be walking, per-se; Mrs. Jenkinson can push my chair along the path. She takes me out at least once a day for my constitution. Rosings has an excellent path that encircles our pond and borders the parsonage.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I would love to take you up on your offer during my stay.”

“Miss Bennet.” Lady Catherine’s sharp voice drew Elizabeth’s attention away from the pleasant conversation she’d been having. Lady Catherine launched a series of impertinent questions as to how many sisters Elizabeth had, whether they were all out in society, and what their accomplishments were as well as trying to find out Elizabeth’s own accomplishments and education, and even her age.

“Do you have many relatives then, Miss Bennet?” Lady Catherine continued her interrogation.

“My father’s only living relative is Mr. Collins, your ladyship. As for my mother, she has a sister who lives in Meryton and a brother in London.”

“Their occupations?”

Elizabeth gritted her teeth. “My aunt is married to a solicitor and my uncle has a business in the cabinetry industry.”

“So, he is a carpenter by trade?”

“No, your ladyship. His company makes and sells furniture, and he oversees it. Although, as it happens, he is quite handy at woodcraft himself, being the primary designer of most of the pieces they sell.”

“I see. And you have no connections to anyone in society. Nobody who is a peer or a member of parliament in your family.”

“None that have any close relationship to us, your ladyship.”

Charlotte sensed Elizabeth’s discomfort and looked as though she wished she could say something on Elizabeth’s behalf, but she did not dare risk offending their patroness. Fortunately for Elizabeth’s sake, Mr. Collins decided to change the subject.

“This dinner is quite sumptuous! The best I have eaten to this date! I hope that your ladyship will allow us the privilege of returning the favor by hosting you and your

daughter for dinner following the Sunday service this week. Though our table is nothing we can boast about, compared to the feasts you offer here, we hope that you might honor us with your presence. Unless of course, you have other plans that day. In which case, we are happy to have you any day that is convenient for your—”

“—I will save you the trouble, Mr. Collins,” Lady Catherine interrupted. “It is well that you were able to come this evening, for I am afraid that we shall be occupied for the next several weeks and will not see you.”

“Oh, I— that is...of course your ladyship has many obligations,” Mr. Collins stammered.

“Will you be going out of town again, your ladyship?” Charlotte asked.

Miss de Bourgh answered for her mother. “My cousins, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy, are coming to stay.”

Lady Catherine glared at her daughter for speaking out of turn.

“Yes, so since we will have company, I am afraid we cannot come for dinner, Mr. Collins.”

The rest of the dinner passed, but Elizabeth scarcely heard a word. All she could think about was Miss de Bourgh’s revelation. Mr. Darcy— here in Kent!

Chapter 20



A month at Pemberley had not been enough to dispel Darcy's gloom. Even the shining lake had lost its luster and the gardens seemed to mock him with their blooms.

"You are making a mistake," Georgiana told him as he packed to leave for Rosings. He would collect his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, from London on the way.

"Anne de Bourgh is a respectable woman and a fit mistress for Pemberley. There is no reason why I should not marry her, as my aunt has always intended."

"There is every reason!" Georgiana argued. "For one thing, you do not love her. You love Elizabeth!"

"Do not mention that name to me!" Darcy snapped. Then he sobered. "I am sorry, Georgiana."

His sister did not speak.

Darcy sighed. "Elizabeth is lost to me. I will not forfeit my dignity trying to win her back. And I have given my word to Lady Catherine that I will marry Cousin Anne. I cannot go back on that."

"You are a fool, Will," Georgiana scolded. "Give my regards to Lady Catherine and Cousin Anne, and to Cousin Richard, too."

Darcy nodded. "Shall I send for you when the wedding date is set?"

Georgiana turned her head away. "No. I do not wish to be there when you sign your life away."

"Very well, then."



“Aunt Catherine seems in a fine mood,” Colonel Fitzwilliam remarked as he and Darcy walked along the pondside path at Rosings. “She seemed to be a mixture of glee and anxiousness, all at once, and I cannot understand her reluctance to let us take a constitutional walk. It is not as if she can keep the both of us cooped up indoors during our entire stay. What can be her motive?”

“Where Lady Catherine is concerned, it is best not to make any assumptions,” Darcy said.

The gentlemen had been staying at Rosings for several days, but this was the first time they had left the house.

“I offer you my congratulations,” the colonel said.

“What?”

“On your engagement,” he clarified. “Anne is a lucky woman.” There was a hint of sadness on the colonel’s face, which Darcy interpreted to be sympathy for his finally succumbing to their aunt’s wishes. Only the day before, he had met with Lady Catherine’s solicitor to discuss the terms of the marriage settlement so the papers could be drawn up. Colonel Fitzwilliam had rightly inferred the implications of that meeting.

“Yes, well, I have come to realize there is no use fighting what everybody wants.”

The colonel looked as though he was about to speak. But just then, a young woman came into view from the opposite direction, and Darcy stopped short.

“Miss Bennet!” he exclaimed.

Elizabeth looked up from the book she had been reading while strolling. “Mr. Darcy. What are you doing here?”

“Er, visiting my aunt and my cousin.” He looked at the colonel. “And this is another of my cousins, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. Colonel, this is Miss Elizabeth Bennet. My— my friend from Hertfordshire.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Colonel Fitzwilliam kissed Elizabeth’s hand and she greeted him cordially.

“What—what brings you to Kent, Miss Bennet?” Darcy stammered. “Are you a guest of the Collinses?”

“I am.”

He glanced down at her feet. “Your ankle appears much better!”

“Yes, I am grateful to be back on my feet.”

“What’s this? Were you injured, Miss Bennet?” The colonel asked.

“Sadly, yes,” she replied. “I turned my ankle climbing up a hill. Fortunately, Mr. Darcy was there to nurse me.”

“Did he, now?” The colonel exclaimed, turning an amused expression towards Darcy. “I did not know that nursing was among Darcy’s many talents.”

“There is a lot you don’t know about me, Richard.” Darcy retorted.

Elizabeth hid her smile. “Well, it has been a pleasure seeing you, Mr. Darcy, and meeting you, Colonel Fitzwilliam, but I ought to return to the parsonage in case Mrs. Collins needs me.”

“Now, hold on!” The colonel laughed. “If you and my cousin are such good friends, then you must allow me the opportunity to become better acquainted with you, Miss Bennet. Allow us to accompany you back to the parsonage. We ought to call there anyhow.”



“Well, I’ll be!” Charlotte exclaimed when the two gentlemen had gone. They had stayed at the parsonage above half an hour and had even taken a spot of tea that was offered.

“Here I was, thinking we had brought you to Kent to escape your thoughts of Mr. Darcy, and it seems he has followed you, Eliza!”

“He has done no such thing,” Elizabeth retorted. “He is here for the sake of his relatives, not me. And besides,” she let out a sigh, “I have had four weeks apart from him for any lingering affections to cool. Surely by now, we can meet as indifferent acquaintances.”

“Four weeks for whose affections to cool? His, or yours?” Charlotte’s eyes gleamed.

“Either— neither!!” Elizabeth flustered. “I broke it off with him, remember? There was never any affection between us. He was taken by my beauty; I, by his fortune. In the end, I decided that was not enough. We are too incompatible.”

“It did not appear that way, judging by the casual banter you displayed.”

“I banter with anyone whom I have even a modicum of friendship with,” Elizabeth huffed. “The fact I am able to do so only proves my ability to retain an amicable relationship with him despite our having gone our separate ways in regard to any thoughts of marriage.”

Charlotte raised one eyebrow. “Yes, I was rather shocked to hear he is now engaged to Miss de Bourgh. He moved on quickly. Does that not bother you?”

“Not in the least.” Elizabeth stuck her chin out. “In fact, I expected it. Good for him. I like a man who knows what he wants.”

“You really have no regrets in letting him go, then?”

“None, whatsoever.” Elizabeth nodded decisively.



Elizabeth held herself together until she reached the small bedroom allotted to her during her stay. Then she crumbled. Burying her head beneath two pillows so as not to be heard, Elizabeth released her sobs. No regrets? She had every regret in letting Mr. Darcy go. As his publicly declared *fiancée*, she could have insisted on going through with a wedding. Her honor was at stake, after all, since they had been witnessed together entering his carriage by Miss Bingley. Even though enough time had passed that she should be safe from scandal, she would have been within her rights to hold him to the engagement. But that was not what she wanted. She did not want him to marry her out of any sort of obligation. Especially now that she knew his heart lay with his cousin, Miss de Bourgh.

Colonel Fitzwilliam had let it slip during their visit that Mr. Darcy was to be married to Miss de Bourgh. Mr. Collins was overjoyed at the news, but for Elizabeth, though she had long known it to be a possibility, it came like a knife to her heart.

Would he even wait three weeks for the Banns to be read? Or would they procure a license and be married sooner? How could she stand to be staying at the parsonage right next door to Mr. Darcy, knowing that he was about to be married to someone else?

She never should have come to Kent.

Chapter 21



Elizabeth, here in Kent! Mr. Darcy paced his room anxiously. He had thought that coming to Rosings and becoming engaged to Anne would have finally put her out of his mind. Instead, here she was, invading his very presence at a time when he would rather she be as far away as the moon is to the earth. It was torture, being so near to her, and yet unable to acknowledge her as more than an acquaintance. A former lover. If she could even be called that. A former *fiancée*. Yes, that was better.

Colonel Fitzwilliam, lazing in the easy chair in the corner with his feet up on the dresser, found it all amusing. He had come into Darcy's chambers uninvited and made himself at home with a cigar, saying that Aunt Catherine never let him smoke in any other rooms of the house.

"Have you got an army of ants in your pants, Darce?" He chortled. "You seem agitated."

"Agitated? No, I am perfectly calm. What would make you think that I am not calm, Richard?"

Colonel Fitzwilliam let out a circular puff of smoke. "You are about as calm as a tempest on the high seas. What could have made you so unnerved? Not this Miss Bennet you knew in Hertfordshire?"

"Why would Miss Bennet make me unnerved?"

"Oh, I do not know. Perhaps that you were recently engaged to her, before she broke it off?" The colonel blithely suggested.

Darcy stopped pacing. "You knew?"

Colonel Fitzwilliam laughed. "Did you think that I would not hear of it? Between Aunt Catherine muttering about 'that Bennet girl' when she thought no one was listening and

Cousin Anne telling me directly, I was bound to know of it. But I do wonder why you did not tell me yourself.”

“What is there to tell? We were engaged, she decided not to go through with it. End of story.”

“Oh, I think there is far more to tell than that.” Colonel Fitzwilliam’s eyes twinkled. “Did she break your heart, this Elizabeth Bennet? Is that why you hurried to engage yourself to Cousin Anne so quickly?”

“My engagement with Anne has been long in coming, and you know it. And besides, even if there was something in my heart for Miss Bennet at one time, there is nothing now. I have moved on. I cannot dwell on the past.”

“I see.” The colonel took his boots off of the dresser and put out his cigar. “Very well, then.”



Elizabeth awoke with renewed determination the next day. If she could not avoid a proximity to Mr. Darcy, then she would face him with dignity and indifference. No use crying about the loss of him. She had made her choice, and so had he.

Charlotte was nearly finished at the breakfast table when Elizabeth went downstairs.

“Lizzy, there you are. Mr. Collins and I are going to call at Rosings after breakfast. He feels impelled to congratulate his benefactress on her daughter’s marriage and to offer to officiate the wedding. Would you like to accompany us?”

Elizabeth thought for a moment. “Yes. Yes, I think I shall,” she decided.



Lady Catherine looked peeved to see them in her drawing room. She tapped her cane against the side of her foot as Mr. Collins, Charlotte, and Elizabeth took their seats before her. None of the others were present in the room.

“Mr. Collins,” she said. “I told you; I am too busy these days to accept any callers.”

Mr. Collins groveled. “Yes, of course, your ladyship. I will not take up more than a few minutes of your time, but I felt it incumbent on me, as the recipient of your goodwill, to come in person to wish you my heartfelt congratulations on the engagement of your daughter and your estimable nephew. I daresay that never before, and never again will be, a bride as lovely as she, for I have always said that she—”

“Yes, yes,” Lady Catherine waved him off. “I thank you for your congratulations, Mr. Collins. Now, if that is all, I have a thousand things to attend to. Good day to you, Mr. Collins, Mrs. Collins, Miss Bennet,” Lady Catherine acknowledged.

Mr. Collins scooted his chair forward before Lady Catherine could rise from her seat. “Er, one more thing, your ladyship.”

Lady Catherine rolled her eyes.

“I would like to offer you my services,” Mr. Collins continued. “It would be my utmost honor to perform the wedding for Miss de Bourgh and Mr. Darcy. Furthermore, I can assist you with many of the minutiae that goes into planning the ceremony. For I am well aware of the immense work that goes into such an endeavor.”

“Unfortunately, Mr. Collins, I have already asked another to officiate the ceremony. Mr. Garbutt.”

Mr. Collins clenched his fist. “The rector of Westerham?”

“Yes,” Lady Catherine answered. “I mean to have Anne married in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin there. She will

look stunning against the backdrop of the Last Supper mosaic.”

“But...that is to say...would Miss de Bourgh not prefer to be married in her own parish, here in Hunsford?”

“I own the advowson for the Westerham living, therefore, it may as well be her own parish. Besides, I am getting a special license, thanks to my connections with the Archbishop of Canterbury, so Anne may marry in any place I choose for her, even in my own garden. I believe you yourself had gotten a license, though it was only a *common* one, since you were in such haste to be wed to your dear Mrs. Collins, is that not so?”

Elizabeth heard something like a squeak come from Mr. Collins’ mouth. She looked to see if Charlotte was as ashamed as he was over the real reason for their hasty marriage, but her color never changed.

Lady Catherine cleared her throat. “Mr. Garbutt is familiar with that church and its layout, and he is the rector there, therefore I thought it would be easiest for him to perform the ceremony. So, thank you, Mr. Collins, but your services are not needed.”

For once, Mr. Collins was unable to speak. Elizabeth thought she had never seen the poor man look so defeated.

Charlotte took his arm and rose. “Thank you, your ladyship. I am certain the wedding will be beautiful. We will let you get on with your business.”

Elizabeth popped up, ready to follow the Collinses out the door.

But just then, the door swung open, and Colonel Fitzwilliam entered.

“Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Collins! Miss Bennet! A pleasure to see you again. Aunt Catherine, you did not tell me they would be joining us for luncheon also.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Collins are just leaving,” said Lady Catherine.

“Nonsense! You must invite them to stay. Didn’t you say that your other rector, Mr. What’s-His-Name Something-but is lunching with us to discuss Anne and Darcy’s wedding? Surely, we can make room for three more!”

Before Lady Catherine could answer, her daughter entered the room, being pushed by Mr. Darcy.

“Oh, are you here for luncheon?” Miss de Bourgh asked them. “I do hope so, for I would love your company, especially you, Miss Bennet.”

Lady Catherine was left with no way out. “Do join us, Mr. and Mrs. Collins and Miss Bennet. I would be very ill-bred if I did not invite you to stay.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam looked at his aunt with a twinkle in his eye. “No one could ever accuse you of being ill-bred, Aunt Catherine.” He shot a glance at Darcy, and the two seemed to share some sort of inside joke.

Darcy covered his mouth quickly to hide his smile.

Mr. Collins bowed repeatedly to Lady Catherine as he thanked her profusely for the invitation, how delighted they were to stay, what an honor, etc., until even her patience was tried.

Turning to Darcy, she said, “Do help me to see if Mr. Garbutt has arrived. I am growing hungry, and I do not like to be kept waiting for my meal.”

Darcy turned to the front window, where a view of the drive could be had. “There is just now a carriage stationed out front, and a man in a black cape exiting it,” he informed her.

“Yes, that will be him,” said Lady Catherine. She rang her butler to ensure that their luncheon would be ready to serve in a few moments.



Mr. Garbutt was a decrepit old man whose back hunched with age. He coughed and wheezed throughout the whole meal and his hearing must have been bad, for even Lady Catherine, seated next to him, practically had to shout to make herself heard by him.

This suited Elizabeth fine, for she could converse freely with Miss de Bourgh and Colonel Fitzwilliam without much danger of being overheard by Lady Catherine. Mr. Darcy's attention was commanded, for Lady Catherine had much to discuss about the wedding, and she required Mr. Darcy's input, although she contradicted him with her own opinions at every turn. Elizabeth wondered that the lady did not simply plan the whole wedding according to her own wishes and leave off the pretense of asking the groom his opinion. Mr. Darcy seemed to put up with her antics, however, as if he truly did not have a care in the matter. Lady Catherine rarely called upon her daughter to express an opinion, and when she did, it was just as easily dismissed. The bride, apparently, had even less of a say in the organization of her wedding than the groom did.

Once or twice, Mr. Collins tried to insert his own expert advice— he was very proud of the fact that he married, buried, and baptized all his own parishioners— but he was brought down so sharply by Lady Catherine's reminder that he was not to perform the wedding, and therefore had no business in the matter, that he became strangely silent the rest of the meal. Even his wife's attempts to draw him into conversation were met with monosyllabic responses. Elizabeth had never seen her cousin so morose.

Elizabeth had been engaged in a lively discussion with Colonel Fitzwilliam on the subject of the home defense and the colonel's expectations that he might soon be stationed near Dover. He had just finished a rather good impression of

Napoleon that had her in stitches when she heard the voice next to her interrupt.

“I have not forgotten your promise to me.”

Elizabeth turned her attention to Miss de Bourgh, who had spoken. “Which promise?”

“To take a walk with me during your stay at Hunsford,” Miss de Bourgh reminded her. “Mrs. Jenkinson is ill today, but I am sure that one of my cousins can push my chair while we enjoy the scenery of the grounds.”

“Oh yes, of course.” Elizabeth nodded. “It would be my pleasure to do so.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam piped up. “Perhaps we might do so after the meal. The weather is pleasant today, I observed.”

“Let’s all go,” Charlotte suggested from across the table.

Lady Catherine’s attention was drawn. “What is this we are planning here?” she demanded.

“A walk, your ladyship,” Charlotte answered.

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” Mr. Darcy said. The meal was finished, and the servants were already clearing the table. “Would you like to join us, Mr. Garbutt?” Mr. Darcy graciously offered.

Mr. Garbutt let out a loud, guttural cough of a wet nature that made Elizabeth grateful that the plates were already cleared. “Fraid I must be going, Mr. Darcy,” his raspy voice answered. “But thank ye for asking me, nonetheless. Lady Catherine,” he said, turning to his hostess, “my compliments on the meal. We will meet one more time to finalize the specifics on the wedding, but my heartfelt congratulations to you, and to the happy couple.” He gave a bow to Lady Catherine and to the bride and groom, if the shallow deepening of his already hunched position could be called a bow. He hobbled to the door on the arm of a footman, hacking and coughing into his handkerchief the whole way.

Lady Catherine returned to the conversation at hand. “I am sure that a walk will not be necessary. Anne has already taken her morning constitutional with Mr. Darcy and should not exert herself any further.”

“I hardly think that being pushed in a chair could exert her any further, Aunt Catherine, and if it should, I will personally ensure that she returns to the house posthaste.” Mr. Darcy vouched on his cousin’s behalf.

Colonel Fitzwilliam’s head bobbed. “Yes, Aunt, surely you cannot object to an additional dose of sunshine on a day like this, especially at a time of year when the spring rains might keep us indoors for a week or more. *Carpe diem!*”

“Well, not you, Darcy. I am planning to go over the menu for the wedding feast, and I require your opinion on the matter. If the others are determined to go, you at least must not see fit to abandon me.”

“Dear Aunt,” Darcy said. “The wedding plans will keep. And if they cannot, I trust you have matters well at hand. I defer to your excellent judgment. As for me, I shall take Cousin Richard’s advice and seize the day.”

Lady Catherine groused. “I can see that I am to have no say, even in my own house. Well then, be off with you! I must go and lie down. All this company has made me weary.”

“As if company could ever make *her* weary,” Colonel Fitzwilliam whispered in Elizabeth’s ear. “If there is one thing my aunt never tires of it is entertaining.”

Elizabeth stifled a laugh.



They took the route that encircled the great pond bordering the gardens. The path was just broad enough for two

abreast. Colonel Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth soon took the lead with their brisk pace, while Mr. and Mrs. Collins followed at a more leisurely stroll and Mr. Darcy, pushing Miss de Bourgh in her chair, brought up the rear.

Behind her, Elizabeth could hear Mr. Collins, grumbling to his wife.

“That feeble codger! Why should he have the honor of officiating, instead of me?”

Charlotte hushed him, saying “I agree, you are much better at performing weddings, but you must not insult her ladyship’s choice.”

“Insupportable!” He mumbled. He continued to grumble, with his wife shushing him to be quieter, lest Miss de Bourgh hear them.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth and the colonel talked lightheartedly of their favorite plays. Through this, he discovered that she was a fan of Shakespeare. “I will confess, I prefer a comedy over a tragedy, as a general rule,” he said.

“As do I,” Elizabeth nodded. “With one exception. I cannot forget the play that first made me fall in love with The Bard.”

“And which play would that be?”

“Romeo and Juliet,” she answered.

“Really? I never would have suspected such from you!” The colonel laughed. “I find the whole thing rather melodramatic.”

“Ah, but there are some exquisite passages as well. In fact, our own Mr. Darcy once performed the balcony scene with me, his Romeo to my Juliet.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam let out a delighted laugh. “Did he, really?”

She nodded that he had. “For our party at Netherfield, to pass the time when we were all stranded together due to a

washed-out bridge.”

The colonel laughed again. “I never could get him to play-act anything with me as a child, whether it be scenes from a comedy or tragedy, or some silly bit Cousin Anne and I made up on our own. He would not even deign to play soldiers and pirates with me. Can you believe it? I am rather impressed at your ability to press him into your service, Miss Bennet!”

“Mr. Darcy needed no coercion. As I recall, he readily accepted the part when it was offered.”

“Curious.” There was a gleam in Colonel Fitzwilliam’s eye which Elizabeth could not comprehend. “And how did our friend do, Miss Bennet? Was he a good Romeo?”

“One could hardly separate the man from the character. Mr. Darcy could have brought the house down at Drury Lane.”

They were nearing the turn that led to the parsonage. Charlotte recalled some matters she needed to attend to, so she and Mr. Collins took their leave. The rest continued on.

“Darcy, why not let me take a turn pushing Cousin Anne for a while?” Colonel Fitzwilliam suggested. “You must be in need of a rest.”

Darcy protested at first, but after a little further persuasion, yielded to his cousin and they traded places.

There was an awkward silence between Darcy and Elizabeth as they fell in place alongside each other. Darcy had spoken little to her since his arrival at Rosings, mainly speaking to those around her. Now in close proximity to him, Elizabeth found she did not know what to say to him.

He was the first one to speak. “Are you enjoying your stay in Kent, Miss Bennet?”

“Very much!” Elizabeth answered, rather too quickly. Then, not wishing him to suppose her enjoyment was on account of him, she added. “I find your cousins both to be very engaging, especially Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

“Yes, I can see that you get on well with him. I could not hear your conversation, but the pair of you seemed quite animated.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Yes, I was telling him about our performance together, as Romeo and Juliet.”

“That event occurred so long ago; I am surprised you remember it.”

“How could I not? Your Romeo was quite affecting.” A tinge of pink rose to Elizabeth’s cheeks.

“But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?” Darcy quoted. “It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.”

Elizabeth’s color deepened. “You see, I am affected, even now.”

“It is your admiration of the words of the poet that has you so affected,” Darcy surmised. “I am merely the performer who is playacting.”

Elizabeth swallowed. “Yes, it is only playacting.” She cleared her throat. “The preparations for your wedding to Miss de Bourgh seem to be coming along well. I overheard a little of the plans during our luncheon.”

“Knowing my aunt, she will make it as ostentatious an affair as she can get away with without being unseemly.”

“Has she set a date yet?”

“The last day of the month, two weeks from today.”

“So soon?” Elizabeth’s eyes widened.

“With the special license she’s acquired, there is no need to wait longer. Everything will be done speedily, just as she wishes.”

“And you are pleased with this arrangement?”

“I am. My cousin and I have known each other since our infancy. There is no need for a long courtship or engagement between us.”

Elizabeth forced herself to keep her eyes straight ahead on the path. “I wish you both the best, Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy took a deep breath. “Elizabeth, I—”

“Yes, Mr. Darcy?” There was a pregnant pause as Elizabeth waited for his answer.

“Nothing.” He shrugged. “Never mind.”

She did not press him further.

Darcy changed the subject. “It seems that Mr. Collins is upset about not being chosen to officiate my wedding.”

“Yes, he is rather put out. I believe he is angling to get Mr. Garbutt’s living when he passes away. He waxed poetic about the Westerham parsonage and the church of St. Mary’s there when we passed through.”

Darcy shook his head. “I have always opposed the idea of pluralists— vicars and rectors who collect multiple church livings as a way of enriching themselves. Meanwhile, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of clergymen employed as curates, doing all the real work of the parish and living on a pauper’s salary, while their superior sits on his laurels and enjoys the tithes from those parishes.”

“I agree, it is a poor system.”

The footpath led them back to Rosings and its gardens. Both the colonel and Mr. Darcy offered to turn and walk Elizabeth back to the parsonage, but she declined.

“I am perfectly able to make my own way,” she insisted.

Miss de Bourgh spoke up. "My mother is giving an engagement party for me and Mr. Darcy on Saturday. I hope that you and the Collinses can come."

"An engagement party! I did not know that was something people did."

Miss de Bourgh laughed. "My mother never misses an opportunity to entertain guests."

Colonel Fitzwilliam joined in urging her.

"Yes, you must come, Miss Elizabeth. Our party will be far too dull without your presence!"

"I would love to accept, and I am sure that Mr. and Mrs. Collins would, but will your mother not mind that you have invited us on her behalf?"

"I can think of no impediment! She has been talking of needing a few more to fill her table; she wants all twenty seats occupied. It is a wonder she did not invite you all before now. It must have slipped her mind, with all that she has on her plate at the moment. She will be so pleased when I tell her you can come."

"In that case, please send my regards and our acceptance."

Elizabeth's eyes inadvertently went to Mr. Darcy's face, but she could not discern whether he was pleased or agitated at the prospect of her being at the event.

Chapter 22



Darcy pretended to be perfectly at ease with the open rapport that Miss Bennet seemed to share with his cousin. But internally, his emotions roiled like the tempest that Richard had compared him to. That Elizabeth shared more in common with Richard than him was obvious; they both had blithe dispositions, easy tempers, and they got along famously. Besides, the colonel had no money to offer and neither had she. If a love match was what Elizabeth wanted, then perhaps this might be it. Neither of them could have any pecuniary motives where the other was concerned. That was for certain. The colonel's salary was enough that the two could live comfortably, albeit perhaps not in the fashion he had been accustomed to. But with her thousand pounds added to it, it might be enough if they invested wisely and lived within their means. He ought to support their match, even promote it. But try as he might, Darcy could not fully reconcile himself to the idea. Ridiculous, really, he told himself. As an engaged man, he could have no claim on Elizabeth. Did he not wish her happiness? He did, yes. Of course. But then why could he not stand to see her find that happiness with his own cousin?



Anne de Bourgh had been entirely wrong in supposing that her mother would be pleased to have the Collinses and Elizabeth Bennet at her table for the all-important engagement party. After berating her daughter for overstepping, Lady Catherine was of the mind to go over to the parsonage and uninvite them all. However, she was persuaded by two circumstances to let the matter go.

Firstly, the day before the party, Mr. Garbutt fell ill and could not attend the party. Lady Catherine hoped that it was not serious and that he would recover in time for the wedding. The second circumstance was that one of the prominent families in the neighborhood, whom Lady Catherine had been depending on to fill up her table, had finally returned their responses in that they were unable to attend the dinner. This left her with exactly three seats at the table which she needed to fill. Of course, she could have left them empty, but she felt she ought to soothe Mr. Collins a little by allowing him and his wife to be at the party. It would come at the price of having Elizabeth Bennet there; that could not be avoided. But perhaps it would not come to any harm. She had the upper hand, after all. Darcy would soon be more than just her nephew. He would be her son in law. And Anne would have Pemberley.



Darcy surveyed the dining room at Rosings. Lady Catherine had truly outdone herself. Tall, thin vases cascading with flowers alternated with silver candelabras all down the long dining room table. Every place setting glimmered with the shine of crystal goblets, gleaming silverware and china, and gilded chargers. In the corner, a string quartet had been hired to play in the background. Lady Catherine had hired extra footmen to help for the evening, so now there were twenty young men, all nearly identical in their white powdered wigs and matching liveries, lined up like soldiers down the length of the table. Darcy had even heard it whispered among the staff that there was to be fireworks later that evening. As for the guests, all of Lady Catherine's friends in high society—or at least those who pretended to be her friends—had arrived to celebrate the forthcoming marriage of her daughter and Mr. Darcy.

“Quite the display, eh?” Colonel Fitzwilliam remarked to Darcy as the drinks were being served in the drawing room

before dinner. “One might almost think we were in London, to see a party such as this. And to think, it is all for you!”

Darcy laughed. “The party might be ‘in my honor’, and in Anne’s, but we all know who the event is truly for. It is Lady Catherine’s night to shine.”

“Yes,” Colonel Fitzwilliam agreed. “But I am afraid her radiance still pales in comparison.” He nodded his chin towards the corner, where Elizabeth and Anne were chatting together animatedly.

Darcy drew in his breath. Elizabeth was stunning. Though dressed more simply than everyone else in her white muslin gown, she was the most beautiful woman in the room. Even Anne, ever elegant and refined, and dressed this evening in a rust-colored satin gown that brought out the color of her hair, was not as lovely as Elizabeth, Darcy thought.

He watched as the colonel crossed the room to greet the two ladies, bowing to each of them. Darcy could not hear his words, but there must have been something amusing in his address, for both ladies began giggling in response. Not for the first time, Darcy wished he had Richard’s ease of speaking with ladies.

A voice in his ear echoed his thoughts. “Richard certainly seems to have a way with women.”

Darcy turned to find his aunt beside him.

“The Bennet girl seems quite taken with him,” Lady Catherine remarked. “I hope she has not got any more ideas about marrying into this family.” She clicked her tongue.

“If she has, it would have to be a love match. Richard has no fortune,” Darcy retorted. “Besides, you cannot expect to exert your influence over *all* your nieces and nephews’ matches, aunt.”

“I will certainly do everything in my power to ensure that no one comes into this family that does not belong,” Lady Catherine hissed in his ear.

Darcy grabbed her arm. “Do not interfere,” he warned. “Richard knows what he is about. He is not the sort to be taken in and he does not fall in love easily. He will not offer for her unless he is certain she is the one.”

“Humph,” Lady Catherine sniffed, as if daring Darcy to challenge her again. She clicked her cane twice, and a footman drew near to receive her orders. She gave him instructions to have the staff serve the meal.

Turning back to Darcy, she told him, “You had better go and fetch your bride. It is your duty to escort her into the dining room.”

Darcy nodded grimly.



Darcy tried hard to give Anne her due attention during the meal, but his eye was continuously drawn to Elizabeth. Lady Catherine had seen fit to seat her at the far end of the table away from him. But despite Elizabeth being seated next to Mrs. Guthrie and Mrs. Wilson, who she did not know, Darcy saw how her eyes lit up as she made pleasant conversation with them in her usual, witty style. Wherever she went, Elizabeth Bennet was sure of making friends.

Colonel Fitzwilliam, sitting across from him, asked him a question, but he did not hear it.

“You seem distracted, Darce,” he remarked.

Darcy snapped to attention. “My apologies. What was the question?”

The colonel repeated his question and Darcy answered him, but his heart was not in the conversation.

He was relieved when the party moved to the drawing room after dinner, thinking that perhaps with so many guests,

he could keep his mind off of Elizabeth by conversing with others. But her presence drew him like a siren's call. He drew closer and closer to where she and Colonel Fitzwilliam sat on the settee that faced the fireplace, engaged in a deep conversation. He soon found himself standing behind the settee, close enough to hear them, but they did notice his presence. He did not mean to overhear, but he could not help himself.

"Why must marriage always come down to how much money one has?" Elizabeth asked.

"A worthy question," the colonel smiled. "But I suppose it comes down to the reality that there are few among us who can afford to marry without some attention to money. The trouble is, those who have no money want to marry someone who is rich, but those who are rich want to marry other people who are also rich."

"Unless they happen to fall in love with a poor person," Elizabeth laughed.

The colonel chuckled along with her. "True. But all too often, even in the case where that happens, their family or other forces may conspire against them."

"Yes, I have witnessed this. But one has to hope that in the end, the strength of their love will enable them to prevail."

"Do you believe that love conquers all, then?"

"I must say that I do. As long as the couple has true love for each other, they can overcome any obstacle, whether wealth or poverty, family interference or their own pride."

Colonel Fitzwilliam smiled. "You give me hope, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth said archly, "Do you have a lady in mind, then? Has someone captured your heart, Colonel Fitzwilliam?"

"Aye, there is. For years, I have thought the obstacles before us too great to overcome, but your words make me realize I ought to act soon, before I regret my lack of action for

the rest of my life.” The colonel cocked his head, catching a glimpse of Darcy out of the corner of his eye. “And what of you, Miss Bennet? Is there someone you are secretly holding a candle for?”

Darcy drew in a breath. What was Richard playing at? Yet he dared not move. He longed to hear her answer.

Elizabeth turned a fair shade of pink. “I...” she stammered.

Colonel Fitzwilliam gave a little laugh. “Forgive me, Miss Bennet, I fear my question is too impertinent.”

She ducked her head. “No more impertinent than mine was.”

Her words came out low, no more than a murmur. Darcy strained to hear her over the string quartet playing in the background. “In truth...there was someone...is someone... but...”

“But what?”

“I waited too long to tell him my feelings. And I do not believe that he ever returned them.”

“If you never told him, then how do you know that he did not?”

“I suppose I shall never know,” she answered.

Darcy began slowly backing away. His cousin smiled at him, changing the subject to keep Elizabeth distracted while he made his escape to the other side of the drawing room.

He took a glass of wine that a footman offered him and drank it all in one gulp. His mind reeled with the conversation that he had just overheard. It had to be him, the one that Elizabeth spoke of. Who else could it be? *She loves me!* His heart soared at the thought. Then just as quickly, it sank. *Too late. It's too late. No, it cannot be. I have to put a stop to it all.*



Just as Darcy predicted, Lady Catherine did not take it well when he declared he wanted to call off the wedding.

“How dare you!” she roared. “How dare you come to me in the middle of *my daughter’s* engagement party to tell me that you wish to retract!”

“Yes, the timing is rather unfortunate, I must admit. But it is better, I feel, to call things off now than to go through with the wedding.”

“‘The timing is unfortunate’? That is an understatement. You must be out of your mind, Darcy! Do you really think that I would, under any circumstances, let you break off an engagement to *my daughter*? After all that I went through to secure this match?” Lady Catherine paced the floor of her study, her cane thumping in rhythm with her steps.

“I thought that I could go through with a loveless marriage. That I could somehow make it work between myself and Anne. But I was wrong. I was wrong on so many counts. She loves me— Elizabeth loves me!” He blurted out, as astonished at his outburst towards his aunt as he was with the statement that he finally said out loud.

“So, once more, the little minx is interfering with your chances of making an advantageous match. Darcy, do not be fooled by that Jezebel! She is only after one thing— your money! You and Anne are equals, formed for each other since birth, neither one of you in need of the other’s fortune. But just think of what you could do with those fortunes united! You would be one of the most powerful families in all of England. Nothing would be beyond your reach!”

“I care very little for that, Aunt. My only goal has always been to find someone who loves me for myself, and not for my great wealth.”

“You are a fool if you believe Elizabeth loves you for you, Fitzwilliam!”

“I was a fool before, but now I see it; she would love me even if I did not have a penny to my name.”

“If she loved you so much, then why did she let you go before, when she had you in her grasp?”

“Because she did not want to try to trap me into marriage. She wanted me to be free to make my own choice.”

“And so you have!” Lady Catherine thumped her cane. “You chose Anne. It is as simple as that. And just in case you get any ideas about jilting poor Anne at the altar, I should remind you that her reputation is at stake here. If you attempt to cry off, I shall sue you for breach of promise and drag your name through the mud until you pay every penny that was promised to Anne under the agreement! How will that look to your precious Elizabeth’s family? Will they let their daughter marry a scoundrel who would ruin his own *fiancée* in order to marry another?”

“I daresay they will not think twice about letting her marry me.” Darcy stated.

“Precisely! They will never let it stand!”

“I mean, that they will give their blessing without reservation. As long as they are certain of my love for their daughter, they will wholeheartedly consent. And as for the money, dear aunt, I do not care one fig. Take it. Take it all, if you will! Whatever is owed to you by right of contract, I will pay. Only release me from my engagement to Anne.”

“Never!”

“That is all I have to say to you then. I have spoken my piece. Good day.” Darcy strode out of the room, leaving his aunt to rant and fume in his wake.

Lady Catherine rang for a footman to come.

“Summon Mr. Collins to my study,” she ordered. “I need to have a word with him.”



Elizabeth had not meant to be so forthcoming with Colonel Fitzwilliam. Something about his easygoing manner had made her lips spill all their secrets, despite their being barely acquaintances. What if what she had said got back to Lady Catherine somehow? It was no secret that she and Darcy had been engaged. Anybody who was as bright as a candle under a shade could realize who it was she had meant when she spoke. What if the colonel said something to one of his cousins? She glanced at Anne, who was playing cards with Charlotte, along with Mrs. Guthrie and Mrs. Wilson, her expression cheerful and animated. Though Elizabeth had not known Anne long, she had already found in her a friend. Anne was sweet and kind and had been through much suffering thanks to the illness which had robbed her of the use of her legs. She deserved to be happy with Mr. Darcy. *I had my chance already*, Elizabeth thought to herself. *And I wasted it.*

There was a loud clanging of someone tapping a knife against a glass. Elizabeth turned towards the sound and stood up, and so did Colonel Fitzwilliam beside her. Lady Catherine stood at the center of the room, holding a crystal goblet full of champagne.

Satisfied that she had the attention of everyone in the room, the great lady began. “Most, if not all of you, know the reason why we are all gathered this evening. It is my great honor and privilege to announce the engagement of my daughter, Miss Anne de Bourgh, to my nephew, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley.”

The room erupted with applause. Elizabeth tried to clap, but her heart was not in it. Anne cast a glance in her direction. The smile that had been on her face vanished. Was she not happy about being engaged to Mr. Darcy? Anne turned her head back away.

Where was Mr. Darcy? Elizabeth did not see him anywhere in the room.

Lady Catherine's speech continued, praising her soon-to-be son-in-law and declaring how happy she was that their two houses would be united once more, how much her beloved sister would have loved to see this day, and so on. But Elizabeth hardly heard a word of it. She needed a breath of fresh air.

While everyone was still distracted by Lady Catherine's toast, Elizabeth quietly slipped out the door that led to the gardens. The garden was lit with dozens of slow-burning candles lining the footpaths. A footman was lighting the last set of candles. He blew out the wick on his candle lighter as he walked past Elizabeth. Elizabeth wandered along the path, feeling the chill of the night air on her skin. The breeze rustled through the trees, and in the distance, an owl hooted. Eventually, the path led Elizabeth beyond the lights of the garden onto the dark path that led to a circular garden folly. Here in this place, dark except for a sliver of moonlight, with the coldness of the stone all around her, Elizabeth felt like she could just disappear. Sinking down to the floor beneath her, she let all of her pent-up emotions release in a sea of tears.



Darcy watched Elizabeth from the shadows as she emerged from the house, alone. He had been hiding away in the garden since his confrontation with Lady Catherine, hoping no one would come looking for him. Leaving the safety of the shrubbery he had been sequestered in, he followed Elizabeth down the path. He could just make out her form as she disappeared underneath the garden folly. He walked up to the folly and peered inside. Elizabeth was sitting on the stone floor, her head buried in her knees, softly crying.

“Elizabeth,” he said gently.

Her head shot up. She quickly wiped the tears from her eyes and stood. “Mr. Darcy. I did not hear you coming.”

“Are you unwell?”

She choked back a sob. “I am quite well, thank you.”

“You do not look so well.”

“I thank you for your concern, but it is unnecessary.”

She shivered. “You ought to return to your party, Mr. Darcy. Your *fiancée* will be wondering where you are.”

Darcy did not move. An awkward silence filled the air. Darcy stared at Elizabeth. Dark tendrils had escaped from her coif, framing her face.

Elizabeth’s lower lip quivered. “I came here for solitude. Will you not go?”

Darcy put his hands on his lips and began pacing the small circular area, a low laugh escaping his lips. “Tell me, Elizabeth— is there any hope?”

“Any hope? What do you mean?”

“I heard what you said to Colonel Fitzwilliam earlier.”

“I— that conversation was not meant for your ears.” Elizabeth turned her head from him, though in the darkness he could not discern whether she was blushing anyhow.

“Then perhaps you should not have said it in a room full of people at my engagement party, where anybody might hear. Oh, Elizabeth!” He took her hands in his and knelt down before her.

“What are you doing?” Elizabeth’s voice rose an octave. “Get up, at once!”

But Darcy ignored her command.

“I have struggled in vain, and I can bear it no longer. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you!”

Elizabeth's tears burst forth again. "You— you love me?" she stammered.

"Yes! Yes, I do. Very much!" He rose from his kneeling position.

There was a desire in her eyes. He could see it. She wanted him as badly as he wanted her. He drew her close to him. Perfectly soft lips met his, like the petals of a rosebud opening. Her slender hands were still tenderly clasped in his. He could hold those hands forever. Oh, this was sweetness itself!

Then, without warning, she pushed him away.

"No, this is wrong. We cannot do this," Elizabeth shook her head, taking another step back from him. "You are not a free man. You are engaged to Miss de Bourgh."

"Oh, that I were still engaged to you! I should never have let you go. I regret that I let you walk away from me after your sister's wedding."

"Why did you, then? Why wait until you are promised to another to declare your feelings for me?"

"I thought you did not care for me. I thought that you disdained me. You said, yourself, that you could never marry a rich man."

"I said that I could never marry a rich man whom I did not love." Elizabeth replied. "I did not want you to marry me out of obligation, because your honor demanded it. But I would have gladly married you out of your love for me. Because I had already fallen in love with you, even if I did not know it then myself." A great sigh left her chest as she admitted the words aloud that had been pressing on her heart for so long.

Darcy's heart soared at those words. She loved him! He felt like his heart might burst through his chest and continue soaring up to heaven.

“I have already spoken to my aunt and told her I want to call off the wedding,” he said. “It is not a love match, mine and Anne’s. She will understand when I tell her. If you and I were able to survive breaking off our engagement, then there is no reason that Anne and I cannot do it as well.”

Elizabeth’s eyes shimmered in the glimmer of moonlight. “Did you really tell your aunt that you want to break it off? She must have been furious!”

“Oh, absolutely livid! She threatened to sue me for breach of promise.”

Elizabeth’s face fell. “That is a serious threat.”

Darcy shook his head. “I am not worried. Her suit would not prevail in court, and even if it did, I would pay any price to be able to marry you.” He pressed his lips to Elizabeth’s again, wishing that it were not so dark so that he might see how his kiss affected the color of her face.

“Is this really happening?” Elizabeth asked. “Or am I only dreaming?”

Darcy smiled. “If it is a dream, then I hope that we never wake from it.”

Chapter 23



They stayed under the garden folly for as long as they dared.

“We must not be seen returning to the house together,” Elizabeth said.

Darcy nodded. “I will remain here a while longer. You return first.”

Elizabeth returned to the area of the garden that was lit by the candles. The other guests were coming out the side doors into the garden.

Charlotte spotted Elizabeth. “There you are, Eliza! The fireworks are about to begin. I was afraid you might miss them. Where have you been all this time?”

“Just...around,” Elizabeth answered. Fortunately, Charlotte was more concerned with finding a good spot to see the fireworks than the whereabouts of her friend the last half hour. No sooner had she picked a spot with an optimal view, than a tall gentleman with broad shoulders stepped in front of her. “Come this way, Eliza, I cannot see anything from where we are.” She pushed her friend to the outer edge of the crowd. From her new vantage point, Elizabeth saw Mr. Darcy slink around from the dark path coming from the garden folly, trying to make it back into the house without being seen.

Lady Catherine spotted him. “Fitzwilliam, there you are. Come, stand beside Anne. You missed the toast I gave in your honor.” She directed Mrs. Jenkinson to wheel Anne to the front edge of a large, paved area that encircled the fountain in the center of the garden. Darcy reluctantly took his place beside her.

Lady Catherine nodded to her butler, who signaled the servants waiting on the other side of the pond. As soon as they

saw his signal, they began launching the fireworks one by one.

Elizabeth had never seen fireworks before. Her aunt, who had lived in London long enough to have seen them a few times on celebratory occasions, had once tried to describe them to her. But her words had not adequately prepared Elizabeth for the brilliant bursts of light, like stars exploding, followed by the crackle in the air as each one fizzled out. Streams of white, yellow, and orange, and occasionally red, blue or green, lit up the night sky and reflected off the waters of the pond. It was possibly the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She wished she had been standing next to Mr. Darcy to enjoy the display. She looked over to where he was stationed next to Miss de Bourgh's chair. To her surprise, he was not watching the show at all. He was staring straight back at her, a hint of a smile on his face. Elizabeth felt grateful for the cover of darkness to hide the blush creeping up on her cheeks again.

She felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to see who it was.

Mr. Collins drew her aside. His face was pale and drawn. She followed him away from the crowd a short distance.

“What is it, Mr. Collins? You look quite worried.”

“I have a message to deliver to you, and I fear it may contain news of grave import.”

He handed her a sealed letter. “An express came to the parsonage for you, and the messenger, being told by the housekeeper that we were all here tonight, took the trouble to bring this to me.”

“But if it is addressed to me, why did the messenger not hand it to a footman to give to me directly?”

“I suspect that my housekeeper must have indicated it should pass to me first to give to you. It must be serious indeed for the messenger to have troubled himself to come up to the big house instead of leaving the letter at the parsonage.”

Elizabeth frowned. She took the letter into the empty hallway and broke the seal. Mr. Collins followed her to see what the missive said. Elizabeth read it to herself, covering her mouth to choke back a sob.

“What is it, dear cousin? I hope the Bennet family are not unwell.”

“They are unwell, indeed! This is from our housekeeper, Mrs. Hill. She writes that the entire family has succumbed to a dangerous fever. My father has it the worst, and she asks that if I am able, I should return immediately if I hope to see him before it is too late.”

Mr. Collins twisted his hands. “Oh, how perfectly dreadful!”

Elizabeth, having misplaced her handkerchief, used her fingers to try to wipe the tears from her eyes. Mr. Collins immediately offered her his handkerchief, which she gratefully accepted.

“I am sorry,” she sputtered.

“No, do not be,” Mr. Collins consoled. “Anyone in your position would be equally distraught, if not more so.”

“I do not think that I can return to the party. Please, give my regards. I will walk back to the parsonage this instant to pack my things. I must go back to Hertfordshire as soon as possible.”

“Shall I fetch Charlotte for you?” Mr. Collins asked.

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, let her enjoy the fireworks. I will go back first.”

Charlotte was still staring at the sky, enthralled by the fireworks display, and unaware that Elizabeth had left her side. Elizabeth accepted a lantern that Mr. Collins had obtained from one of the servants and took the path that led around the pond which she had walked only a few days before. The fireworks continued bursting in the sky above her. Admittedly, she would have had an even better view of them from this path, but she no longer cared about the lavish display. All she

could think of was her dear Papa and wondering if she would make it home in time to see him again, should the worst happen.

She crossed through the parsonage gardens and entered the house. As soon as she reached her room, she pulled her trunk from where it was stowed under the bed and began filling it with her things, distracted with worry.

Mr. Darcy! She remembered when she was halfway through with packing. *I need to leave a letter, explaining what has happened.* She went to the small desk in the corner of the room and drew out a sheet of paper. She began writing his name at the top, then she stopped.

No, it is too risky, she decided. Until it is all settled, I cannot write to him again. He will hear of my father's illness from Charlotte or my cousin, I am sure of it.

She left the paper on the desk and resumed her packing.

Downstairs, she heard the Collinses return home from the party and someone's feet bounding up the stairs. Charlotte entered the room.

"Eliza!" she cried. "What's happened? Mr. Collins told me your family has taken ill and that you are preparing to return home at once."

"Here, you may read it," Elizabeth said, handing her the letter from Mrs. Hill.

Charlotte scanned over the letter while Elizabeth continued folding her gowns and outerwear.

"Well," Charlotte said in a matter-of-fact tone when she finished reading. "You can stop packing your things. I can safely say that none of our family are ill."

Elizabeth stopped mid-fold and looked at her. "What?"

"Your family are quite well," Charlotte repeated in a calm tone that irked Elizabeth slightly with such heavy news on her heart.

“How can you say that? Did you not read the letter from Mrs. Hill?”

“Yes,” Charlotte nodded. “Only this letter is not from Mrs. Hill.”

Elizabeth’s brow furrowed as she took the letter back. “It has her name at the bottom. I confess, I have not seen her writing many times, but it appears familiar to me.”

“It may appear familiar to you. That is because this is Mr. Collins’ handwriting,” Charlotte stated, matter-of-factly.

Elizabeth studied the large, flowery handwriting and realized that she had seen it before— on the letters that Mr. Collins had written to her father. A gasp escaped her lips.

“If you need further proof,” Charlotte went on, “I can provide you with a specimen of Mrs. Hill’s handwriting to compare. I often asked Hill for her recipes when I was still living at Lucas Lodge, and she would copy them out for me. I believe I have the one she gave me when we last visited Longbourn. Shall I fetch it for you?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Elizabeth said, still staring in disbelief at the letter in front of her as her racing heart tried to find its bearings.

Mr. Collins knocked on the door before entering. “I have excellent news regarding your transportation home. Lady Catherine sent a servant to inform us that we may have the use of her barouche, since our own gig will not convey us all the way to Hertfordshire, and this will spare us the necessity of hiring a post-chaise. She only asks that we send notice as to what time her coachman should bring it around in the morning. Is that not generous of her?” He wore his usual half witted smile.

Charlotte turned to face her husband, her voice slightly icy. “You may thank her ladyship for her generosity, but inform her that we shall not be needing her barouche, or a post-chaise.”

“But, but, surely you do not intend to send my cousin home via *public transportation!*”

“Elizabeth will not be going home,” Charlotte announced. “And I would like for you to tell me why you tried to send her home by forging a letter from Mrs. Hill.” She folded her arms and glared at him crossly.

Mr. Collins went white as a sheet. “I...I...” he stammered.

Elizabeth stepped forward, crossing her own arms to match Charlotte’s stance. “Do tell us, Mr. Collins, for I should like to know what you hoped to accomplish by such a ruse.”

Mr. Collins broke down and confessed. “It was her ladyship who put me up to it! She promised me that I could have the Westerham living when Mr. Garbutt dies if I helped her to get Cousin Elizabeth out of the way so that she doesn’t interfere with Mr. Darcy and Miss de Bourgh’s wedding.”

Charlotte’s jaw dropped. “So, you sought to enrich yourself at our friend’s expense. Your own family, indeed! Tell me, what were you planning to do once Elizabeth reached home and realized that it was all a lie. Or was there some plan to ensure that she never reached home at all?”

“No, no! You must believe me. I would have delivered her safely to her family.” Mr. Collins whimpered. “I would never wish any harm on you, my cousin.” He cast a pleading look towards Elizabeth.

“I believe you, Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth said. “Though what you did was very wrong.” Her worry finally melted away, but she was still cross at the ruse.

“Very wrong, indeed!” Charlotte echoed. “And if you so much as *think* about trying any similar stunts in the future, I shall never admit you to my bed again!” she threatened.

Mr. Collins cowered like a dog that had been beaten. “Of course, Charlotte. My love.” He backed out of the room and shut the door.

“Well!” Charlotte exclaimed. “I think we can safely assume that my husband will no longer try any sort of mischief.”



Elizabeth and the Collinses were in the middle of breakfast the next morning when Lady Catherine descended upon them. She strode into the breakfast parlor without waiting for the housekeeper who had admitted her to announce her arrival.

Mr. Collins immediately rose from his seat. “Y-your ladyship! It is an honor to have you call upon us at our humble abode—”

“Save your breath, Collins!” Lady Catherine dismissed him with her hand. “I require a private audience with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Mr. Collins scuttled away faster than a crab running from a seagull.

Charlotte rose slower. “Your ladyship,” she curtsied. She gave Elizabeth a look and a nod that told her she would be close by if needed, before exiting to the adjoining room, leaving the door ajar.

Elizabeth stayed at the table, continuing to eat her marmalade and scones as if Lady Catherine were not there at all.

“Miss Bennet,” Lady Catherine began, “you can be at no loss to understand why I am here.”

“You are mistaken, your ladyship. I cannot account for this honor at all.”

“I had expected that you would be halfway back to your paltry little manor in Hertfordshire by this hour.”

“Yet, as you can see, your ladyship, I have not.”

“Why, then, are you still here? Is not your father gravely ill, and your mother and sisters also bedridden with fever?”

“I do not know what you have been told, your ladyship, but to my knowledge, my father, mother, and sisters are all very well. The last letter from my sister, Mrs. Bingley, communicates that she returned from her wedding tour and found them all in good health.” Elizabeth tilted her eyes up towards Lady Catherine. “But I think you already knew that. Otherwise, you would not have tried to bribe Mr. Collins into taking me home.”

“Insolent girl!” She rapped her cane on the wooden floorboards, hard. “You have no idea what I’ve worked so hard to achieve. I will not have you come along and destroy everything that I have hoped and prayed for since the time that my daughter was small. Your very presence here is a threat to the union between my daughter and my nephew which is about to be solidified.”

“A union which neither party desires, I am told.”

“Children often do not know what is best for them. This union has been planned since their infancy. It was his mother’s particular wish, and mine, that our children should one day marry.”

“That may be the case,” Elizabeth argued, “but neither Mr. Darcy nor your daughter are children any longer. Therefore, regardless of the wishes of their family, it is up to them to choose their own destinies.” She took a bite of her scone to keep her temper cooled.

“This is not to be borne!” Lady Catherine raged. “Especially coming from you— a country peasant whose father barely holds the title of ‘gentleman’, whose relations still reek of the stench of their trades, with no fortune and no connections to *anybody* of importance. You already tried once to insinuate yourself into the Darcy family. I thought that you had the good sense to know that you had overreached your

place when you ended that engagement— an engagement, that I might add, which you had no right to form, due to the prior claim which Anne already had. I can see now that you do *not* possess an ounce of sense or decency, for here I find you once more trying to snare my nephew and publicly humiliate my daughter.”

Elizabeth put down her scone abruptly and stood up. “I am not trying to *snare* anybody, nor do I intend to humiliate anyone! I came as a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Collins, with no aspirations to anything other than an enjoyable visit with my friends.”

“Then you will agree to leave quietly and cause no further disruption to the forthcoming wedding plans.”

“I will do no such thing. And neither your threats, nor your attempts at trickery, shall drive me away.”

“I see how it is.” Lady Catherine scowled, circling the table like a vulture, her cane thumping with every step. “You will not be driven away by force. And as for Collins, I should have known better than to trust that fool to carry out my wishes. You are a clever girl, Miss Bennet, and cleverness is always to be rewarded. Well, how much is it to be, then?”

Elizabeth blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Come now, everyone has their price. Even you.”

“I am afraid I do not understand you, your ladyship.”

Lady Catherine opened her reticule and took out a thick wad of banknotes. She slapped them on the breakfast table in front of Elizabeth. “Five-hundred pounds.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. She had never seen that many notes in person before.

Lady Catherine stuck her chin up. “They are real. Count them, if you will. Bank of England. You can take these to any London bank and exchange them for gold, if you wish.”

“I am afraid your ladyship has got the wrong idea about me,” Elizabeth replied.

“Five-hundred is not enough? Let us make it a thousand, then.” She pulled out another wad of notes and dropped them on top of the other stack. “I believe that is an amount equivalent to your own dowry, yes? Congratulations, you have just doubled it. All you have to do is walk away, and never see nor speak to Mr. Darcy ever again.”

Elizabeth’s face twisted up into a scowl. “I cannot be paid off, your ladyship.”

Lady Catherine continued to circle, her eyes staring at Elizabeth as if she were sizing up an enemy on the battlefield.

“I have underestimated you. You are like a leech that will not let go once it has drawn blood. It must be pried off. Very well. I shall make you an offer that you cannot refuse. A thousand pounds, each, for you and your unmarried sisters. And I shall tell Mr. Collins that his receiving the Westerham living is contingent upon his allowing your mother to remain at Longbourn for the remainder of her life.”

Elizabeth drew in a breath. *Four-thousand pounds and a promise that her mother would always have a home!*

“Think carefully, Miss Bennet,” Lady Catherine warned her. “Consider what it would mean for your family, for your sisters who are not yet wed.”

Elizabeth thought of Jane, so willing to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her family. She had married well, but Bingley’s fortune would never be enough to support all of them. She thought of Mary, whose lack of beauty and accomplishments meant she might never attract a suitor. Of Kitty and Lydia, two of the silliest girls in the country. Even if they managed to marry officers, they could certainly benefit from a bigger dowry to supplement their husbands’ meager income. And her poor mother, who fretted daily about the possibility of being thrown out of her home. But then, she thought of her father, and she remembered something he had once told her: “There is no substitute for happiness, Lizzy. One can live as long as one has enough to eat, but no amount

of material comforts can make up for the misery that comes from being separated from the person that one loves.”

Elizabeth stuck her chin out as far as it could go. Had she been raised in a more vulgar environment, she would have told her ladyship where she could take her money and shove it. However, being a gentleman’s daughter, she said, “I reject your offer, your ladyship, and any and all other offers you should make. You must think that the Bennet family has no pride, if I or any other member of my family could be bought off like that. As long as the Bennets have friends and family living, we shall none of us be homeless or destitute. Besides,” a grin slowly appeared on her face, “you are forgetting an important thing: Mr. Darcy’s income of ten-thousand a year is more than enough to maintain his in-laws, so why would I ever give that up for a mere four-thousand pounds?”

At this, Lady Catherine completely lost her temper. She raised her cane and began to beat Elizabeth with it, all the while shouting. “You *mongrel!* You greedy, grasping, wanton little *strumpet!*” More insults followed, the likes of which belied Lady Catherine’s noble upbringing, until an even louder voice overpowered hers.

“That will be quite enough, Lady Catherine!”

Lady Catherine stopped her tirade and turned to look. Charlotte had reentered the room, her hands upon her rounded hips.

“You may do many things, Lady Catherine, but you will *not* assault a guest of mine while they are in *my home*. Please leave at once!” Charlotte pointed towards the door. “And I beg you, do not call here ever again unless you wish your neighbors to learn the sort of treatment you give the guests of their minister.”

Lady Catherine picked up the stacks of banknotes and shoved them back into her reticule. “I have never been thus treated in my whole life! I am most seriously displeased! I send no compliments to your husband. You deserve no such attention! And you can tell that worthless dishrag that he

should not expect to be presented with the Westerham living, if and when it should become available!”

Lady Catherine stormed out, slamming the front door behind her.

“I am sorry it came to violence, Eliza,” Charlotte said, drawing closer to comfort her friend.

“No matter, I am not injured.”

“You know that I have always promised you that I would see to it that your mother and sisters have a home at Longbourn for as long as they wish.”

“I know that, and I am grateful.”

“I applaud you for taking on Lady Catherine like that. Not many in this world would be brave enough to do so.

“Perhaps. But you know, my courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me.” Elizabeth smiled.

Chapter 24



“Cousin Elizabeth, may I speak with you in private?” Mr. Collins said. He had finally emerged from wherever he had been hiding after being chased away by Lady Catherine. It wasn’t until he was certain that her ladyship had left and after Charlotte had gone about her business that he dared to show his face again.

“Certainly.” She followed him to his study, where he left the door open. She took the seat she was offered.

“My dear cousin,” Mr. Collins began, “It has come to my attention that you intend to be married to Mr. Darcy, and that you have persuaded him to break off his engagement with Miss de Bourgh.”

“Well, I would not say that *I* persuaded him, but yes, that is the case. We intend to be married.”

Mr. Collins cleared his throat. “I quite understand, cousin, how you might believe yourself to have the prior claim on Mr. Darcy, since you yourself were briefly engaged to him. However, now that his engagement to Miss de Bourgh has been made public, I must strongly discourage you from pursuing such a course of action.”

“Oh, not this again,” Elizabeth groaned.

Mr. Collins went on. “Had the knowledge of their engagement been limited to only a small circle of family and, well, *trusted friends*, I should have had no scruples about its being broken off. However, as your elder— by nearly five years, as I reckon— not to mention the position I hold as a spiritual advisor and the future head of the family as heir, I must advise you— nay, *urge you*— to consider the ramifications to Miss de Bourgh’s reputation which is at stake.”

Elizabeth listened quietly.

“As a young lady, I know you are all too aware of the precarious position that an unmarried woman finds herself in when an engagement is suddenly called off. You yourself experienced a taste of the kinds of vicious rumors that begin to circulate when a woman is jilted. Naturally, I did not presume for one moment that any of the things that were said about you were true, but during my brief stay at Lucas Lodge following your sister’s wedding, I heard a number of things said concerning the sudden end to your engagement and Mr. Darcy’s swift removal from the area. Of course, I know you must have had your own reasons for wanting the engagement to end, but I digress. Concerning Miss de Bourgh’s reputation, consider how it would impact her to be jilted by her *fiancé* mere days before her wedding. People might speculate that he had discovered something unsavory about her, and while it would certainly be untrue, to have such a scandal thrown over the name of de Bourgh, well...you can imagine my horror at the very notion of such a thing!”

Elizabeth sniffed. “I should think that the very name of de Bourgh is already so far above reproach that no one would dare raise such speculations.”

“Not in public perhaps. The reverence for Lady Catherine and the noble house of de Bourgh is far too great. But behind closed doors, evil tongues will wag, as you well know. Miss de Bourgh is already in a...precarious position, due to her state of health and the amount of care that a husband would have to provide for her, the uncertainty of whether or not she can bear children, and so on. You ought to know that despite her noble upbringing, Mr. Darcy has been the only suitor she has ever had. Were she to find herself under the shade of a broken engagement, she might never find another man willing to take her on.”

“Her vast fortune alone should ensure that she does, or that she can afford to live in the style of her upbringing as a spinster,” Elizabeth argued. She knew it was an unkind thing to say, but she was tired of people telling her why she could not marry Mr. Darcy.

“Perhaps. But does not Miss de Bourgh deserve to live out her days with a caring and compassionate husband as her companion? Would you rob her of that? She is the innocent party in this imbroglio. I urge you, Cousin Elizabeth, to return to Mr. Darcy and tell him that you have changed your mind, and impress upon him the need to keep the engagement to his cousin, if not for the sake of romantic love which may be absent, then at least for the sake of the familial love which I know that he bears for her.”



Mr. Collins’ lecture had given Elizabeth much to think about. At first, she had dismissed it all as just another attempt to give Lady Catherine her way. But Elizabeth found that she could not stop thinking about the repercussions to Anne once her wedding was publicly called off. What Mr. Collins had said was true— there *had* been nasty rumors circulating her Hertfordshire community following her break from Mr. Darcy. The very kind they had hoped to avoid by posing as an engaged couple in the first place. Thankfully, Mrs. Bennet had not disappointed in staunchly defending Elizabeth’s story that she had simply decided that she and Mr. Darcy would not suit each other and would not allow any stain to besmirch her daughter’s honor. This managed to stem the tide of gossip. By the time Elizabeth had come away to Kent, there were no longer any thoughts of it being Elizabeth’s fault that the marriage had not come to pass, and the citizens of Meryton were quite ready to maintain the honor of one of their own.

Nevertheless, Elizabeth wondered if her past conduct would come to haunt her one day, and she wondered if Miss de Bourgh would be able to dispel the rumors as she had done, or if she would face even greater scrutiny, being the daughter of nobility. Mr. Collins’ plea to consider Miss de Bourgh’s plight did not fall on deaf ears. She was the innocent party in all this.

Did she deserve to be cast under suspicion, or to have her best chance at a lifelong companion taken away from her? Elizabeth tossed and turned all night long, thinking about these things.

When the light finally began to creep in through her window, Elizabeth dressed and put on her bonnet. None of the household were awake yet, save for the servants. Elizabeth slipped out the side door and began wandering through the clusters of daffodils, hyacinths, lilacs, and other plants that made up Mr. Collins' flower garden. But none of the sweet smells of the flowers nor the soothing sounds of the birds and insects inhabiting the garden could banish the thoughts still plaguing her. The garden path eventually wound around to where it connected to that path encircling the Rosings pond. A family of ducks quacked noisily as they swam along in the same direction Elizabeth walked, the father and mother duck leading the way while their seven ducklings swam fast to keep up. Seeing them reminded Elizabeth of that day that she had fed the ducks at the Serpentine Pond in Hyde Park with her aunt and little cousins and had stumbled upon Mr. Darcy and Georgiana. These ducks were not used to being fed by people. They noticed Elizabeth watching them and crossed to the other side of the pond to avoid her. Elizabeth was so engrossed in watching their behavior, she did not notice someone approaching until she heard the crunch of heavy footsteps on the gravel path. She turned her head to look.

"Mr. Darcy!" Elizabeth's breath caught at the sight of him. He was dressed handsomely in a dark green coat that emphasized his broad shoulders and leather boots that clung to his shapely calves.

"Elizabeth," he smiled, stopping when he reached where she stood by the pond. "When will I ever induce you to call me something other than 'Mr. Darcy'?"

"Possibly never," she grinned back.

"I had hoped to find you out and about this morning. My aunt would not stop raving yesterday. Did she really try to

bribe you into leaving Kent?”

Elizabeth nodded. “That is not all she did. When I refused to be bought off, she beat me with her cane.”

“No!” Darcy exclaimed. “That is unforgivable. I hope you were not harmed.”

Elizabeth rubbed her temple. “The bruise I bear was well worth it to see the look on her face.”

“My aunt is not used to people refusing to give way to her.”

“I can see that.”

“Still, what I would not have given to see you stand up to her like that,” Darcy chuckled. He changed the subject. “Anne was not disappointed in the least when she heard that I wanted to call off the wedding. She heartily gave us her blessing. So now, all that remains between us and the altar is for me to write to your father and once more ask his blessing. We could possibly even have Mr. Collins marry us. Wouldn’t that be ironic?” Mr. Darcy chuckled. “If my aunt can obtain a special license, then I am certain I could as well. We could be married in the time it takes to ride to London and back.”

But Elizabeth was not so glib. “About that,” she began, “do you suppose that Miss de Bourgh has considered the effect that this will have on her reputation?” She shared the concerns that had been weighing on her all night.

Darcy listened patiently before answering. “Surely though, if you and I were able to break off our engagement without such a scandal, then Anne and I could easily do so as well.”

“Our engagement was broken, it is true. But it was not without scandal. The gossip in Meryton. Well, you were not there to hear it, but I was. I came here to Kent to escape it, as soon as my leg was healed enough to travel.”

“I am sorry to hear that. Had I only known...” Darcy shook his head.

Elizabeth continued. “Yours and Anne’s engagement has been far more publicized than ours was. The wedding is mere days away. Not to mention, your aunt will likely try to sue you for breach of promise.”

“Yes, she has already threatened to do so. But I do not care about that. I would pay any price to be able to marry you.”

“But don’t you see? It is Anne who would pay the price. The scandal would ruin her. Who would marry her after her engagement to you is broken?”

“Then we must create a bigger scandal.”

“How?”

“We must elope together.”

Elizabeth snorted. “I fail to see how that is any different from marrying by special license. The effect would be the same.”

“No, not necessarily.” Darcy shook his head. “If my engagement to Anne is publicly called off, as would need to be done in order to obtain a special license and be married, then the brunt of the scandal will fall on her shoulders, it is true. If, however, we run away together and are married before anyone even knows it, then there will be some scandal, yes, but the bigger part of it will be on me. People will begin to assume that I was being forced into an engagement with her due to the family connections, and that, being overcome with my love for you, we simply chose to run away together to avoid my having to marry her.”

“Which is, in fact, the truth,” Elizabeth smiled.

“Precisely!”

They made a plan to meet again by the garden folly later that night after everyone had retired. Darcy would have his carriage ready and waiting to take them to Scotland. The thought was, if they left in the dead of night, they could cover

enough distance before anybody could discover them that there would be no chance of their being overtaken.



Elizabeth walked with a spring in her step back to the parsonage. A secret elopement! It was too thrilling.

Charlotte and Mr. Collins were awake and having breakfast when Elizabeth entered the house.

“Where have you gone off to, so early in the morning?” Charlotte asked with a smile.

Elizabeth blushed. “Oh, just out for a walk. I thought I might take advantage of the fine weather we are having.”

“Well, the post came while you were gone. You have had a letter from home, it looks like.”

Elizabeth picked up the letter sitting by her place at the table. “It is from Jane,” she said, recognizing the neat, dainty handwriting on the front. She opened the letter and began reading, expecting a recounting of the latest news from Hertfordshire and other mundane things. Instead, the tidings it bore were so shocking, so horrible, that Elizabeth immediately got up from the table and went into the adjoining parlor, barely able to contain her sobs until she was out of the breakfast room.

Charlotte followed her. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Elizabeth showed her the letter.

Dear Lizzy,

I regret to tell you that there has been a most unfortunate circumstance in our family. Poor Lydia has been taken in by a soldier who has got her with child and then

abandoned her. Papa has insisted on keeping her home for the time being, under the premise of her being ill, but soon, it will be impossible to conceal her condition from anyone in Meryton. We are all distraught. Mama has taken to her bed and does nothing but wail and moan all day long, saying her poor nerves are shot. Father, on the other hand, refuses to leave his library. For some time, Lydia refused to disclose to us who the father of her child is, but eventually, under pressure from Mary and myself and after we were hinted to by Kitty as to the likeliest culprit, she has confessed it to be Mr. Wickham. It pains me to say that we were all gravely deceived in his character. Lydia says that she has written to him, and she has every belief that he will come for her, and they will be married. I hope that she is right, or else we are all ruined. I am at a loss for how to manage both our parents and the household on my own. Bingley and I come every day, but it is more than either of us can handle and we do not know how long Lydia's condition can be kept a secret. Kitty and Lydia are no help at all, as you can imagine. Mary tries to help, but her pedantic sermons on the matter are growing tiresome even to my nerves. You are the only one who might move Father to act while there is still time for something to be done for Lydia. Do come as soon as you can, I beg you.

Your sister,

Jane Bingley

Below this, there was a postscript.

The situation is worse than we thought. I am glad that I did not seal this letter, for we have just had news of an even more distressing nature. Lydia's letter to Mr. Wickham was returned to her by Colonel Forster, who wrote that Mr. Wickham altogether quit the militia shortly after their removal to Brighton. His whereabouts are currently unknown. It is Lydia's belief, based on her last conversation with him, that he intended to join the regulars, in hopes that, should he survive

the war, he might return home with enough prize money to afford to wed. But without any knowledge of which battalion he might belong to, it is impossible to get any word to him. I must go now; Mama is having another of her fits. I do pray that this letter reaches you speedily and that you might return to us in haste.

Mr. Collins, whose own curiosity had got the better of him, had followed them into the parlor as well.

Charlotte rounded on him as soon as she had finished the letter. "Is this more of your doing, Mr. Collins?"

"No, no, I can assure you, I have had nothing to do with any more letters to Elizabeth." He cowered.

"No, he's right," Elizabeth confirmed. "This letter is in Jane's writing. There is no mistake about that.

After asking Elizabeth's permission to share, Charlotte briefly apprised him of the situation.

"This is very grave news, indeed," Mr. Collins said. "We must arrange for you to get home at the earliest possible time."

Mr. Collins wanted to ask Lady Catherine if she might renew her offer to use her carriage, but Elizabeth refused.

Instead, she set about writing an express to her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner to ask if they might be able to send someone to meet her in Bromley; The Collinses had promised they could deliver her as far as there. The hope was that the Gardiners could take her the rest of the way home. Elizabeth hated to impose on them, but given the circumstances, it was the best solution. A return express came back before nightfall, confirming that they were willing to help.



For the second time in a matter of days, Elizabeth packed her things, but not for any of the reasons she had imagined doing so. Despite her distress, Elizabeth had not forgotten her plans to elope with Mr. Darcy. He needed to be told, somehow, but she worried that a letter might fall into the wrong hands. She decided that the only way to safely communicate was to keep her plan to meet him that night. What with her worries over Lydia, it was doubtful she would get a good night's sleep anyways.

Once she was certain that the Collinses were asleep, judging by the loud snoring coming from one bedroom and the soft wheezing from another, and the clock in the hall chimed one, Elizabeth slipped out the parsonage, just as she had that morning. Mr. Darcy was waiting for her at the garden folly, just as he had promised.

"You're here at last." He pulled her into a tender kiss. "I was beginning to think you would not come. Where are your things?"

"There has been a development." She filled him in on the letter from Jane.

Darcy sighed. "Oh, this is all my fault."

Elizabeth was confused. "What do you mean?"

"Your sister might already be married if I had given him what he asked for."

"I don't understand."

"When I was last in Hertfordshire, just before Bingley's wedding, Mr. Wickham came to see me at Netherfield. I do not know how he came to learn that I had returned there, but he asked for my help, and I refused him."

"What sort of help?" Elizabeth wanted to know.

"He told me that he wanted to leave the militia and go into some other line of work. He said he'd found a sweetheart and he wanted to marry her, but that the military life was not a good one for a man with a wife. He needed more if he was to

settle down and marry her, because her dowry was too small for them to live off of. He asked me for the funds to return to Cambridge and complete his education so that he might become a minister, as he'd originally intended. But I refused to help him. I didn't believe he ever intended to wed someone with no dowry, and I accused him of using this as a means to acquire a comfortable income at little to no expense to himself. I did not think that he would choose instead to run off and abandon a girl, leaving her pregnant. Nor did I ever think for one moment that the girl he had mentioned was your sister."

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed. "So, you are telling me that the reason that Wickham abandoned my sister instead of marrying her is because you refused to help him?"

"It's worse than that." Darcy hung his head. "I told him that the only thing I would do for him was to pay for his commission in the army so that he could join a battalion headed for France. I then gave him money in the amount of £450 and said that I hoped Napoleon's forces might dispatch him straight to hell for me."

Elizabeth blinked back more tears. "In other words, you've given the father of my sister's child a possible death sentence. Wished it on him, in fact."

Darcy could not answer her.

Elizabeth patted her eyes and sniffed. "My sister's condition can only be kept secret for so long. If she does not marry, she will be ruined. I, my sisters, my family— we shall all be ruined. It was not enough for you to ruin your own sister's happiness, was it? You had to ruin my sister's happiness as well." Elizabeth knew she was not being rational, but between the anger and pain of what was happening and the heightened emotions of the past few days, Elizabeth's heart was too raw.

"My sister's happiness?" Darcy was confused.

"Georgiana told me about her past with Wickham, how you prevented them from marrying."

Darcy scowled. "I was perfectly justified in stopping that *fiend* from taking advantage of my sister."

"She loved him, you know! It was *her* idea to elope, not his! But you— you never want to believe that anyone might be interested in marrying for reasons other than money! You did not believe that Wickham might have truly loved your sister, and now, you would not believe that he could truly love *my* sister either." Angry tears were rolling freely down her face now.

"You seem to forget that it was Mr. Wickham who took advantage of your sister and then abandoned her without a word," Darcy said bitterly.

Blinded by her fury, Elizabeth lashed out. "Because he thought that he had to find a way to provide for her first. Because *you* denied him the respectable living that your father had promised for him."

Cold silence filled the air as neither one spoke for a few minutes. Finally, Darcy spoke.

"What does this mean, then, for us?" he asked.

"We," Elizabeth hesitated. "We can't elope," she finished. "Not with my sister in such peril."

"No." Darcy shook his head. "No, I do see that."

"I must go to my family at once. It has already been arranged. I leave tomorrow morning."

"Of course. And then?"

"I do not know," she answered. "I need time. Time to think. Good night to you, Mr. Darcy," she said, without any hint of having meant the sentiment. Not daring to look at him again, she turned around to go back to the parsonage. Darcy did not call out or follow her.

Chapter 25



Darcy cursed under his breath. He had thought himself well-rid of Wickham, but once more, it seemed that the man was an obstacle to his happiness. *Only this time, I might have prevented it all.* Darcy sighed. Wickham was by no means innocent; to have taken advantage of a young girl like Lydia who had clearly been infatuated with him...Darcy's anger still burned at the thought of what had nearly taken place with Georgiana. But if there was even a shred of truth to what Wickham had said about his desire to marry Lydia, to finish his education and hold a respectable office in the church, if he had only listened and granted Wickham his request, then Lydia might not now be in her current predicament. He paced the floor of the garden folly, ruminating on all that he had learned.

Elizabeth's accusation that he had ruined both her sister's life and his own sister's still stung. *I was doing what's best for Georgiana, keeping her from marrying that reprobate.* Georgiana's pleas echoed in his mind, begging him to give his approval for her marriage, her insistence that the elopement had been her idea and not Wickham's. At the time, he had dismissed it all as a child's attempt to protect the man she was infatuated with; that Wickham had certainly been the one to scheme and plan for the sake of stealing her fortune. But what if Georgiana had been telling the truth? What if Wickham really had wanted to wait a few years to marry her, after finishing his degree and establishing himself in a profession? *Have I been wrong about Wickham? Did he really love Georgiana? It does not excuse their plans to elope,* he reasoned. But the irony that he himself had been planning to elope in order to be with the one that he loved was not lost on him.

In his mind's eye, he could once more see the last conversation he'd had with Wickham.

“I know I have been far from perfect, but I want to turn over a new leaf. There’s a girl, a wonderful girl, who comes from a good family. I want to marry her. But I cannot give her the life she deserves in my current occupation.”

“Isn’t her dowry big enough? It must be fairly sizable to tempt you.”

“Not at all; a mere thousand pounds is all.”

“Only a thousand? Then her father must be giving you the old ‘pistols at dawn’ threat if you don’t marry her.”

“Can you really not believe that I would ever marry for love?”

“No, I cannot. A wastrel like you is incapable of loving anything but money.”

Darcy clenched his fist as he snuck quietly back into the house. It was still the middle of the night. Somewhere in the house, a clock chimed two.

I suppose I cannot know if Wickham really loves the girl or not. But perhaps there is something I can do about their situation. He rounded the corner— and came face to face with Colonel Fitzwilliam! In his long, white nightshirt with a candle illuminating his face, he had a ghostly appearance that gave Darcy a start.

“Richard,” Darcy hissed, “what are you doing downstairs at this time of night?”

“I could ask you the same question, Darce,” the colonel whispered.

“I asked you first.”

“I...could not sleep and came down for a glass of warm milk. Why are you dressed in your clothes? Were you outside?”

“Shh!” Darcy put his finger to his lips. He motioned for Colonel Fitzwilliam to follow him upstairs. They went into

Darcy's bedroom and shut the door. Colonel Fitzwilliam set the candle he had been holding down on the dresser.

"I was with Elizabeth," Darcy confessed.

"I knew it!" The look of utter glee on the colonel's face made Darcy want to slap it off of him.

Darcy knew there was nobody he could trust more than his cousin. He told him about the situation with Elizabeth's sister and Wickham.

"I should have shot Wickham after I knew what he'd attempted to do to Georgiana." Colonel Fitzwilliam scowled.

"I have had the same thought, more than once," Darcy admitted. "But for the sake of Elizabeth's sister, I must do what I can to help. But first, I need to locate Wickham, wherever he might be."

"I might be able to help with that," Colonel Fitzwilliam offered. "I shall write to the War Office. I have some friends there who may be able to locate which regiment Wickham has joined."

Darcy nodded. "I was hoping you could do that."

"What will you do if you find him?"

"Let him know he is to be a father. Then we shall see if he has any shred of decency in him."



Elizabeth knew it was unfair to blame Mr. Darcy for Lydia's predicament, but her anger overpowered her rational thinking. There was no rest for her that night. Her mind was torn between the foolishness of Wickham and Lydia and Darcy's callous behavior towards Wickham. Though Darcy could never have known the results, his insensitivity irked her still. In the morning, Mr. Collins drove her in his two-person

gig to Bromley, where she was met by her aunt and four little cousins and transferred to their larger coach. Elizabeth thanked them for taking the trouble to come and fetch her, to which Mrs. Gardiner replied, "Of course, dear, you are family. We would come to the ends of the earth to fetch you if need be."

They reached Gracechurch Street where they took a rest and ate luncheon. Mr. Gardiner returned home from his warehouses, having had some business to attend to which prevented him from making the first part of the journey with them. In the afternoon, they all set off again for Hertfordshire.

Mrs. Gardiner was principally occupied in entertaining her children, who were already tired and cranky from being in the carriage all that morning. When Eddie and Robbie finally succumbed to their need for a nap and laid their heads on their mother's shoulder and lap, respectively, Mr. Gardiner took over playing a guessing game with the girls.

Mrs. Gardiner turned to Elizabeth and inquired how her stay in Kent was.

Elizabeth hardly knew how to answer her. "It was... pleasant enough," she muttered.

"I read in the papers that Mr. Darcy is to be married to a Miss de Bourgh from Kent. Is she not the daughter of Mr. Collins' patroness?"

When Elizabeth affirmed, her aunt went on to ask, "Did you happen to see Mr. Darcy while you were there, then?"

"Yes." Elizabeth's voice croaked.

"Oh, my dear, I am sorry. That must have been difficult for you, meeting him again."

Would Mr. Darcy come for her at Longbourn? Would he write to her? They had parted under such strange circumstances. She wished they had not left things up in the air. She wished she had told him with certainty that she still wanted to marry him. She wished she had not been so hasty to blame him for a matter in which, clearly, Mr. Wickham was at fault.

Poor Lydia! What was to be done for her?



“You want me to offer the Westerham living to the son of your father’s former steward, a man of whom you have often made comments regarding your distaste for?” Lady Catherine asked, seated in the great, leather chair in her study which had once belonged to her husband, and from where she conducted all matters relating to the estate.

“That is correct,” Darcy answered. Although his aunt was ignorant of the reasons for his hatred of Wickham, he had made no secret of his dislike of the man.

Lady Catherine cocked her head. “Why, might I ask, would you do such a thing— stick your neck out for a man who you despise?”

“The reasons are complicated, but it comes down to my belief that I may have been in error when I had him expelled from Cambridge and gave away the living that had been promised to him by my father. It is a circumstance which I feel the need to rectify.”

“And why should I be the one to help you? After all, you have other livings in your gift which you might present when one becomes available, and I had intended to give the Westerham living to Mr. Collins.”

“Mr. Collins already benefits from holding the rectory of Hunsford and will one day have an estate of his own. He has no need of a second living. All my own livings are currently held by clergymen who are young and in good health. I expect it will be some time before one becomes available. Mr. Wickham is in need of more immediate assistance than I am able to give.”

Lady Catherine folded her hands and laid them on the desk “And what will you do for me in return, if I give this Wickham fellow the living you are asking for?”

“A trade, perhaps? I will give the next living of mine that becomes available to your Mr. Collins, since you desire to enrich your rector further.”

“A trade, yes,” Catherine nodded, “but we need to have one of equal value. I care little whether Mr. Collins ever gets his wish for more parishes from which to reap the tithes. What I want in return is for you to keep your promise to marry Anne. Give up this foolish nonsense about calling off the wedding.”

Darcy scoffed. “Why do you persist in clinging to your fancy? Anne already has a vast fortune and an estate of which she will be mistress. What is it you want for her? More money? A bigger estate?”

“You really have no idea, do you, Fitzwilliam? It is not about the money— it was never about the money!”

“Then, what?” Darcy shouted, not caring whether or not he offended his aunt.

Lady Catherine paused a few moments before speaking softly. “There are not many who would take on someone like Anne for their wife, what with her...specific condition. As you know, I will not be around forever. I need to ensure that Anne is taken care of when I am gone.”

“Surely she would always have a companion, servants, who would do that for her.”

“That is not enough!” Lady Catherine’s eyes flashed. “They would not love her as she ought to be loved. She would be at their mercy, should they fail in their duties to her. I have heard terrible stories of...of...*infirm patients* who were mistreated at the hands of their caretakers. I cannot allow that to happen to Anne. That is why you must marry her, Darcy.” There was a pleading, anguished look in her eyes that Darcy had never seen before.

Darcy felt he finally understood his aunt's desperation to have him marry Anne.

Lady Catherine pulled out a handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbed her eyes.

Darcy walked over to her chair and put one hand on her shoulder. "Dear aunt, you know that even if I did not marry Anne, I would always ensure that she is well-cared for. I would come to visit her regularly, as would my cousins, and if we suspected for one moment that she was not receiving her due care or was being mistreated in any way, we would remove the offending servants and install new ones in their place."

"And how do you expect to know these things, when you are miles away in Derbyshire or London most of the year?" Lady Catherine retorted. "You asked what the price of my giving away the valuable Westerham rectory is to be, and this is it—marry Anne, or your little sweetheart, Elizabeth, can say 'goodbye' to her family's good standing and her sister can be left to raise that bastard child of hers all on her own."

Darcy's mouth hung open.

Lady Catherine stood up, leaning on her cane for support, a wicked gleam returning to her eye. "Did you really think I did not know? Mr. Collins called on me to take his leave before delivering Miss Bennet to her relatives. Since he has no sense of discretion, it did not take long for me to learn the reason behind her departure, which I was especially curious to know after her adamant refusal to leave only a day before. Mr. Collins told me the whole sordid tale. So, when you came to me, I knew right away what you were about, hoping to buy off the scoundrel so he would come back and marry the little Bennet brat, and save your precious Elizabeth's family reputation. So, Fitzwilliam, what is it to be?"

Darcy felt as though his heart were being squeezed between two boulders the size of a carriage. There was no way out. *She knows that she has me*, he thought. *If I walk away now, the Bennet family will be ruined.*

Darcy hung his head. “Summon your solicitor. I want the marriage articles amended to ensure that you will uphold your end of the bargain, and I will uphold mine.”

“There’s a good boy,” Lady Catherine nodded with her usual air of arrogance. “I knew you could be brought to reason.”



Elizabeth visited her father first, while the others were having their supper. She could deal with her mother’s hysterics later.

Her father had taken to sleeping on the couch in his library and having all his meals there. He offered her some of the food on his tray, but Elizabeth declined.

“Papa, you must do something about Lydia. Your failure to act will bring about shame and disgrace on all our heads. You know that Lydia cannot pretend to be ill for nine whole months. In a small town like ours, the truth will soon be found out.”

“I am afraid there is nothing *to do*, Lizzy,” Mr. Bennet answered. “I have already written to the war office, but since I have no friends there, it is doubtful my letter shall even be looked at. They are rather preoccupied in this whole war with Bonaparte, after all. I am sure they have far too much business to bother with locating one foot soldier.”

“There must be something else that could be done. Do we have any relatives who could take Lydia abroad until her baby is born?”

Mr. Bennet gave a wry laugh. “You know that we do not. Your aunt and uncle are the only ones with any means, but I do not think Edward can afford to leave his cabinetry in the hands

of others for so long, and he would not like to send his wife and children abroad without him.”

“So, Lydia is just to bear the shame of what she’s done, and we along with her?” Elizabeth’s face flushed with anger.

“I do not see any other way.” Mr. Bennet shook his head. “We all must bear the consequences of our actions, some far greater than others. I must bear the shame that I did not rein in my children when I should have; your mother, that she did not instruct her daughters to behave with modesty and purity. You and Jane had the benefit of spending extended time with your Aunt Gardiner, without whom your upbringing would have been lacking. Had I extended the same privilege to your younger sisters, we might not now be in this position.”

Mr. Bennet shook his head. “Your mother has always lacked discretion and modesty. Unfortunately, that is how I came to be wed to her.”

Elizabeth’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean, Papa?”

“Have you never wondered why Jane’s birthday is only a few months after your mother’s and my wedding anniversary?”

“I never gave it much thought. The family Bible lists your wedding in the year 1788, and Jane’s birthday is in the year 1789.”

Mr. Bennet cleared his throat. “The family Bible has been amended to reflect a respectable time between the marriage and the birth of our first child. However, in actuality, your mother was already carrying Jane when we were wed.”

Elizabeth could not hide her shock. Her father wished to rest, and Elizabeth needed to see her mother as well, so she let him be.

She climbed the stairs to her mother’s bedroom.

Her mother had on her nightgown and a big white nightcap and was perched in her bed with a mound of pillows around her. She held out her arms to Elizabeth.

“Lizzy, dear, come give your mama a kiss.”

Elizabeth obliged her.

“It is so good you have come,” Mrs. Bennet crooned. She picked up the large handkerchief that had been lying on one of her pillows and blew into it. “We have all been in a fuss the last few weeks. My poor Lydia has been thrown over by Mr. Wickham after he promised to marry her, and now he has disappeared off the face of the earth!”

“If he has promised to marry her, then why did he go off without a word to her?”

“I do not know!” Mrs. Bennet began to wail. “We have all been terribly ill used by him!”

“You know that Lydia is at fault here, as well,” Elizabeth began. “Mr. Wickham certainly took advantage of her and there is no excuse for that, but there are some things she ought to have known not to do. Things her mother ought to have warned her about.”

“Everything would have been just fine if he had only stayed and married her!”

“Do you mean to say that you excuse their conduct?”

Mrs. Bennet huffed. “Well, you know how it is. You were engaged once, yourself, Lizzy!” She dried off her tears, giving one last sniff as she set the soggy handkerchief down on the pillow again.

Elizabeth’s cheeks reddened. “Mr. Darcy and I always conducted ourselves in perfect propriety while we were engaged.”

“Of course, you did, dear,” Mrs. Bennet gave a little giggle. “I *always* maintained that you were a paragon of virtue. You need not confess to *me* any little things that might have happened along the way.”

“I assure you, there is nothing to confess. But while we are on the subject of confessing, I learned something from Papa about the state of things when you and he married. About

how Jane was born only a few months after, and not a year after, as the family Bible suggests.”

“Oh, well, you cannot blame me for that,” Mrs. Bennet answered with a smile, her cheeks barely turning pink. “Your father was very handsome in his day, and I must say, I turned quite a few heads myself. Besides, we did marry, so it all turned out well. You know what they say, ‘a baby can come any time after the wedding; after that, it takes nine months.’” She gave a rippling laugh that shook the bed.

“You really have no qualms then, about what Lydia has done?”

“My dear, plenty of young people anticipate their vows. Lydia’s mistake was in failing to secure a proper engagement before succumbing to the carnal desires. She went off of the man’s word, which *ought* to have been enough, but plenty of men will say such things in order to get what they want. Had she brought the man to her father and had him sign the marriage articles first, she could have had some recourse if he tried to jilt her.”

Elizabeth shook her head at her mother’s inane reasoning. Even if there were sufficient grounds to sue Lydia’s lover for breach of promise and succeed, it would not have restored her honor.

Chapter 26



It had been too late in the day to see Jane when Elizabeth and the Gardiners had arrived at Longbourn, but she and Bingley came over the next day.

“I honestly do not know what to do about things,” Jane confessed.

“Neither do I.” Elizabeth shook her head. “Papa and Mama were no help, either.” Her cheeks pinked as she recalled the embarrassing revelation she had learnt. She decided she would not share it with Jane. Jane could, in time, come to learn the news herself if their parents ever chose to tell her about it. Until then, better that she live in ignorant bliss about the timing of her own conception.

Wanting to be cheered up, Elizabeth asked about any other developments that had happened in the neighborhood since she left.

“Well, let’s see,” Jane began. “Maria Lucas has a suitor now: William Goulding. Oh, and Mrs. Jung’s nieces have both married.”

“Really? To whom?”

“Theresa caught the attention of Matthew Lucas— you know, the one who played the trumpet at my wedding— and they were wed just last week. And Emily Jung is now married to William Buckland.”

“Who?”

“You know, ‘Bucky’ Buckland. Only we do not call him that anymore. He went to see Mr. Jung about some pain in his front teeth and ended up having them replaced with brand-new false teeth. One would hardly recognize him anymore!”

“You jest!” Elizabeth laughed.

“Only a little! His brand-new smile was enough to make him attractive to Emily, who accepted his proposal without a second thought. Now he is working as a dental assistant to Mr. Jung, and he hopes in a few years to move to London and set up his own practice.”

“Mrs. Jung must be so thrilled.” Elizabeth remarked.

“Very much! She considers it to be a great triumph. She has over forty nieces and nephews, and since her own children are already grown, she has plans to be of use to them all.”

“Well, let us rather hope that there are more ‘Bucky Bucklands’ to be found in Hertfordshire, so that she may make matches for each of them.” Elizabeth laughed.

Jane’s own soft laughter echoed her sister’s.

“Oh, I forgot to mention, Charles has had a letter from his sister. Caroline has found herself a suitor as well, the man who owns the estate neighboring Mr. Hurst’s. Apparently, he has twelve or thirteen-thousand a year!”

“How impressive!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “I hope that if she manages to secure him that she will be well-pleased.”

“Time will tell,” Jane answered. Then she changed the subject. “What news from Kent?”

Elizabeth looked around. Seeing that none of her other sisters were nearby, Elizabeth told Jane the truth of what happened during her visit to Hunsford Parsonage. Jane listened to it all with wide eyes.

“You poor thing!” Jane exclaimed when Elizabeth had finished. “So where do things stand now, with Mr. Darcy?”

“I do not know. I was so angry with him when we parted. I blamed him for not doing his part in enabling Wickham to marry. I know it was wrong to do so, but I could not help it. Now, even if Mr. Wickham returns and marries Lydia, I am not certain that Mr. Darcy will still want to marry me. Our family has been disgraced, and Mr. Darcy might not be willing to become the brother-in-law of his hated nemesis.”

“Oh, Lizzy!” Jane took her sister into her embrace. “I shall have Bingley write to him; I am sure the matter can be resolved.”

“No. Better not to do anything until we know what is to become of Lydia.”



On Thursday, Mr. Garbutt died. Mr. Collins was among the first to offer his condolences at the wake. Mr. Garbutt’s widow did not appreciate it, as she suspected that he was only there to get a peek inside the Westerham parsonage, which was confirmed when she caught him trying to steal a look at one of her closets to see if it had any shelves. He then visited Lady Catherine, who had no need of his condolences, despite Mr. Collins grave remarks on “what a sad day it was” and “how terrible that she should lose one of her rectors at such a time.”

“You may save your sympathies, Mr. Collins,” Lady Catherine told him. “Your silly ruse failed to get rid of Elizabeth Bennet, and it was by sheer luck that she was called away due to that unfortunate affair of her sister’s. But you may make it up to me. I am moving up the wedding of Fitzwilliam and Anne to the day after tomorrow. Now that Mr. Garbutt is gone, I will need you to perform the wedding ceremony.”

“Of course, your ladyship,” Mr. Collins bowed.

“Everything is settled now that Fitzwilliam has agreed to move forward, and the marriage settlement has been signed.”



Darcy heard voices in the drawing room as he passed by. He didn't mean to eavesdrop, but the sound of his cousin's voice drew him in. He leaned against the wall near the open door.

"It is completely unfair! Why should Cousin Will and I be forced to wed when I— when he is in love with someone else?"

"My child, you have no idea the struggles I have gone through to ensure that this wedding takes place. Fitzwilliam has accepted that it is his duty to marry you. He will take care of you even when I am gone. Besides, you did not object to the wedding before. I do not see why you are raising such a fuss all of a sudden."

"Things are different. I did not know then that Will was in love with someone else. And I had thought that..."

"You had thought what?"

"Never mind," Anne answered.

Lady Catherine's cane could be heard thumping along as she paced the drawing room. "I would think that after all I have done for you, you would be just a little more *grateful*."

Darcy turned away. He hated the situation they were both in. *It was the only way to save Elizabeth's sister*, he told himself. Thanks to Colonel Fitzwilliam's inquiry, they had located Mr. Wickham's regiment, which was preparing to set sail for France within the month. Darcy had wasted no time in sending him a letter about Lydia Bennet's condition, urging him to return and marry her. In the letter, Darcy told him of the Westerham rectory that was to be his and promised to help Wickham get reinstated at Cambridge and pay for his final term, so that he could assume the position following his ordination. The letter from Wickham that returned expressed his gratitude and his assurance that he had resigned his commission and was headed to Hertfordshire to make an honest woman out of Miss Lydia.



“La, I am so tired of everyone’s lectures,” Lydia complained after Elizabeth tried to impress upon her the seriousness of what she had done. Already, her belly was beginning to show, her narrow gown doing little to hide the growing evidence of her pregnancy. She turned towards her middle sister, who was banging away on the piano. “Mary, stop that racket! Everyone is sick of your playing!”

Mary glared back at her but kept on plunking out the sonata she was rehearsing.

Lydia turned back to Elizabeth. “I’ve already had to endure a dozen sermons from Mary, then from Aunt Gardiner, and now you.”

“Can you not understand why?” Elizabeth asked, exasperated.

“Honestly, no, I cannot. My Wickham and I have done nothing wrong. We love each other, and I am sure that he will come for me. He promised me he would come back, and we would be married.”

“But we cannot even locate which regiment he is in.”

“Then he will come back when the war is over. He’ll come back as a hero, rich with prize money, having kicked Napoleon’s *derrière*,” Lydia sniggered.

“*If* he survives the war,” Elizabeth pointed out.

“He will, I am sure of it.” Lydia’s curls bobbed along with her head. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I was on my way to fetch my bonnet.”

“Why do you need it?”

“I am going to call on Aunt Phillips.”

“You know you cannot leave the house.” Elizabeth blocked Lydia’s way, but she skirted around her.

“It’s been weeks since I’ve had any visits to Meryton.”

“And you know the reason for that.”

Lydia glared. “You cannot keep me locked up here for nine months!”

“Until a suitable alternative presents itself, we must!”

Lydia tried to make a break for the door, but Elizabeth caught hold of her and would not let go. Lydia wrestled to get free, yelling “let me go” at the top of her lungs while Elizabeth shouted back at her.

Kitty, who had been watching the birds out the window in sheer boredom, suddenly perked up. “Look, there is somebody coming!”

Lydia and Elizabeth stopped fighting and ran over to look. Even Mary stopped practicing and came over to see. A tall figure seated atop a horse was coming up the lane towards the house.

“It looks like—” began Elizabeth.

Lydia’s eyes widened. “It’s my Wickham!” she exclaimed. She turned to her sisters with a big grin. “I told you he would come back for me!”

Elizabeth was astonished. “I do not understand how,” she shook her head.

Kitty and Mary ran upstairs to fetch their mother, who was being kept company by Mrs. Gardiner. Lydia ran out the front door. Elizabeth watched from the window as Wickham dismounted his horse in front of the house and met Lydia’s embrace, giving her a passionate kiss.



Mrs. Bennet knew that Wickham's coming could only mean that he meant to marry her and welcomed him with gushing cries of "Oh Mr. Wickham, how good of you to come all this way on your leave!" and "You will be staying the night with us, won't you? I will have Hill make up a room for you at once!"

Mr. Bennet's reaction was less welcoming. He had been locked away in his library when the carriage arrived and was at first unaware of Wickham's presence until his wife burst in, uninvited, to tell him. On hearing that the man who had debauched his youngest daughter was standing in the hall, had a mind to take him out in the garden, string him up from a tree, and put an end to him. Instead, he hurried down the stairs, shouting oaths, and meant to chase Wickham out of the house, and out of the county, if necessary.

His wife's pleas fell on deaf ears, as did Lydia's wails. It was not until Elizabeth managed to calm him down and explain the whole story that he was willing to admit Wickham into his presence. The latter was so humble and contrite, and his profession of love for the youngest Miss Bennet so sincere, that the former was obliged to give his blessing for the wedding to take place.

The Bennets were even more happy that the wedding was to take place when they learned that Wickham had been given the benefice of the Westerham living, and that he planned to return to Cambridge to complete his final term there before taking possession of it.

"Someone must have put in a good word for you with Lady Catherine de Bourgh," Mrs. Bennet commented. "We have often heard of her generosity from our cousin, Mr. Collins." She beamed.

Jane and Bingley were summoned to celebrate the good news. They were both thrilled at the outcome.

"He claims he had no idea that Lydia was with child, or he never would have left town without marrying her first,"

Elizabeth told Jane. “But I still do not know how he was notified of her condition.”

“Perhaps you should ask him,” she suggested. She drew Elizabeth aside. “I have some bad news. Bingley has had a letter from Mr. Darcy. It seems he plans to go through with his wedding to Miss de Bourgh.”

Elizabeth’s face turned two shades paler. “When?”

“According to the letter we received today, the wedding will be taking place tomorrow. I’m so sorry, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth felt the weight in her heart sink even lower than before.



Elizabeth had her opportunity to speak to Wickham later that day. She was out for a stroll around the garden, and he happened to be out at the same time.

“I hope you won’t mind if I join you on your walk,” Wickham said, coming alongside her as she walked along the path towards the orchard.

“I cannot stop you from joining me,” Elizabeth answered frostily.

Mr. Wickham let out a low laugh. “You do not seem particularly pleased to see me.”

“If I were not a lady, I would sock you in the jaw for what you did to my sister.”

Wickham’s face reddened. “I will admit, I have not been the perfect gentleman. But what man would be, when such a sweet, loving young lady offers herself so willingly?”

“A gentleman would have scolded her and sent her home to her mama and papa for such behavior.”

“Perhaps. I know it was wrong of me to take advantage of her, but I hope you’ll believe me when I say, I truly do love Lydia.”

“If that is the case, then why did you not make an honest woman of her sooner? Why did you leave Hertfordshire when you had the chance?”

“Truly, I did not know she was with child when I left, or I never would have gone. I had planned to make my fortune and then return to marry her when I had the money to give her the kind of life she deserved.”

“That still does not excuse what you did. Sipping from a cup of nectar that wasn’t yours to sip from.”

“No, it does not. But really, we are not the first couple to indulge in such ‘sipping’, as you call it.”

Given what Elizabeth had just learnt about her own parents’ premarital dalliances, she could hardly argue with that.

“By the way,” Elizabeth said, “We were all curious what made you decide to return.”

“Ah,” Wickham said. “You have your friend Mr. Darcy to thank for that.”

“Mr. Darcy?”

Wickham nodded. “It was he who wrote to me, urging me to return home. He is the one who is providing for my return to Cambridge, and I suspect it is he who persuaded his aunt to give me the Westerham living.”

Elizabeth was so surprised she did not speak for a minute. She wondered what Darcy could have said to Lady Catherine to persuade her to give the living to Mr. Wickham, since she had it on good authority from Mr. Collins that Lady Catherine had promised the living to him.

Wickham looked at her as they walked forward. “But I thought you would have known all that, given how close you are to Darcy. You must have told him about your sister’s

predicament, or he never would have lifted a finger to help me.”

Suddenly, the pieces snapped into place. Darcy had sacrificed himself to obtain the living for Wickham, so that he could afford to marry Lydia. Lady Catherine must have made him agree to go through with the wedding to Anne in exchange for it. And he did it all so that Lydia’s honor— her family’s honor— could be restored.

Wickham bowed his head to her and tipped his hat. “Enjoy the rest of your walk, Miss Bennet.” He returned to the house, leaving Elizabeth to her thoughts.

Her feet carried her over to the bench by the large cherry tree, now dressed in the green leaves of summer. She sank down, remembering the last time she had sat under this tree with Mr. Darcy when it was covered in pink blossoms. If only she had found the words to confess her love, then, perhaps things would have been different. How was it that for the second time in a matter of months she was about to lose Mr. Darcy? The ache in her heart was almost more than she could bear.

Chapter 27



With much dread did Mr. Darcy wake up on his wedding day. His feet moved like lead as he staggered out of bed and rang for his valet. Downstairs, he could hear servants bustling about, getting ready for the wedding breakfast that would take place after the ceremony. He heard Lady Catherine shouting, but her words did not register in his mind.

His valet entered the room. Darcy expected him to begin dressing him in the deep blue velvet jacket and pure white breeches that had been laid out carefully the night before. But instead, his valet handed him an envelope, sealed with the de Bourgh crest.

“Sir, Miss de Bourgh gave this to me last night, and asked me to wait until this morning to give it to you.” He bowed and exited the room to give Darcy some privacy while he read.

Ignoring the cacophony of noises coming from downstairs, Darcy slit open the seal and digested the contents of the letter.

My dear cousin,

I know not how to explain things to you. I trust all will become clear, however. By the time you read this letter, Richard and I will be in Scotland together. Yes, that's right— we are eloping! Richard has hired a boat that will take us from Margate to Berwick on Tweed, where we shall be wed as soon as we can find a minister who is as available to perform the rites. I hope that you will wish us well, and that you will not think too badly of me for ending our engagement in this manner. There was no other way I could think of which my mother would possibly accept.

You and I have both known for some time that our love for each other is no more than that platonic bond of family members. While it would have been a great honor to become your wife, I do not think that we could have made each other happy.

For some time now, the rapport between Richard and I has grown beyond the bounds of friendship into something more. A love so deep and true, I felt the weight of its ache in my soul daily, and he has too. We both knew that, due to his lack of fortune, my mother would never agree to our engagement. Therefore, while he was away in France, we bided our time, keeping our communication over letters, planning that we would elope once he returned.

However, I did not expect that when he came, he would be accompanying you, or that you had come for the purpose of fulfilling my mother's wishes. I was informed by her that you intended to propose, and henceforth ordered that I would comply, despite my protests that my feelings for you were not equal to romantic love. Naturally, I could not divulge the real truth of my heart to her— that I was in love, but with my other cousin!

I am sorry that things had to be this way. I do believe, in my heart, that you will not be at all disappointed in the outcome, save for having to endure my mother's wrath when she learns of my disappearance. I have witnessed, during your stay here, your behavior in the presence of your former fiancée, Miss Bennet, and it has taught me to believe that you are still very much in love with her, and she with you. I do not know what circumstances caused you to end your engagement previously, but I pray that you might both reconcile the feelings in your heart, and that this will lead you to give each other one more chance. I genuinely believe that you and Miss Bennet could be happy together, just as Richard and I are now happy.

Sincerely,

Anne de Bourgh

Darcy scarcely had time to finish reading the letter and marvel at its contents when he heard a shriek. Moments later, Lady Catherine burst into his room, disregarding all propriety.

“Darcy, she’s gone! She and your cousin have run away together. You must go after them, at once! Before they reach Scotland.”

“I fear, dear aunt, that it is too late for that. By the time I reach them, they will surely already be wed.”

“The indignity of it! How can you stand to be left at the altar, on your very wedding day! This cannot happen!”

“I assure you, I shall bear the indignity with grace, as I fear you must do also.”

“But Anne is too frail! How can she make such a journey with only Richard to help her? She did not even take Mrs. Jenkinson with her!”

“Cousin Anne is far stronger than you give her credit for. Her infirmity may have stolen the use of her legs, but it has not stolen her perseverance. Whatever she sets out to do, you can be sure that she will accomplish. And besides, with Richard at her side, you can be certain that no harm will come to her.”

Lady Catherine continued to fret, both for her daughter’s sake, and over the shame of having to tell all her guests that there was not to be a wedding that day. But she knew that she could not stir Darcy to move to help with anything. On that point, there could be no further dispute. Even her threats to revoke the Westerham living that was promised to Wickham did nothing; Darcy had made sure that the clauses pertaining to it in the marriage settlement he signed were ironclad. Lady Catherine could not revoke them unless he— not the bride— were the one to cry off the wedding.

Darcy was free! It was almost too good to be true! There was just one thing left to do: ascertain whether or not Elizabeth Bennet still desired to become his wife. When they

parted, she hadn't been certain of it. Had blamed him for his part in sending Wickham away from Hertfordshire. Did she still hold him responsible for that? With his belongings already packed for the wedding tour he was supposed to have taken with Anne, Darcy had only to summon his valet and his carriage and make way for Longbourn.



Elizabeth was so distraught over the knowledge that Darcy had given up his own happiness for her sake that she did not even bother to get dressed the following day. She stayed in her room in her nightgown the entire day. When Jane came over for dinner, she went up to Elizabeth's room and tried her best to console her. "Perhaps it was not meant to be. Perhaps, in time, you shall find another, as I did. When Mr. Grayson broke my heart, I thought the pain would never end. But then I found Charles."

"Yes, and I am glad that you did, but that makes it all the worse. Charles and Mr. Darcy are close friends. It is inevitable that you will see him again, and that means that *I* might have to endure meeting him again. Him and his wife. He and Anne are probably setting off from their wedding breakfast right about now, do you know? Heading off to the continent for their wedding tour where they will— where they—" Elizabeth could not even finish her sentence.

"Lizzy, do not torture yourself like this." She sat beside Elizabeth on her bed and began braiding some small sections of her hair into a circlet, much like she had done for their playacting at Netherfield. When she finished braiding, she began brushing the rest of Elizabeth's hair until it was smooth and free of tangles. "You know," she said, "Aunt and Uncle Gardiner mentioned that they have plans to tour Derbyshire

after Lydia's wedding. Perhaps you might ask to go with them."

Elizabeth huffed. "I have no wish to go into *that* county."

"But Derbyshire is a large county. There is no reason to suppose you would go anywhere near Pemberley. And besides, you yourself said that they will be away on the continent and not at home."

There was a "thump" of something hitting the window. Elizabeth turned her head to look but saw nothing. *It must have been a bird or an insect*, she decided. But when the "thump" was followed by another one, it prompted her to open up the window and look.

There, standing out on the lawn, visible only by the lights coming from the house, was Mr. Darcy.

Seeing her peering out the window, dressed in her white nightgown with her hair tied in the same fashion, reminded him of their performance together. He called up to her window. "But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun."

Elizabeth's heart pounded. "Mr. Darcy! What are you doing here? Is today not your wedding day to Miss de Bourgh?"

A huge smile spread across Mr. Darcy's face that warmed Elizabeth from her heart to her toes. "My cousins will be nearly to Scotland by now, if they are not there already. Anne and Richard have eloped."

Elizabeth's heart burst with happiness at the news.

"Wait there, I am coming down!" Elizabeth called. Jane gave her shoulder a squeeze as she hurried past. Mary, Kitty and Lydia heard the noise of Elizabeth's footsteps on the stairs and came out of their rooms. "What is it? What is going on?" Lydia asked.

“Come and see,” Jane told them, motioning for them to follow her down.

Elizabeth met Mr. Darcy on the front lawn and took his hands in hers.

“Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth,” he began, but Elizabeth interrupted him.

“Before you get too far, there is something I must say to you. I was wrong to blame you for what happened with Mr. Wickham. It is not your fault that he went away from Hertfordshire.”

“It *was* my fault, though not entirely,” Darcy argued.

“Nevertheless, I owe you a debt of gratitude for what you did for Wickham, and by extension, Lydia.”

“Elizabeth,” Darcy smiled, taking one of his hands and cupping her cheek with it. “There is nothing I would not do for you, or your family. I hope that you know that.”

Elizabeth’s sisters quietly came out of the house to see what was happening.

On the ground floor, another window opened, and Mrs. Bennet stuck her head out. “What is going on out there?” she asked. Then, spotting Mr. Darcy, she called the rest of their family from the drawing room to join her as they hurried out onto the lawn.

Elizabeth tried not to smile at the sight of her entire family watching her exchange with Mr. Darcy. Apparently, he could not hide his smile either. His face was lit up as he got down on one knee.

“I love you, Elizabeth. I never thought I could ever love anybody as much as I love you.”

Elizabeth’s eyes glistened as she listened to his words.

Darcy continued, “When I first arrived in this county, I had a jaded view of love. I was convinced that love matches did not exist for those in my position, and I was not in want of

a wife who would only be marrying me for my fortune. You showed me that I was wrong. You were the first person, outside of my own family, who loved me for simply being *me*.”

Elizabeth spoke. “I, too, was convinced that if I couldn’t have love, then I would rather remain single forever. I broke off our engagement because I did not want you to be trapped into marrying me, or to think that I only wanted you for your money.”

“Then we have both been fools. Elizabeth, I never wish to be parted from you from this day on. Please, tell me once and for all, that you will be my wife.”

“Yes,” she whispered.

Mrs. Bennet’s piercing screeches echoed across the lawn. “What did she say? We can’t hear you!”

Elizabeth turned and grinned at her family.

“She said ‘yes’!” Darcy replied, loud enough for everybody to hear.

There was a resounding cheer as Mr. Darcy took his *fiancée* into his arms and kissed her.



Not long after Mr. Darcy’s return, Lydia and Wickham were married. They stayed in Hertfordshire through the summer, before moving to a small cottage that Mr. Darcy had rented for them near Cambridge. Their daughter was born less than a month after Mr. Wickham’s ordination and their moving into the spacious parsonage at Westerham. Mr. Collins never got over the loss of those beautiful gardens or the exquisite mosaic of the Last Supper.

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam resigned his commission from the army and settled permanently at Rosings, where he and Anne were happier than ever. In time, Lady Catherine came to reconcile herself to her daughter's marriage. She found that exchanging one nephew for the other as a son-in-law was a better outcome than she had thought. Richard was constantly devoted to Anne, and under his care, Anne flourished and grew healthier than she had ever been. Lady Catherine also came to appreciate the added benefit of her daughter always living with her at Rosings, whereas in the other case, she would have had to part with her to supply a mistress for Pemberley.

And as for Darcy and Elizabeth, they chose to have a small wedding in Longbourn's garden, just weeks after Lydia and Wickham's wedding. Only the immediate family were in attendance, despite Mrs. Bennet's protests that they should invite the whole neighborhood. Georgiana came up from London for the wedding, and she accompanied Darcy and Elizabeth three months later when they went abroad for their wedding tour.

"Well, my dear," Darcy said once they were on board a ship for Germany, the first port of call on their European tour, "Now I can safely tell those that I meet that I am not in want of a wife."

"Not in want of a wife?" Elizabeth answered, a twinkle in her eyes. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Yes," Darcy nodded. "Because I already have the best wife that I could ever want."

"So, if you are not in want of a wife, then what are you in want of?"

"Nothing. I have everything I could ever want in this life."

"Oh, what a shame," Elizabeth said, looking out over the glistening ocean waves. "I was rather hoping that you might be in want of a child, next." She patted her belly.

Darcy looked at her in wonder. “Truly?”

Elizabeth looked at him and nodded, a smile spreading across her face..

Darcy was so happy he could not even speak. He gave her a quick kiss before dashing off to tell Georgiana, shouting the news to every passenger on board as he passed.

Coming soon from Amanda Kai

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Chapter 1

July 1812

Elizabeth

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a favorable impression goes a long way in securing the good opinion of another. Elizabeth Bennet's opinion of Mr. Darcy was first formed during her tour of the beautiful house and grounds of Pemberley with her sister and her aunt and uncle.

For the past few weeks, they had seen all the principal sights that the region had to offer. They had seen the beauties of Dovedale and Matlock, climbed the Peaks, seen the ruins at Kenilworth, and toured Chatsworth and Blenheim Palace.

They had now reached the town of Bakewell, and over breakfast at the inn were discussing if there was anything worth seeing on their way to Mrs. Gardiner's childhood home of Lambton.

"I believe we are quite near Pemberley," Mr. Gardiner remarked, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Indeed, we are!" His wife remarked. "I should very much like to see it again, if it is not too much out of our way."

Mr. Gardiner consulted his map and determined that it would not take them more than a mile out of their way to see it.

“What do you recall of the place?” Elizabeth asked her aunt.

“I have not been there since I left to go away to school, but it was very grand. As beautiful as Chatsworth, if not more so,” Mrs. Gardiner answered. “And the woods are some of the finest in the county. A river runs through the property and feeds its lake, which I am told boasts excellent fishing.”

“Well, in that case, we had certainly better go!” Mr. Gardiner chuckled. He was an avid fisherman, though he seldom had the opportunity to enjoy it.

Jane smiled. “It all sounds marvelous.”

With nothing to impede their plans, they set off immediately after breakfast.

“You know, Lizzy, I believe your friend Mr. Wickham spent his whole childhood at Pemberley. His father was the steward.” Mrs. Gardiner remarked while they were in the carriage.

Elizabeth felt her cheeks grow warmer. Mr. Wickham’s good looks and charming manners had made a fine impression on all the ladies of Meryton when he joined the regiment that was quartered there the past autumn. Elizabeth could not help but like him also. He was friendly and easy to talk to, and though they had little in common, they always seemed to find plenty to converse about. But though she found his company pleasing and thoughts of him made her heart skip from time to time, she knew that her lack of dowry made it impossible that their relationship could ever be more than friendship. Besides that, her youngest sister, Lydia, was hopelessly infatuated with him. They had argued, more than once, because Mr. Wickham had given Elizabeth preference over Lydia at a gathering. Elizabeth hoped that in time, Lydia would come to realize, as she had, that there was little chance of either of them ever being given an offer of marriage from someone as poor as Mr. Wickham.

Despite all this, Elizabeth had a curiosity to see the home where Mr. Wickham had grown up. The carriage passed over a bridge fording the river Mrs. Gardiner had spoken of, and then the great house came into view. It was situated on a high elevation across a valley. The river wound down the valley, feeding into a shimmering lake that only magnified the beauty of the mansion overlooking it. Pemberley House was a magnificent stone structure built in the Palladian style with a triangular pediment and columns gracing the front of it.

“I believe you are right, Aunt Gardiner,” Elizabeth remarked, “Chatsworth House has its equal in Pemberley.”

Jane added, “Perhaps the builders took Chatsworth as their inspiration for Pemberley.”

“Or perhaps Pemberley was the inspiration for Chatsworth,” Elizabeth countered. “Which came first: the chicken, or the egg?” She grinned.

Aunt Gardiner gave a little laugh. “I do not know which was built first, so I cannot say. But in my opinion, Pemberley is just a *little* more superior.”

“Who is the master here?” Elizabeth wanted to know.

“Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, I believe.” Mrs. Gardiner replied. “His father and mother knew my parents.”

“Have you ever met the son?”

“Just once, when he was a lad.”

The carriage pulled up onto a wide, paved driveway beside the main entrance. After requesting to see the house, they were admitted to the hall. As they waited for the housekeeper, Elizabeth marveled at the room in which they were in. The ceiling rose up a full two stories and was covered in a fresco depicting life-size angels and biblical figures in various scenes. The walls, too, each held several massive, Renaissance-era paintings in the same style. The housekeeper entered, her heels clicking along the marbled parquet flooring. Her graying hair peeped out from beneath her white mob cap

and she had a friendly expression. She introduced herself as Mrs. Reynolds.

“Oh yes, the master does not return until tomorrow, so I would be happy to show you the house,” she confirmed, when asked whether or not they might be given a tour.

They followed her up a staircase lined with plush, red velvet. The main floor of the house was bustling with servants carrying on various tasks.

“You will have to excuse the state of things,” Mrs. Reynolds said. “The house has been vacant since last August. The master spends most of his time in London and other parts of the country. We only got word yesterday that he would be coming with a large house party, so we are making everything ready.”

“We seem to have come at a bad time, then,” Jane commented.

“Oh no, miss, we have it all well at hand!” Mrs. Reynolds answered cheerily. “But it is well that you have come today, for yesterday much of the furniture was covered up and the valuables put away in the attics. The house is in a much better state to be seen today.”

She showed them the formal drawing room filled with tasteful, Italian furnishings, a dining room decked in luxurious red carpets and curtains, an impressive library that made Elizabeth more than a little envious, and a music room with gilded walls that matched the gilded harp that stood as the focal point of the room.

“Who plays the harp?” Elizabeth asked.

“The master’s sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy. She is a most accomplished musician. She plays the pianoforte and sings as well.”

“It is a pity that your master is not at home more often to enjoy such splendid surroundings,” Mrs. Gardiner remarked.

Mrs. Reynolds nodded as she led them up another staircase. “Indeed. If he were to get married, then we might see more of him. But I do not know when that will ever be. Here is his picture now.” They had reached a long gallery filled with paintings of members of the Darcy family. Elizabeth looked at the portrait of Mr. Darcy that stood before them. She judged him to be a young man, perhaps in his late-twenties. He had dark, curly hair, a strong jaw, and a noble mien.

“What sort of man is Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth wanted to know.

“Oh, the very best!” Mrs. Reynolds exclaimed. “I never heard a cross word from him, and I have known him since he was four years old. He takes prodigious good care of all the servants and tenants under his domain, and you never saw a more attentive brother— or a better friend.”

Mr. Gardiner’s head bobbed. “He seems quite a good fellow!”

“Indeed!” Mrs. Reynolds agreed. “I hope you have the good fortune to meet him sometime.”

They passed a set of miniatures on display and Mrs. Gardiner leaned in closer to examine them.

“Here is one you might recognize, Lizzy and Jane.” She pointed to a small oval frame containing a portrait of a handsome young man. The artist had expertly captured his boyish smile.

“Why, it is Mr. Wickham!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

Mrs. Reynolds tilted her head in curiosity. “Do the young ladies know Mr. Wickham?”

They explained their acquaintance with him through his being stationed in their hometown.

“He was the son of our late steward,” Mrs. Reynolds said. “But I am afraid he has turned out very wild.”

Elizabeth wondered what she meant by that, but she did not think it proper to ask.

After they had seen all the principal public rooms of the house, Mrs. Reynolds turned them over to the care of the gardener to show them the gardens and the grounds.

The beauty of the gardens was beyond anything Elizabeth had ever witnessed. Even the other great houses they had visited were no match. A rose garden with every color of rose you could imagine. Fountain gardens, a hedge maze, a cottage garden, kitchen gardens, and numerous flower gardens. On one side of the house was a long pool with a fountain springing up from the center of it, in which you could see the reflection of the mansion behind it. All this in addition to the lake and the river and miles upon miles of wooded trails.

As they followed the gardener along the path that encircled the lake, Mr. Gardiner enjoyed the gleam of the trout, bass, and other fish living in the water.

Mrs. Gardiner smiled. "You wish you could be lazing by the bank catching a few of these, eh?" She teased him.

"Aye!" he chortled.

They neared the edge of the lake that was closest to the stables. The sound of hoofbeats reverberated off the pathway, precipitating the appearance of a rider through the break in the trees. He crossed over the same bridge that their carriage had passed earlier. As he neared the stables, he saw them, and tipped his hat to them.

"That be our master, Mr. Darcy," the gardener told them.

Elizabeth's brow wrinkled. "I thought he was not due until tomorrow."

"Perhaps he decided to come ahead of his guests," Jane suggested. "We ought to offer our greetings and apologize for intruding on his land."

The others agreed, and they walked towards the stables.

Mr. Darcy emerged a few minutes later on foot. He was even more handsome in the flesh than his painting had made him out to be. His hair, damp with moisture from his ride, had curled itself into tight ringlets beneath his fashionable D'orsay top hat. He wore a well-fitting jacket that hugged his athletic form. Elizabeth forced herself not to let her eyes linger on the buckskin leather breeches that clung to his shapely thighs like a second skin but to keep her gaze fixed on his face. His perfectly bow-shaped mouth turned upwards at the creases when he looked at her, causing Elizabeth's breath to quicken and her own mouth to break into a smile.

"Hullo there!" He greeted them, walking towards their group. His hailing them signaled that he was open to an introduction. Mr. Gardiner led the way, first presenting himself and his wife and then their two nieces.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Mr. Darcy bowed. "What brings you to this area?"

Mr. Gardiner explained that they had been touring Derbyshire the past few weeks and had wished to see the house.

"Of course, you are very welcome to," Mr. Darcy answered. "The house and grounds are open to you. Where are you all visiting from?"

They answered that the Bennet sisters were from Hertfordshire while Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner lived in London, but that Mrs. Gardiner had grown up in Lambton.

"In fact, I believe I met you once sir," Mrs. Gardiner said, "when you were just a boy. Though I doubt very much that you would remember me. I was Miss Clark then."

He asked her who her parents were, and then said, "Ah yes, I do seem to recall them, and I believe I recall you, ma'am. You came with the Davies and the Harris families for a picnic gathering. Charlie Davies and Rose Harris were there and we all played hide and seek together in the hedge maze.

“You do remember!” Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed in delight.

“Yes, in fact, Charlie and Rose will both be at the house party I am giving this week. They are married now, if you can believe it.”

Mrs. Gardiner was overjoyed. “I have not seen either of them since before my days at school. I am sad to say that we did not keep in touch. I would love to see them again and revisit the old days.”

“In that case, I must insist that you all come to dinner tomorrow evening, if you have the time. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to facilitate your reunion with your friends,” Mr. Darcy said.

His invitation was most agreeable to all. As he walked them to their carriage, Elizabeth said to him, “Our meeting you seems to be quite serendipitous, Mr. Darcy. I hope you know the joy you bring to my aunt in your inclusion of us in your gathering. I wonder whether we have any other mutual friends in common who will be at your party.”

He smiled. “Oh, probably not. My sister will be there with her companion, along with several of my friends from my university days. Where did you say you were from again, Miss Elizabeth?”

“My sister and I live at Longbourn, near Meryton, in Hertfordshire.”

“Hertfordshire, yes. My good friend Charles Bingley leased a place near there last autumn.”

Jane’s eyes shot over to them at the mention of that name. Elizabeth’s mouth parted slightly as she looked at her sister in response.

Elizabeth turned her face back towards Mr. Darcy. “We had the good fortune to become acquainted with Mr. Bingley during that time.” She forced herself to smile.

“Did you!” Darcy exclaimed. “As it happens, Bingley wrote to me yesterday that he and his whole family are to join our party. That is why I rode out a day early to ensure that my house was prepared for the additional guests. I am sure that he will be pleased to see you again.”

“I do hope so, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth answered. Jane could only nod in response. Elizabeth took Jane’s hand and squeezed it before entering the carriage.

Mr. Darcy bid them all farewell. “Until tomorrow, then.” He tipped his hat.

“Until tomorrow, Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth said through the open window of the carriage as the driver shut their door and climbed up to his seat.



Jane was silent all the way to the Rose and Crown at Lambton where they would be staying. Once they were alone, Elizabeth spoke to her. Sitting down on the bed beside Jane, she patted her back.

“I know that you are nervous about meeting Mr. Bingley again.”

“Oh Lizzy. I feel so foolish! I had thought that by now I could meet Mr. Bingley with indifference, but when faced with the prospect of actually seeing him, I feel like an animal about to be gutted.”

“I can only imagine your wretchedness,” Elizabeth tried to sympathize.

“I wish that we had not already accepted Mr. Darcy’s invitation before learning that Mr. Bingley is to be there,” Jane lamented.

Elizabeth shrugged. “I suppose you could always pretend to be ill.”

“No,” Jane shook her head. “If Aunt Gardiner thought that I was ill, she would stay behind and care for me and then she would miss the opportunity to meet her old friends.”

“I wish I knew why he did not call on me or make any attempt to see me while I was staying in London last winter.” Jane rubbed her arm absently, her eyes wandering up to the ceiling as she blinked back tears. “I feel it will be so embarrassing to see him.”

Elizabeth folded her arms. “It is Caroline Bingley who should feel embarrassed to see *you*,” she declared. “After so pointedly giving you the cut when you did everything you ought to in order to maintain the acquaintance: writing to her, calling on her, leaving your card. It took her weeks to even return your call.”

“Yes, but she said that she had numerous engagements which kept her from returning it sooner.”

“Not a fair excuse,” Elizabeth argued. “Had she planned to keep your acquaintance, a brief call would have sufficed, or even a note. And even when she finally called, she made it all too clear that she did not intend to continue the friendship. What was it she said to you again? Refresh my memory.”

“It has been too long, I forget the exact words. Something about how deeply she regretted being behind on her correspondence. And then when I remarked that I hoped we might meet again before the Season ended, she replied that she hoped so too, but that she was not certain it would be possible, as their social calendar was very full. But I am sure that someone of her social standing must have many engagements during the Season to keep her busy.”

Elizabeth shook her head and clicked her tongue. “Jane, Jane. Always too ready to forgive everybody’s faults. I have always said that a true friend will make time for those that they care about.”

“Then perhaps that explains why her brother never visited me.” Jane sighed.

“I would not be at all surprised if he was ignorant of your even being in town. I would wager that Miss Bingley and her sister deliberately kept it from him.”

“We cannot know that for certain. What if he did know, and he simply did not wish to do anything about it? When I inquired after her brother, Caroline mentioned that he was doing well, and that he was spending much time in the company of an heiress, who they hoped he might make a good match with. What if the reason he never called on me is that he found someone else?”

The pain in Jane’s voice nearly broke Elizabeth’s heart. She took her hand. “If he had found someone else, we would have read about it in the papers. Let us not lose hope yet. Tomorrow, we shall have a better understanding of where things may stand, after we have seen Mr. Bingley again for ourselves.”

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About the Author

Amanda Kai's love of period dramas and classic literature inspires her historical romances and other romances. She is the author of several stories inspired by Jane Austen, including *Not In Want of a Wife*, *Elizabeth's Secret Admirer*, and *Marriage and Ministry*. Prior to becoming an author, Amanda enjoyed a successful career as a professional harpist, and danced ballet for twenty years. When she's not diving into the realm of her imagination, Amanda lives out her own happily ever after in Texas with her husband and three children.