

Elizabeth Bennet's
INHERITANCE



LARABA KENDIG

Elizabeth Bennet's Inheritance

A Pride and Prejudice Variation

By Laraba Kendig

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Epilogue 1](#)

[Epilogue 2](#)

[Epilogue 3](#)

[Sneak Peek of *The Second Mr. Darcy*](#)

[A Darcy and Elizabeth friends-to-lovers story.](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Regency Romance Books by Laraba Kendig](#)

[Note from the Author](#)

[Dedication](#)

Chapter 1

Longbourn

6th February, 1812

The view out of the drawing room windows was not a cheerful one. The grasses lay dead and brown on gray dust, the trees bare and leafless and occasionally shivering in a chill wind. Twiggy bushes and shrubs hunkered low to the ground beneath a dismal cloudy sky.

In contrast, indoors was delightfully pleasant. A generous fire warmed the room, where Mrs. Bennet reclined gracefully across the sofa as she dozed. Lydia and Kitty had both claimed chairs near the fire, each happily reading a novel from the lending library in Meryton, occasionally giggling or sighing depending on where they were in their respective plots.

Elizabeth sat near the window, a basket of sewing forgotten at her feet. Her attention was alternately on the dark skeletal trees stark against the pale sky outside and her sisters as they whispered together about their books. Her mother gave a faint snore, and Elizabeth glanced over, noting with vague sympathy that Mrs. Bennet's famed nerves must have kept her awake again the previous night.

A tap at the door drew her attention, and she looked over as their butler entered with a silver tray expertly balanced on his hand. "A letter for you, Miss Elizabeth," he said properly, crossing to her and lowering his tray.

"Thank you," Elizabeth replied, taking the letter eagerly. It was, she observed, from her Aunt Madeline Gardiner, who lived in London with her husband and four children. At the moment, Elizabeth's elder sister, Jane, was staying with the Gardiners, and Elizabeth was eager to hear further word of her

beloved sister, who had suffered a heartbreak the previous autumn.

She broke the wax seal, spread open the pages and turned a little in order to avail herself of the light coming through the window.

3rd February, 1812

Dear Lizzy,

I do not know how long I will have before the children want me, so I will write immediately of Jane as I know you are concerned about her. You are quite correct to believe that she suffers periods of despondency over the desertion of Mr. Bingley. I do feel quite badly for her; she has such a tender heart.

I was here, of course, when the young man's sister came to visit. Based on Miss Bingley's behavior, I would say that Jane is well served at being separated from her former beau. What an intolerable woman! She was rude to my maids and haughty and discourteous to me and Jane. I understand that Mr. Bingley is substantially different from his sister, and I suppose I can believe it. Siblings do vary so much, do they not?

Now, having briefly discussed Jane's difficulties in romance, may I ask a gentle question about Mr. George Wickham? Certainly a most handsome and charming man, but given his lack of fortune – well, Lizzy, I hope that you are not encouraging him too much. He cannot support you or any children, and it would be most unwise to form a strong attachment to the young...

Oh! I was just interrupted, and I have shocking news. Well, I am surprised, though perhaps I ought not to be. But I am babbling, and in a letter, which is quite absurd. Dear Lizzy, I just received word that Annabelle Simpson is dead. I know you will grieve as I do – such a fine old lady, who, I am confident, derived great delight from your extensive

correspondence in the last years. Do you remember how you used to write very seriously of the kittens in the stable and your antics in climbing oak trees? I visited her only two weeks ago, and she seemed cheerful enough, though frail. Her heart had been giving her trouble, it seemed, but I never imagined... She lived a good long life; she was almost seventy years of age! I am pleased to know that she is with our Lord, but I will miss her wry wit.

The children do want me now.

With much love,

Madeline Gardiner

Elizabeth bit her lip, gulped, and felt tears start in her eyes. Annabelle Simpson was dead? She could immediately conjure up, in her mind's eye, the straight backed form of the wealthy old lady who had proven an amusing and faithful correspondent these last years. Elizabeth would miss her comments on London life and the foibles of mankind.

“Lizzy, why are you crying? Is something wrong with Jane?” Mrs. Bennet suddenly cried out, causing Elizabeth to jerk in surprise.

“No, no,” she replied, turning to face her mother, who was now sitting up and staring at her with worried eyes. “No, Jane is well enough.”

“But I suppose she has not seen Mr. Bingley?” the lady of the house demanded.

“No, she has not,” Elizabeth replied and then, eager to head off any wailing about Mr. Bingley's desertion, continued, “Aunt Gardiner tells me that Mrs. Annabelle Simpson has died.”

“Oh!” Mrs. Bennet replied, her eyes shifting back and forth rapidly. Elizabeth, who knew her mother very well, knew that the lady wished to complain about Mr. Bingley's betrayal but also was curious about the death of Mrs. Simpson, even

though the woman was a comparative stranger to the matron of Longbourn.

“Who is Mrs. Annabelle Simpson?” Kitty asked curiously, which tipped the scales in Elizabeth’s preferred direction.

“Oh, she was an elderly relation of your Aunt Gardiner,” Mrs. Bennet said, “though I do not entirely remember how they were related.”

“Mrs. Simpson is – was – Aunt Gardiner’s great-aunt on her father’s side,” Elizabeth explained.

“She must have been very old,” Kitty remarked.

“She was almost seventy years of age,” Elizabeth agreed.

“Have I ever met her?” the girl asked, her brow knitted in thought.

“No,” her elder sister replied. “I visited her a number of times while spending time with our London relatives, but I have not seen her in two or three years. I wrote to her regularly, however, and she wrote back with equal regularity. I will miss our correspondence.”

“You were writing to an old woman?” Lydia asked, tossing her dark curls. “How very dull!”

“Mrs. Simpson was not dull in the least,” Elizabeth replied, smothering her usual indignation over Lydia’s cavalier attitude toward the elderly. “She had quite an interesting life.”

“A scandalous one, you mean,” Mrs. Bennet huffed.

This, naturally enough, caused her two youngest daughters to perk up in excitement.

“Scandalous?” Lydia demanded, her blue eyes now gleaming with excitement. “How was it scandalous?”

“I do not remember the details,” her mother admitted.

“I do, and it was not so terribly scandalous,” Elizabeth said. “It is merely – well, Aunt Gardiner’s paternal grandfather was the fourth son of a baron, while Mrs. Simpson was the baron’s only daughter, born rather late in his life. There was not a great deal of money in the family, and Mrs. Simpson, thanks to her lack of dowry, was unable to garner an offer from a rich gentleman. She chose instead to marry a wealthy widower who had two sons from his first marriage and was also a merchant. Society was scandalized, but Mrs. Simpson preferred a comfortable life to genteel poverty. Moreover, she and her husband were happy together.”

Lydia wrinkled her nose and said, “I cannot imagine marrying an old man for his money! I intend to marry a handsome officer who wears a red coat!”

“Only if he has enough money, Lydia,” her mother said reprovingly. “It is all very well to marry for love if the gentleman has sufficient funds, but you would not enjoy mending your own clothes and cooking your own meals, would you?”

This was remarkably sensible advice, especially since Mrs. Bennet was so violently eager to marry off her daughters that she often drove possible suitors away with her enthusiasm. Indeed, that was why Mr. George Wickham, the most charming and handsome man of Elizabeth’s acquaintance, was not an eligible suitor.

Elizabeth blew out a breath and forced herself to relax her tightened fists. Mr. Wickham *should* be an eligible suitor, but he had been unhappily used by another handsome man of her acquaintance, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley. Mr. Wickham, godson to Mr. Darcy’s father, was intended for the church, and indeed the elder Mr. Darcy had set aside a valuable living in Derbyshire for his godson. But when the living had fallen vacant only a few years previously, Mr. Darcy had given it to another.

“I so wish that Mr. Wickham had money,” Lydia exclaimed in a strange echo of Elizabeth’s thoughts. “He is

quite the most handsome, charming man I have ever met, and such a fine dancer!”

“He is wooing Mary King now, though,” Kitty remarked.

“Of course he is, but only because she recently inherited ten thousand pounds!” the youngest Miss Bennet declared. “It is quite shocking, really; she has so many freckles!”

“Handsome young men must have something to live on as well as plain ones,” Elizabeth pointed out regretfully.

“The world is so unfair sometimes!” Lydia complained, and Elizabeth could only sigh in agreement.

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Drawing Room

The Next Day

The door to the drawing room opened, and Mr. Bennet entered, which provoked his wife and four younger daughters to look up in surprise. It still lacked two hours to dinner, and the master of Longbourn invariably spent the majority of the day closeted in his library, away from the chattering of his wife and younger daughters. Elizabeth often spent time in the library with him, but today she had not. She was grieving over the loss of Mrs. Simpson, and her father’s sardonic view of life and death would not be a great comfort.

“Elizabeth,” Mr. Bennet said, “will you please join me in the study?”

“Of course, Father,” Elizabeth replied, setting aside her needlework, standing up, and shaking out her skirts.

“Is something the matter, Mr. Bennet?” Mrs. Bennet asked fretfully.

“No, nothing is wrong,” her husband replied. “Come along, Lizzy.”

She did so, departing with Lydia and Kitty’s giggles in her wake. Her youngest sisters seemed to find amusement in the most ridiculous of events, which was, in Elizabeth’s view, a great pity. She herself liked to laugh, but not at everything and anything.

She followed her father down the corridor that led to the study, which was adjacent to the library. Mr. Bennet opened the study door, and Elizabeth passed through and stopped in joyful surprise.

“Uncle Gardiner!” she exclaimed, and then rushed forward to embrace her favorite uncle. “Oh, what a delightful surprise this is!”

She stepped back, her eyes suddenly widening in distress. “Is it Jane? Or Aunt Gardiner or the children? Has something happened?”

“Nothing bad has happened, Elizabeth,” Mr. Gardiner said immediately and forced a smile. Elizabeth, regarding him carefully, noticed that his forehead was creased in thought. But Mr. Gardiner was a truthful man, so she knew that Jane and her other relations were well.

“Why are you here, sir?” she asked, taking a seat next to the fire, which was crackling pleasantly.

Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner took seats in chairs across from her, and Gardiner, after blowing out a breath, said, “Elizabeth, my dear, Madeline sent you a letter recently. Did you receive it?”

“I received it yesterday,” Elizabeth said, and sighed mournfully. “Mrs. Simpson is dead.”

“Yes, she is,” Mr. Gardiner agreed, and tilted his head thoughtfully. “You are grieved?”

“I am. I met her in person less than a dozen times, but we had a robust correspondence for the last eight years. She

was such an interesting woman, and so kind to write regularly to a twelve year old as if she were quite a young lady.”

She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and then managed a shaky smile. “Yes, I will miss her.”

“That explains it, at least partially,” Mr. Bennet said cryptically.

“Explains what?” Elizabeth asked.

“It appears that you have inherited some money from the lady,” her father said.

“Yes, you have,” her uncle said. “Yesterday I met with Mrs. Simpson’s solicitor, a Mr. Harris, at his request, and you are a legatee in the lady’s will, as is Jane.”

Elizabeth’s brows raised in surprise. “Truly? That seems startling, as we are not even blood relations.”

“Truly,” Mr. Gardiner said, and cleared his throat before saying, “Mrs. Simpson left you seventy thousand pounds.”

Elizabeth froze, goggled, and finally gasped out, “*What?*”

“Elizabeth has inherited seven thousand pounds?” Mr. Bennet demanded, his usually sardonic expression replaced by open astonishment.

“Elizabeth has inherited *seventy* thousand pounds,” Mr. Gardiner corrected. “*Seventy* thousand.”

Elizabeth swayed a little and reached out her hands to brace herself on the arms of her chair. “That ... that is impossible.”

Chapter 2

The Library

Longbourn

Gertrude pushed the door of the library and stepped in cautiously. She had been instructed by the housekeeper, Mrs. Hill, to clean the grate of the fireplace in the library because the master was currently busy elsewhere.

Gertrude knew, as did everyone in Longbourn, that Mr. Bennet was accustomed to spending every spare hour in the library and was almost always settled near the library fire at this hour of the day. Mr. Bennet was not an unkind master, but she had no desire to intrude on him unnecessarily.

But Mrs. Hill was correct; the room was empty, though the door to the adjacent office was cracked open, and she could hear Mr. Bennet and Miss Lizzy speaking with an unknown gentleman.

Gertrude hurried over to the fireplace along the east wall and began sweeping it. It was not a task that required much attention, and thus the girl found herself listening vaguely, and then intently, to the conversation next door in the study.

“Mrs. Simpson left you seventy thousand pounds,” the stranger declared.

“*What?*” cried Miss Elizabeth, obviously in disbelief.

“Elizabeth has inherited seven thousand pounds?” asked the master in unmistakable amazement.

“Elizabeth has inherited seventy thousand,” the unknown voice declared. “*Seventy* thousand.”

Gertrude gasped aloud, and then covered her mouth with one hand. Seventy thousand pounds? She could not even

imagine so great a sum as one thousand pounds, but seventy? Miss Elizabeth would be very rich indeed.

She finished sweeping the fireplace and hurried quietly out of the library, smiling to herself. She liked Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth very much; both were kind to the maids and did not make enormous messes for the servants to clean up. Miss Mary was also pleasant, but the youngest two Misses Bennet were very annoying indeed, scattering clothing around, romping around in light clothing and getting it dirty, and so on.

She knew that the Bennet girls would lose Longbourn when their father died, but with so vast a fortune, Miss Elizabeth would be well enough, as would her mother and sisters.

It was wonderful news.

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The Study

Mr. Gardiner sighed and said, "I am quite as shocked as you both are, I assure you."

"I am not even Mrs. Simpson's blood relation!" Elizabeth repeated, her face pale. "It does not make sense!"

"The will itself is, of course, with Mrs. Simpson's solicitor, but I remember the gist of it," her uncle said. "Mrs. Simpson was very fond of both Madeline and you, and made special note in an accompanying document that neither of you ever asked for money. Apparently she was the subject of multiple demands from various relations over the years, and grew quite weary of it."

"Does this mean that Aunt Gardiner inherited money as well?" Elizabeth asked, her brow furrowed.

“Oh yes, I should have mentioned that,” her uncle said, and then cleared his throat and added sheepishly, “but I confess to some discomfort. The truth is that Madeline inherited ninety thousand pounds and the house on Half Moon Street from her great-aunt.”

Mr. Bennet, who had been doing rapid sums in his head, said, “Elizabeth, your bequest will bring you almost three thousand pounds in the four percents!”

Elizabeth wiped her mouth with her handkerchief, more for something to do than anything else, and said, “That... it seems impossible, Uncle Gardiner. What of her other relations? Surely they deserve the money more than I do!”

“Madeline and you are the primary beneficiaries,” her uncle said, “but Mrs. Simpson left a few hundred pounds here and there for other relatives and longtime servants, and Jane received three thousand pounds.”

“Oh, I am glad she remembered Jane!” Elizabeth cried out. “I know that they did not know one another particularly well, but no one is more deserving than Jane.”

“Is there any chance that anyone will contest the will?” Mr. Bennet demanded, having partially recovered from the shock of learning that his second daughter was now wealthier than he was.

“Mr. Harris assured me that the legal documents are watertight,” Mr. Gardiner said. “But let me explain some of the background. Mr. Simpson, who has been dead for twenty odd years, was previously married and his first wife birthed two fine sons. She tragically died of consumption many years ago, and Mr. Simpson married Miss Annabelle Beaumont, daughter of Lord Beaumont, baron, a few years later. The new Mrs. Simpson was a good deal younger than her husband, and thus it is not surprising that she was widowed while still middle aged.”

Mr. Gardiner paused to see whether his audience of two had any questions, but both remained silent, their entire

attention fixed on him.

“When Mr. Simpson died,” he continued, “he left his property equally divided between his two sons and his wife. Mrs. Simpson was a canny woman and invested wisely, partly with me and my business in these last years, and also lived a moderately frugal life for a woman of means. Her stepsons were more reckless, unfortunately.”

“Unfortunate, if not surprising,” Mr. Bennet muttered.

“Quite. In the five and twenty years since she was widowed, Mrs. Simpson transformed a large sum into a substantial fortune. During her lifetime, she was asked by her stepsons, and her stepsons’ relations, for money, and was moderately open handed in the beginning, but she cut them off when they continued behaving recklessly. She cared deeply for you and your aunt, and decided to make you her primary beneficiaries.”

Silence fell for a minute, and Elizabeth, who prided herself on her quick response to situations, found herself struck dumb with disbelief.

“The money, where is it?” Mr. Bennet finally inquired.

“Much of it is in government securities and some is in investments. I have been named executor of the will, along with Mrs. Simpson’s man of business, and will be responsible for looking after Lizzy’s bequest until she is of age.”

Elizabeth felt herself relax a little at this. She would turn one and twenty in five months, and it was a relief to know that she was not actually mistress of a great fortune at the moment, though she would be soon.

“Well, Elizabeth,” her father said, “congratulations on your sudden acquisition of wealth.”

“Thank you?” she replied, sounding uncertain. She chuckled and said, “I... it is such a shock, Father. I still wonder if I am dreaming.”

“I understand,” her uncle remarked with a rueful smile. “I am considerably older than you are, and I keep pinching myself. We were very comfortable in the past, but this inheritance will change our lives considerably, I hope for the better.”

“You hope?” Mr. Bennet asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“What is it that Christ said? *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God?* Of course, this surprise bequest is wonderful, but there will doubtless be challenges as well.”

“Like indigent relatives knocking on your door?” Mr. Bennet mused.

“Yes, exactly. Madeline and I both have cousins and nephews and nieces who need financial assistance, and will have to be sensible about using our new fortune wisely. I do not wish to encourage a dissolute lifestyle in anyone.”

The tradesman sighed, shook his head, and turned toward Elizabeth. “So that is the situation. You still have some months before you can access the principal, but I would be glad to arrange for you to use some of the money as you wish, Lizzy.”

“Oh!” his niece replied. She pondered for a moment and then said, “I do not wish for any funds now, Uncle. I know you will look after my affairs well enough, and I am still so bewildered over what has come to pass that I cannot think clearly.”

“That is very sensible,” her uncle declared, and her father, who had been stroking his chin thoughtfully, said, “Do you wish for your mother and sisters to know of your new riches, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth groaned, wrinkled her nose, and asked, “What do you think, Father?”

“It would be unwise to tell them,” Mr. Bennet replied promptly. “Your mother and sisters will endlessly beg for money for ribbons and lace and new dresses and the like.”

Elizabeth turned questioning eyes on her uncle, who said, "I agree that it would be unwise to share news of your sudden acquisition of wealth with my sister and my younger nieces, though perhaps for different reasons. As a rich single woman, you will be the subject of great interest from gentlemen in desire of a wife."

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single lady in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a husband?" Elizabeth suggested, arching one eyebrow.

Both men laughed, and her father remarked, "Very good, my dear, very good. Your uncle is quite right."

"Do give me a moment to think, please," Elizabeth requested.

Her male relatives lapsed into silence for a full five minutes, until finally Elizabeth said, "I will not tell them of the entire sum, but I would like to tell my mother and sisters that I have inherited money from Mrs. Simpson which will provide close to seven hundred pounds a year in income. That will comfort my mother. In order to keep the begging down, perhaps we can tell them that I do not yet have access to the money?"

"Yes, that is quite in order," her uncle remarked. "The money will be tied up for some time as everything is sorted out."

"Mamma is very worried about the entail, you know," Elizabeth said, her dark eyes solemn. "If something were to happen to Father..."

"They would all be cast into the hedgerows," Mr. Bennet finished, with a return to his own sardonic manner.

"You know that your Uncle Phillips and I would not permit such a thing," Mr. Gardiner said sternly.

Elizabeth smiled at him gratefully. "I know you would do what you could, but you have children of your own, and they are your primary responsibility. If I truly am going to be

mistress of nearly three thousand pounds a year, I will be able to care for my mother and sisters with ease, and I will do so.”

“You may find that more difficult than you imagine,” Mr. Bennet said in the driest tone his voice was capable of conveying.

Elizabeth’s expression hardened, and her chin came up. “With all due respect, Father, I believe that I am more stubborn than you are regarding such things.”

Mr. Bennet, who had already been shocked today, was shocked again. Elizabeth was his favorite daughter, and they usually coexisted happily, and yet there was a thread of indignation in that statement. He turned toward his brother-in-law, whose own expression was carefully blank.

“I do not suppose you understand how difficult it is to withstand the pleading of your mother and sisters,” he said truculently.

Elizabeth stared at him for a moment and then said, “I suppose I do not. But since I too have been living with uncertainty about my future when you die, Father, I have an extra incentive to manage money well.”

Her father looked genuinely amazed at this, which Elizabeth found both surprising and exasperating. She was an intelligent woman, and knew well that it would be difficult for her mother to support all five of her daughters on a mere two hundred pounds a year, which was all that they would have as interest from the five thousand pounds of her mother’s marriage portion. Longbourn, entailed away from the female line, would go to a distant cousin, Mr. Collins. No, not difficult – *impossible*, given that they had been raised in comparative luxury. Elizabeth had refused to give in to despair, but yes, the situation was dire as all five daughters remained unwed, and her father grew older and older.

“If you were so very concerned about your future,” her father said irritably, “why did you refuse Mr. Collins’s offer?”

Elizabeth felt a flare of genuine anger and forced herself to breathe in and out a few times before she said, “Mr. Collins is a sycophantic fool, Father, and he would have driven me entirely mad. I did not respect him, I did not like him, and certainly I could never love him. I am thankful that you supported my refusal to marry the man, and I thought you understood why I did.”

“Of course I did, Lizzy,” her father replied, and reached out to take her hands in his own. “You would have been completely miserable as his wife. I confess I did not realize that you were so very concerned...”

He trailed away, shook his head, and then turned an apologetic look on Mr. Gardiner, who was watching the scene with studious calm.

“Brother,” Mr. Bennet said, and forced himself to smile. “I am certain you are weary after your trip and wish to refresh yourself. I will have one of the maids escort you to your chamber. Perhaps you can come down to the drawing room in an hour and we will tell the rest of the family about Elizabeth’s inheritance?”

“That sounds excellent,” Mr. Gardiner agreed, and Elizabeth stood up and said, “Please allow me to take my uncle upstairs, and then I will take the hour to rest and reflect in my bedchamber. I am rather overcome.”

“That is completely understandable,” her father said.

Chapter 3

Library

Darcy House

London

“In March or early April, it is advisable to shear the Cotswold ewes in preparation for lambing. The Cotswold ewes generally birth...”

Elizabeth Bennet stood a few feet inside the breakfast room at Netherfield, her cheeks flushed pink, her fine eyes brightened with exercise. Her sensible pelisse was spattered with mud, and her dusky curls were windswept under her warm cap.

“I am here to care for my sister,” she said to Miss Bingley. “May I see her?”

Darcy shook his head and started reading once more. “The Cotswold ewes generally birth one to three lambs...”

“Do you not feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel?”

She looked up at him, her dark eyebrows lifted, her eyes dancing, but did not speak. He stared at her in astonishment and repeated the question.

“Oh,” the lady replied, her exquisite lips curling up in amusement, “I heard you before; but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply. You wanted me, I know, to say ‘Yes,’ that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste; but I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes and

cheating a person of their premeditated contempt. I have, therefore, made up my mind to tell you that I do not want to dance a reel at all; and now despise me if you dare."

Darcy stared down at her, his heart in his throat.

"Indeed I do not dare," he said.

"Cotswold ewes generally birth one to three lambs, and those with triplets..."

With a huff of frustration, Fitzwilliam Darcy, master of Pemberley, set the book aside carefully – even when he was distressed, he always put books down with respect – and leaned against his favorite wingbacked chair in his favorite room in Darcy House. He adored libraries, and was pleased to be master of not one but two fine ones; this one, though only a quarter of the size of the library at Pemberley, was full of some of the finest books available to a wealthy gentleman.

Usually, he could read anything, even a treatise on sheep, with rapt attention, but today, like so many other days of late, his thoughts continually shifted to Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn, second daughter of a country gentleman and a solicitor's daughter, impecunious, with manners that were not those of the fashionable world.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet, with her fine eyes and pleasing figure, with her vigor, with her arch smile and clever speech, teased Darcy when no one, not even Bingley, dared.

This could not be love, of course. He was far too sensible a gentleman, with far too great an understanding of his own consequence and responsibility toward his family, to fall in love with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

No, it was merely that she was so very unusual. The ladies of the ton, the unmarried ones, anyway, either pursued him or ignored him. The latter group was largely composed of the highborn daughters of dukes and marquises, though in truth, even some of those young women chased him. Yes, he, with his handsome face and figure, his vast fortune, his great

estate, and close connections to the Earl of Matlock, was a great matrimonial prize.

Elizabeth had never mentioned his wealth, never hung on his arm or complimented his writing. Did she know how very effective her manners were in capturing his interest?

Probably? He hoped she had not been too distressed when he left Netherfield a few months previously. She must have known that, in spite of his obvious attraction toward her, there was really no hope of an offer of marriage. Their positions in life were too disparate.

It would fade, this bizarre, uncomfortable longing to return to Hertfordshire, to ride to Longbourn, to ask her father for his blessing, to take her as his wife.

Surely it would fade?

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Half Moon Street

London

Mrs. Madeline Gardiner squared her shoulders and marched up the shallow steps to the front door of the house on Half Moon Street. Her eldest niece, Jane Bennet, followed her up, though more slowly, as she took her time looking at the neighboring homes. It was a fashionable neighborhood, Half Moon Street, and substantially more genteel than Gracechurch Street.

Mrs. Gardiner knocked on the door with her fist, as the knocker had been taken down, and a full two minutes later, the door opened to reveal a clean, well-kept maid of some five and twenty years, who looked bewildered but said courteously, "I apologize, Madam, but the mistress of the house is not available."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled and said, "I am the new mistress, actually. I am Mrs. Madeline Gardiner, and Mrs. Simpson bequeathed this house to me in her will."

"Oh!" the woman cried out. "Oh, my apologies, Mum. I will ... please do step in, and I will summon the housekeeper."

The two ladies stepped into the small entrance room, and the maid shut the door behind them and scurried off.

Jane and Mrs. Gardiner looked about with interest as they divested themselves of their outer wrappings and hats. The furniture was sturdy and scrupulously clean, the parquet floor was unsmudged by mud or dirt, and the porcelain vase of dried roses set on the small entry table was free of any dust or crumbling. Beneath the flowers, the empty silver card tray was polished and shining, reflecting the roses above it.

Mrs. Gardiner looked up from her examination as a middle aged woman hurried into the room, an anxious expression on her face, and exclaimed, "Mrs. Gardiner, my profound apologies. I did not realize you intended to visit today."

The new owner of the house bestowed a warm smile on the woman and said, "Indeed, I did not know myself, but it was a lovely day for February, and my children were content with their nursemaids, and I decided to make a hasty trip here with my eldest niece. But please, I know we have met before, but I confess to having forgotten your name?"

"I am Mrs. Ripley, Madame."

"Mrs. Ripley, my niece, Jane, and I wish to walk around the house and inspect it. I visited my great aunt many times, but never went upstairs."

"Would you like me to accompany you, Madame?"

"Oh no, that is not necessary. Would it be possible for Jane and me to have tea after we have completed our tour?"

"Oh yes, certainly! Would you like tea in the drawing room or the dining parlor?"

“Oh, the drawing room, I think, and if the fire has not been started, could you arrange to have it lit?”

“Of course,” Mrs. Ripley replied and hurried off.

“Shall we start on this level?” Madeline suggested.

Arm in arm, the two women wandered from one room to the next. They started in the drawing room, with its delicate mauve and hints of purple, with classical sturdy furniture and a simple, currently unlit, fireplace. A sitting room was to the left of the drawing room, made up in glorious peach, with comfortable chairs and sofas. Jane wandered over to examine a set of porcelain figurines while Madeline Gardiner ran a thoughtful finger across the clean mantel and checked the merrily ticking clock against her watch.

The next sitting room was all done up in shades and hues of blue, with a stunning seascape painting on one wall. Jane settled onto a settee and leaned back against a plump cushion, looking around. It was chilly in the room, with no fire lit, but utterly spotless. Mrs. Gardiner wandered over to examine the painting and the frame and found no dust there, either.

The elegant dining room and the study, also on the first floor, were equally well-maintained. The sturdy oaken desk was polished, and Mrs. Gardiner took a moment to browse the books on the shelves behind it – mostly ledgers and accounting books, neatly organized by date. Jane settled into the leather-upholstered chair in front of the desk with only the slightest creak; it had likely not been replaced since Mrs. Simpson’s husband had passed on to his reward, but it had been built to last and last it had.

Madeline Gardiner smiled over at her. “Well, Jane, what do you think?”

“I think that the servants have been commendably diligent,” Jane remarked, looking around.

“Yes,” her aunt agreed. “I am optimistic at what we will find upstairs.”

As they exited from the office, a young maid was emerging from the basement staircase across from them. Mrs. Gardiner held out a detaining hand and said, "Excuse me..."

"Sally, mum," the girl replied as she dipped into a curtsey.

"Sally." Mrs. Gardiner gestured at the stairs. "What is down here?"

The maid glanced behind herself briefly. "The kitchen, mum, and the servants' quarters beyond that."

"Very good, thank you," Mrs. Gardiner said and looked to her niece. "Jane, I think we should inspect the kitchen as well."

Jane nodded and followed her aunt down. Mrs. Bennet was rarely involved in the operations of the kitchen, preferring to give orders to their cook, but Jane herself understood the necessity of a well-working kitchen.

It was the warmest room they had yet visited and hummed with activity, and Jane and Mrs. Gardiner stood out of the way, observing quietly. The cook was a competent and brusque woman, ordering about her underlings who scurried quickly to obey while the midday meal took swift shape beneath their hands. "Tea will be ready for you, mum," the cook assured her new mistress and turned to give orders to a young scullery maid.

Mrs. Gardiner, content, ascended back to the main house.

There were five bedrooms upstairs, starting with the master's bedroom, long-empty, the furniture covered by slightly dusty Holland covers but the windows clean. The mistress's suite, in pristine condition, was still filled with trinkets as though ready for its inhabitant's return at any moment. All three guest rooms were draped in white furniture covers, with a thin fine layer of dust settled across the mantel and window sashes.

Mrs. Gardiner shivered, looking around the last room. "Shall we go back down, Jane? I expect our tea is waiting."

Jane turned from where she had lifted one heavy white cover to peer at the sturdy vanity and mirror beneath and let it drop.

"Yes, let us go down," she agreed, lifting her skirts to cross the room. The floor had been swept, but not particularly recently; given that the room was unoccupied and closed up, there was little need. Jane glanced back as she attained the door; there was not enough dust for her to have left footprints.

When they descended to the hall below, young Sally was lingering near the door of the drawing room. She ducked her head shyly and trotted down towards the kitchen, her heels clicking softly across the parquet. Mrs. Gardiner pulled open the door to the pale purple room, and a welcome heat washed out. Both women hurried over to the fireplace, settling gratefully into seats near the cheerful blaze.

"This was my aunt's favorite chair," Madeline remarked nostalgically, leaning back against the dark leather wingbacked chair. "I remember seeing her sitting here with her embroidery in her hands, or at least until her rheumatism made it impossible."

"She was a very interesting lady," Jane said from her position on a small green settee, as she stretched her hands toward the fire. "It was fascinating hearing her stories of her times in France before the Wars."

"Yes, she was a fine woman," her aunt agreed and wiped a tear away from her eye. "I will miss her."

Jane gazed on Mrs. Gardiner with sympathetic concern and said, "I am so very sorry, Aunt."

"She is better off where she is, of course," her aunt said. "She was failing this last year, you know. She told me she was ready to join her husband in Heaven, but I was very fond of her. In any case, I did wish to ask how you feel about

Elizabeth's bequest being so very large compared to your own. Does that bother you?"

"Bother me?" Miss Bennet repeated, her blue eyes wide with bewilderment. "I had no anticipation that I would receive *anything* from Mrs. Simpson. Of course I am not bothered in the least, but instead, I am extremely grateful."

The door opened at this juncture, and the young maid entered with a tea tray, with Mrs. Ripley behind her. Madeline gestured toward a small table, and the maid carefully lowered the tea tray, then stepped back.

"Thank you," Mrs. Gardiner said with a smile at the girl, and then turned her attention on Mrs. Ripley. "I would like to speak to you before leaving for Cheapside. Are you available now?"

"Yes, Madame," she replied in a composed tone. "Go along, Sally."

The maid nodded and departed hastily, and Mrs. Gardiner said, "Please do sit down, Mrs. Ripley."

"I would rather stand," the woman stated, and folded her hands in front of her.

"As you wish," Madeline replied, and poured Jane a cup of tea with two lumps of sugar, and herself a cup of tea with milk. "Mrs. Ripley, my niece and I are very impressed with how well the house has been maintained since Mrs. Simpson's death."

The housekeeper relaxed noticeably. "Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner."

"I am aware that Mrs. Simpson left you three hundred pounds in her will. Do you wish to continue working here, or do you intend to retire?"

"I would like to continue working and keep the three hundred pounds for my old age."

"Excellent. If you are willing, I would appreciate if you would continue to keep on here as housekeeper, and I will pay

your wages, along with the other servants. We are still uncertain exactly what we will do with the house, but clearly we do not wish to leave the building standing empty.”

“I am willing. Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner.”

Chapter 4

Drawing Room

Longbourn

“Therefore, on Elizabeth’s next birthday, she will be mistress of sufficient funds to provide seven hundred pounds a year in income,” Mr. Gardiner said.

Silence fell and Elizabeth, who had managed to regain at least some of her equanimity, allowed her eyes to drift from her mother to her three younger sisters. Mrs. Bennet was sitting bolt upright on her favorite blue chair, her eyes flared wide, her mouth gaping open.

Mary, the only Bennet daughter who had not inherited their mother’s beauty, was seated on a small chair near the door. Kitty and Lydia, curled up on a settee by the fire, were also open mouthed, but not surprisingly, it was Lydia, the youngest and most boisterous, who spoke first.

“Seven hundred a year! Oh, Lizzy, you are, if not rich, at least quite well off now! You will be able to buy anything you want! Oh, you will share some of it with us, will you not? Please?”

“Of course she will!” Mrs. Bennet cried out, having recovered sufficiently to speak. “Oh, we are saved, *saved!* Dear Lizzy, I am so thankful you did not accept Mr. Collins’s offer. It would have been dreadful if he had been given control over such a sum! Now my dear, you will want to buy some new clothes, and some for your sisters as well, and oh, you should rent a house in London for the Season...”

“Mrs. Bennet,” Mr. Bennet said from his position near the fireplace, and his tone was sufficiently stern that his womenfolk immediately looked at him. “This is Elizabeth’s money, not yours and not our other daughters’. Do not bother

thinking of myriad ways for Lizzy to spend the money, because I will not permit it.”

Elizabeth released a soft sigh of relief and surprise. She had expected her mother, always extravagant, to make plans to spend her inheritance, but she had not expected her father to come to her rescue.

“But Mr. Bennet!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “Lizzy owes it to us...”

“She does not,” her husband interrupted. “Furthermore, as your brother said a minute ago, Elizabeth’s bequest is currently held in trust until her birthday, so she cannot spend any of it now even if she wishes to.”

Mrs. Bennet looked indignant for a moment, but she recovered quickly to say, “That is quite all right; Lizzy will be one and twenty in August, so it is not a long wait. Oh, Elizabeth, how clever you were to write old Mrs. Simpson so regularly! We are saved from the hedgerows! Seven hundred pounds a year is a goodly sum, and with the two hundred from my marriage portion, it is enough to live on. Praise God! Hill! Hill! Do come here and listen to the good news! Miss Lizzy has inherited money!”

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Mrs. Bennet’s Dressing Room

That Night

Mrs. Bennet hummed to herself happily as Gertrude slipped into the room, shut the door behind her, and hurried over to help her mistress into her night clothes.

“Thank you, Gertrude,” the lady said after she had been extracted from her fashionable garments and wrapped in her comfortable dressing gown and sleeping cap.

“Of course, Madame,” Gertrude said, and then added, “may I say, many congratulations on Miss Elizabeth’s inheritance?”

“Thank you,” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “I have never been particularly good at sums, and do not know how much the principal is, but to have such a yearly sum is glorious!”

“Seventy thousand pounds,” Gertrude said, turning toward the fireplace and adding another log. “Which is about two thousand eight hundred pounds in the four percents.”

Gertrude, while only the daughter of a tenant farmer, was very good at sums.

She poked the fire until it flamed up, and then turned back to discover Mrs. Bennet staring at her with incredulous eyes.

“Is something wrong, Madame?” Gertrude asked worriedly.

“Seven hundred pounds,” the lady said faintly. “My brother said Elizabeth would earn seven hundred pounds a year.”

Gertrude felt herself turn ashen. She had assumed ... oh dear God...she had overheard ... she ought not to have said anything...

“I ... I must have heard incorrectly,” she said feebly, but it was too late. Mrs. Bennet rushed toward the door, flung it open, and raced down the corridor as fast as her legs could take her.

/

Elizabeth’s Bedchamber

Elizabeth sank down into her favorite chair by the fire in her room. She had already changed for the night and was now comfortably attired in her nightgown and dressing gown. Now she sat gazing at the dancing flames, relishing the warm coziness.

Her thoughts were whirling. It was so very strange to be suddenly wealthy! Not that she had control of the money yet, but her birthday was in but a few months. In August, she would gain control of more money than she had ever imagined.

She glanced around her room, her eyes traveling over the old familiar four-poster and the nightstand with its lone candlestick and book, the braided rag rug on the floor, and the wardrobe in its corner. She had never quite approved of her mother's penchant for redecorating entire rooms every few years, but now it occurred to her – she could replace all of it, if she wanted. She could fill her wardrobe with whatever clothes she pleased, along with new bonnets and boots. She could have as many wax candles as she liked in her bedroom and stay up reading late.

Elizabeth smiled at her own fancies. There were, of course, a great many opportunities available to her now; horses and carriages, extravagant gowns, a house in Town. She might even be able to enter high society, though perhaps not. Her wealth would be acceptable to the highborn nobles and gentry who enjoyed the London Season every spring, but her ties to trade would not be, nor did she have a sponsor.

In any case, she had no interest in spending extravagantly. While her father was correct that the money was hers, and hers alone, she loved her mother and sisters and had every intention of taking care of their needs in the future.

Needs, but not their wants, which were, in the case of Mrs. Bennet and the two youngest Bennets, endless. Mr. Bennet's income of two thousand pounds a year was very respectable, and yet the family always spent every pence of their income thanks to the extravagance of the mistress of the

home. Well, that was not entirely fair; Mr. Bennet spent his own share on books and the like.

She leaned back in her chair, grateful that only she herself, her father, and her Uncle and Aunt Gardiner knew the true value of her inheritance. Sensibility would fly quite out the window if her mother and younger sisters were to find out, and the whining and pleading would begin.

The door suddenly flung open, and Elizabeth leaped to her feet as Mrs. Bennet, dressed for bed, hurried in, her face alight with eagerness.

“Mamma, what is wrong?” Elizabeth asked worriedly.

“How much did Mrs. Simpson leave you?” the older lady demanded in a shrill tone.

Elizabeth blinked, swallowed, and said carefully, “I ... erm...”

“Was it seventy thousand pounds, Lizzy?” her mother asked, taking a few steps closer.

Elizabeth was not in the habit of telling lies, and her expression obviously spoke for her because Mrs. Bennet cried out, “Seventy thousand pounds? Oh Lizzy, how absolutely ... oh it is wonderful! I cannot even scold you for not telling me. Oh Lizzy, almost three thousand pounds a year! A house in Town! Everything wonderful!”

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The Library

Longbourn

The Next Morning

Mr. Bennet leaned back against the chair, sighed, and rubbed his eyes. “How did she find out?”

“A servant overheard the conversation in the office while she was cleaning the library, and she innocently told Mamma,” Elizabeth said, taking a sip of tea.

Bennet shook his head reprovingly. “That was very poorly done of the girl ...”

“It was not her fault, really,” Elizabeth replied immediately. “Well, I suppose it was, but we left the door between the library and the study open, and she was doing her work in here. She did not realize that the total sum was supposed to be a secret, especially as Mamma immediately told Hill that I had inherited, and that information spread throughout the house.”

“Well, it is no longer a secret,” Bennet said gloomily.

Elizabeth blew out a breath and then smiled. “It is quite all right, Father. I have a few months before I will have control of the money, and I am, I think, a sensible young woman. I will not give in to the pleading of my mother and sisters. I will be well enough. And if their whining proves too annoying, I can always go to London and live with the Gardiners.”

“You *are* very sensible, along with being more resolute than I am,” her father agreed and turned his attention to his latest book.

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The Pig in the Poke

Noon

Two Days Later

Wickham squinted into the pub as he entered, vaguely grateful for the dimmer interior after the bright glare of the sun outside. The smoky old wooden beams of the ceiling and the

equally dark tables and chairs were a boon to his blinding headache.

The smells wafting from the kitchen were even more so. He could smell bacon and eggs and sausage cooking, and his mouth watered in anticipation. Closing the door behind himself, he looked around for a table. The pub was largely empty at this time of day, but the red coat of the only other officer in the place drew his eye. Wickham crossed, nodding to Carter, and collapsed into the chair across from the other man.

One of the barmaids tripped up, looking very neat in her clean frock and crisp apron. "What'll you be havin' today, sir?" she asked brightly.

Wickham eyed his companion's meal. "The same as my friend here, I think," he said blearily and watched the young woman sashay away before plunking his elbow onto the table and dropping his aching forehead into his hand.

"Well, Wickham, you must be cursing your luck about now, I suppose," Captain Carter said as he took a bite of his own toast.

Wickham did not particularly appreciate this comment on top of the enormous headache pounding his skull. He had been up very late playing cards and had lost heavily along with drinking far too much. Carter had been, as bank, the primary winner in last night's game of faro, and Wickham did not welcome the man's bragging.

"Oh, not faro last night!" Carter said, apparently understanding the other man's glower. "Your luck will turn soon, I am certain! No, it is a great pity about Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

"What about Miss Elizabeth?" Wickham demanded, nodding at the servant girl as she deposited ale and a plate of eggs and toast on the table.

"Oh, you have not heard! Well, it appears the girl has come into a great inheritance!"

Wickham had been forking a bite of eggs into his mouth, but at these words, he gaped and his nerveless hand fell to the table. “What?!”

“Yes, some great-aunt died, or something of the sort, and left Miss Elizabeth a fortune,” Carter replied, enjoying the effect of these words on Wickham, who was unarguably the most charming and handsome man in the regiment. “You were quite close to Miss Elizabeth last autumn, I think, but have been pursuing Miss King of late.”

Wickham recovered sufficiently to frown and wave an airy hand. “Forget about Miss King. How much did Miss Elizabeth inherit?”

“Seventy thousand pounds,” Carter said and grinned at the shock on Wickham’s face.

“What?! That is *impossible!*”

“Yes, and I suppose it might not be true,” Carter admitted, emptying his tankard. “Rumors are rather uncertain things, after all.”

“So the rumors are that...?”

“That Miss Elizabeth Bennet has inherited a vast fortune, which she will gain full control over on her upcoming birthday, which is some months away.”

Wickham mulled this in silence as he devoured his food and drank down his ale. He had been attracted to Elizabeth Bennet when he had first arrived at Meryton the previous November and would have gladly offered for the girl if he had known she would inherit a fortune. If it was true that she was now an heiress, well, that changed everything. He would far prefer Elizabeth to Mary King, whose only value lay in her recent inheritance of ten thousand pounds.

Even if the rumors were exaggerating the situation, which was almost certainly true – really, who had seventy thousand pounds to leave anyone? – Elizabeth probably had at least ten thousand pounds, and she would be far more enjoyable a wife than Mary, who was freckled and dull.

Wickham merely needed to worm his way back into Miss Elizabeth's graces, which would not be terribly difficult. The lady, while intelligent and witty, was quite easily manipulated.

If she was even a third of the heiress that she was rumored to be, she would be a very fine Mrs. Wickham.

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Darcy House

London

Darcy took a sip of brandy as he watched his friend, who was eyeing the nearest white ball. Bingley was taking his time with the stick, and Darcy, to keep himself from fidgeting, took a moment to look around himself.

The room had been designed with comfort and leisure in mind, with heavy brown leather wingbacked chairs set before the lit fireplace and a tawny plush carpet under his feet. The room glowed with golden light as candles in their sconces threw out pools of overlapping brilliance, with mirrors behind the polished brass candlesticks magnifying the illumination.

Upon the sturdy oaken table against the wall reposed a silver tray. A decanter of brandy, half-full, sat in the middle of it, with two cut-crystal glasses beside. A swallow of alcohol was left in Bingley's while Darcy's sat empty; he considered refilling it before deciding to wait.

He was in his own home in London, with a robust, comfortable fire, with his closest friend, and without his closest friend's irritating sisters, and yet he felt gloomy and anxious. He missed Miss Elizabeth Bennet so very much. He...

The sound of the cue striking the ball pulled his attention back to the billiard table, where Bingley had just caromed a ball away from a pocket instead of into it. The younger man huffed and took a step away. “Your turn, Darcy.”

Darcy, as he examined the table, allowed his mind to shift to Bingley. Yes, that was another problem; Bingley, usually the most cheerful of companions, had not been himself for many months, not since the beginning of the previous December when he had left his most recent love, Miss Jane Bennet, behind in Hertfordshire.

It had, Darcy conceded, been a reasonable decision on Bingley’s part to lease a country estate the previous autumn. Bingley, whose family hailed from the north of England, was the grandson of a tradesman, and his fortune of over one hundred thousand pounds was a very substantial one indeed. Bingley’s father had wished to purchase an estate but had died before being able to do so. His only son Charles, desirous of learning to oversee an estate before owning one, had decided to lease Netherfield in Hertfordshire, and Darcy had come along to help his friend. He, as master of Pemberley, had been overseeing a much larger estate than Netherfield for more than five years now and had plenty of good advice to share.

And then, of course, Bingley, who was prone to falling in love with ridiculous rapidity, had also fallen in love, with a blue-eyed, blonde goddess who was, even to Darcy’s cynical eyes, quite one of the most handsome women in all of England, along with being charming and kind. But Miss Jane Bennet, Elizabeth’s elder sister – Miss Elizabeth! He must think of her as *Miss Elizabeth* – was a staid, sensible creature, quite unlike her vibrant younger sister. She had encouraged Bingley’s overtures much like a lady encourages a puppy. That would not have been so bad if Miss Bennet’s family was not so dreadfully connected and improper.

Darcy compressed his lips as he hit the red ball, and it knocked one of the white balls into a pocket. Improper was not a strong enough word, actually; Mrs. Bennet and the two youngest Bennet daughters were vulgar, forward, and utterly

without propriety. It would have been catastrophic for Bingley to marry the woman, nearly as catastrophic as Darcy marrying Miss Elizabeth, he thought with little conviction.

Thus Darcy, along with Bingley's sisters, had not hesitated to convince Bingley to abandon Netherfield and Hertfordshire some months previously.

It had not been safe for him to stay either, he knew that. He felt the siren call of those sparkling eyes, that enchanting wit. Miss Elizabeth was not worthy of him and his name, and thus he had been thankful when friendship and prudence had called for him to relocate to London in December, far away from the temptress whose arch speech and cheerful disagreements still haunted his dreams.

Bingley generally fell in and out of love rapidly, but he had not recovered from his attachment to Jane Bennet. He was still a cheerful and agreeable companion, but there was a soberness in his demeanor that had been quite absent a year previously, and more notably, he had not paid any attention to a single young woman since his departure from Hertfordshire.

Darcy was thinking with such intensity that he missed his next shot and left the second white ball in a perfect position, which enabled Bingley to knock it into another pocket, provoking a grin from the younger man.

"I won, and that is a rare thing, Darcy," he exclaimed.

"Indeed," Darcy said with a comical grimace. "Another game?"

"No, no, I have been summoned to the Hursts' house tonight for a dinner party and must prepare myself," Bingley said, and then lifted winsome eyes to Darcy. "Indeed, you are invited, though I told Caroline that you likely were engaged elsewhere, but if you wish to accompany me..."

"No, no," Darcy said, with more haste than courtesy, and then, at his friend's knowing smile, colored a little. "I am rather tired tonight and will likely turn in early."

That was true enough. He was not sleeping well, distracted by dreams of *her*.

“Of course,” Bingley replied and slapped a congenial hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I know that Caroline is tiresome, and I am grateful that you continue to be my friend even though she is overly obvious in her desire to become the mistress of Pemberley. But I really must leave.”

“Until later, then,” Darcy said, and watched as Bingley hurried out the door.

Chapter 5

The Gardiners' House

Gracechurch Street

Cheapside

Two Days Later

The sitting room was peaceful; silent save for the crackling fire, the clicking of knitting needles, and the occasional sounds from the street outside. Jane bent closer to the candle for a moment in order to see her stitches better before lifting her head to ease her neck and looked around. Her Aunt Gardiner sat nearby, a scarf intended for Mr. Gardiner pooling in her lap.

It was a calming room, with its dark blue carpets and oak furniture and green cushions and clean lines. The children often came into this room with their parents, and so there were no knickknacks sitting around to clutter up the place. Several candlesticks lined the mantel, and a couple of heavy brass ones sat on the table nearby.

A knock on the door drew the attention of both women, and a maid stepped inside, one hand pressed to her crisp white apron.

“A Lady Diana Appleby has called,” the maid announced.

Mrs. Gardiner started in surprise, rose to her feet, and looked around. The room was tidy enough, and she said, “Please show her in, Sally.”

Sally retreated and a minute later, a small, elderly lady entered the room, dressed in dark green wool, with a simple but attractive straw bonnet on her head, her faded blue eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. She took off her bonnet and

handed it to the maid along with her pelisse before turning back, the smart cut of her frock now unobscured. Her hair, delicate white and fine as cobwebs, was pulled into an elegant style that accentuated her face, which was lined with myriad fine wrinkles, while the lines around her mouth and eyes spoke of frequent smiles and laughter.

“Mrs. Gardiner,” the lady said, “I am not certain if you remember me?”

“I do indeed, my lady,” Madeline replied. “You were a friend of my Great-aunt Simpson, and we met three times at the house in Half Moon Street. If memory serves me, you and my great-aunt were dear friends for literally decades.”

“What a wonderful memory you have,” the woman exclaimed and turned her attention on Jane. “Would you kindly introduce me to your companion?”

“Of course. This is my niece, Miss Bennet. Niece, Lady Appleby.”

Jane curtsied, and when she had finished, found herself blushing at the intent gaze of the older woman, who had her head tilted with the mien of a curious robin.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet, perchance?” Lady Appleby asked.

“No, Madame,” Mrs. Gardiner said, “Jane is my eldest niece, and Elizabeth is her next younger sister. But please, do sit down by the fire, and I will call for tea.”

Lady Appleby took the best chair, as befitted both her rank and her age, and when Jane had seated herself, the older woman said, “Annabelle told me that Madeline’s eldest niece was a beauty, and she did not overstate the case. My dear Miss Bennet, you are quite exquisite!”

Jane blushed even more at these words and ducked her head. “You are too kind, my lady.”

“Is your sister Elizabeth equally handsome?”

Jane hesitated and was relieved when her aunt, who had stepped out into the corridor to order tea, returned in time to say, “Jane is the acknowledged beauty of the family, but Elizabeth is lovely as well, though she has very different coloring with dark eyes and hair. But yes, Mrs. Bennet, herself a beauty in her youth, produced a coterie of handsome daughters.”

“Well, that does make it easier,” Lady Appleby said, a mischievous smile playing on her lips.

Jane and her aunt exchanged uneasy glances, and Jane asked, rather faintly, “Easier to do what?”

“Why, to introduce you and your sister to London society!” their visitor replied.

/

Drawing Room

Longbourn

Elizabeth curled up in her chair, running one hand across the crisp page of the book on her lap as she lifted her eyes to look out the window. Gray jagged clouds scudded across the sky, occasionally spitting out showers of slushy snow. There was a frosty nip to the air, but it was not strong enough to harden the churned mud of the ground where man and beast frequently walked.

Inside, the drawing room was delightfully warm, with the fire built high and crackling industriously in the fireplace. Mrs. Bennet and all of Elizabeth’s younger sisters sat around engaged in their own pursuits, books and sewing and sketching. Elizabeth took a deep breath of contentment, happy to have a day with her family and no visitors, and returned to her book.

The door to the drawing room opened, and the butler stepped in and intoned, “Captain Denny, Lieutenant Pratt, and Lieutenant Wickham.”

Lydia and Kitty, who had been fretfully complaining about the showers which prevented them from walking to Meryton, leaped to their feet and hurried forward to greet the officers, whose red coats were a trifle damp, and whose black boots were wet and streaked with mud.

“Oh, how wonderful!” Lydia exclaimed boisterously. “We had no idea that you would visit today!”

Wickham, whose eyes were gleaming at the sight of Elizabeth, bowed over Lydia’s hand in a fulsome way and said, “A little snow could not keep us away from the delights of Longbourn, Miss Lydia.”

Naturally, this provoked giggles from both Lydia and Kitty, and Mrs. Bennet, who had been giving instructions to a maid for tea, bustled up and said, “Indeed, we are most grateful that you came out to visit us today, gentlemen! Tea will be here shortly. Would you care to sit down?”

Not surprisingly, all three gentlemen marched toward Elizabeth like a needle toward true north, and Wickham gracefully managed to finagle his way into a seat across from the new heiress, while the other two gentlemen found their places on a couch set closer to Mary.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Wickham said, and his lips stretched wide to show his gleaming teeth, “I hope you are well today?”

Elizabeth smiled in return, enchanted, as usual, by Mr. Wickham’s good looks and cheerful demeanor. “I am very well, thank you.”

“I know that it is dangerous to listen to gossip,” he continued with a quirk of one eyebrow, “but if the rumors are correct, I understand that you are to be congratulated.”

Elizabeth, aware that all three officers were staring at her intensely, turned pink and said, “Yes, quite. I have indeed been blessed to receive a substantial inheritance.”

“Your great-aunt, I believe?” Pratt said, trying, and failing badly, to sound nonchalant.

“My aunt’s great-aunt, actually,” Elizabeth said, and firmly turned the subject. “So, gentlemen, I hope you can tell us all that Colonel Forster is finally planning to host a ball?”

This had the desirable effect of pulling Lydia and Kitty into the conversation, and by the time that Mrs. Bennet was serving tea, the conversation had shifted from the potential upcoming ball to the various delights of London. Elizabeth sipped her tea and more or less enjoyed the conversation, though she continued to feel uncomfortable that all three visitors spent more than three quarters of the time looking at her.

Fifteen minutes into the visit, a maid appeared at the door and summoned Elizabeth to the library where her father was waiting for her. She rose with alacrity and bestowed a general smile on the officers before hurrying out the door, down the hall of the east wing, and into the library, where she scuttled in, pushed the door behind her, and leaned dramatically against it.

Her father, who was tenderly poring over a copy of the English translation of *Dante’s Inferno*, looked up in surprise and then smiled. “Are you escaping today’s visitors, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth drifted over to drop theatrically into a chair across from her father and released a pent up groan of frustration.

“It is absolutely awful, Father,” she moaned. “All of our neighbors have visited in the last few days, and many of the militia officers, and the neighbors are congratulating me, except for the few single men in their number, who all are suddenly very interested in my charm and looks. It is exasperating, and rude to my sisters, and I have no doubt that Lydia, at least, will soon start whining at the lack of attention to her person.”

“Do today’s visitors include your favorite, Mr. Wickham?”

“Yes, he is here. Not, of course, that he has any intentions towards me. He is courting Miss King, and is far too honorable a gentleman to transfer his attentions back to me now that I am a great heiress.”

This provoked a bark of laughter from her father, and when she turned an indignant eye on him, the master of Longbourn declared, “I have no doubt that Mr. Wickham has already turned his attentions back on you, Lizzy. I would think very poorly of the man if he was unwilling to set aside a plain girl with a modest fortune given that you are beautiful, clever, and now, rich.”

“But that is hardly fair to Mary King!” Elizabeth protested. “Surely he would not!”

“My dear, I know you admire Lieutenant Wickham, but he is a man like any other man, and he wishes for wealth and beauty in his partner.”

Elizabeth frowned and said, “Do you ... would you be pleased if I married him, Father?”

“Not at all. Indeed, if you were so foolish as to accept an offer of marriage from him in the near future, I would deny my blessing. You know very little about the man, and I dislike the idea of you wedding a destitute man whose primary interest in you must be your money.”

“He would not be destitute if Mr. Darcy had given him the living in Derbyshire,” his daughter said indignantly.

“If he had done so, then you would never have met Mr. Wickham.”

“True,” Elizabeth admitted, though the familiar fury rose in her breast again at Mr. Darcy’s cruelty toward the handsome lieutenant. She shook her head, blew out a breath, and asked, “Why did you summon me here?”

“Oh, I have a letter from your uncle with more details about your inheritance. I think it best if you have full awareness of the situation.”

“Thank you, Father,” Elizabeth said, taking the chair behind the desk. She picked up the folded letter and spread it open, and then she took a moment to glance around her.

The library had always been her haven. She had spent countless afternoons here, curled up by the window or the fireplace with a book, or in deep discussion with her father over some philosophy or tome, or at one of the two game boards set up beneath the southern windows – chess nearer, and backgammon beyond that.

Now more than ever was it a refuge. She had come to dread the pealing of the bell and the parade of visitors through the drawing room. But up here, with the sun-lit wood floors and the curtains always pulled back to maximize light, with smell of ink and paper and leather, she felt *safe*.

She knew she could not hide in her father’s library forever. She must go out and live her life, however oddly the people around her behaved, with neighbors nosy and eager to hear everything, and men who looked at her and saw only an opportunity to ensure their own ease and comfort. She would meet the challenges of her new life with her chin up, as she ever had.

She began to read the letter in her hands.

Dear Brother,

Here are more details about Elizabeth’s inheritance. The money is tied up in a number of ways, which is good. It is unwise to have all of one’s eggs in a single basket. Thirty percent of the funds are in Consuls, while...

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The Drawing Room

“You could have knocked me over with a feather, gentlemen!” Mrs. Bennet said impressively. “Seventy thousand pounds! I declare I was ready to faint when I heard...”

“Mamma,” Mary interposed anxiously, “perhaps it is not wise to boast about Elizabeth’s inheritance?”

“Oh, I am not boasting, Mary! It is not as if it is *my* money, as your father made very clear! But oh, it is such a wonderful feeling to know that one of my daughters is wealthy now. When Mr. Bennet dies and Mr. Collins throws us out of Longbourn, my Lizzy will take care of us, even if none of the girls are married!”

This plain speaking caused Mary to flush with embarrassment, and Pratt and Denny to exchange speaking glances, but Wickham merely smiled and said, “Miss Elizabeth is a very generous lady, and I am certain she will take care of you very well, Mrs. Bennet, and her sisters too.”

“Oh yes!” Lydia said, who had been holding her tongue with difficulty. “Elizabeth does not have control of the money yet, you know – she is not one and twenty until August! But then, oh, we are so happy that she will be very rich! Perhaps this autumn she will pay for us to travel to London and hire lodgings there!”

“I am certain that you will enjoy the delights of Town, Miss Lydia,” Wickham remarked, “but I would not have thought that Miss Elizabeth would be equally enthusiastic. I know her to be a very vigorous lady who loves to take long walks, though perhaps not in the winter?”

“Oh, Lizzy walks almost every day regardless of the weather,” Mrs. Bennet returned, casting her eyes heavenward. “I think it quite absurd, and she often comes back windblown, but her father refuses to restrain her. In any case, she has spent many months in London with my brother and his family and

always enjoys herself. But you are correct, Lydia; with Elizabeth's newfound wealth, we will be able to hire a house in the very best part of Town! And if she wishes to walk – well, she can walk in Hyde Park!”

Chapter 6

Gardiners' House

Gracechurch Street

“Before I explain my hopes for launching the Misses Bennet into society,” Lady Appleby said, “I must explain my relationship with your great-aunt, Mrs. Simpson.”

“I confess to great curiosity, Madame,” Mrs. Gardiner said, pouring another cup of tea for their noble guest.

“Annabelle and I came out in society the same year,” the old woman said, and now her smile was reflective. “She was quite old to come out – almost two and twenty, but there was no money at home due to her father’s indebtedness, and it was only the kindness of a distant relative which allowed her to have one Season in Town. She was intelligent and vivacious, but not beautiful, and that, combined with her lack of a fortune, meant that she had no eligible offers. So she chose an ineligible offer.”

“Mr. Simpson,” Madeline murmured.

“Precisely. They met during the interval at the theater one day – he was nearly twenty years older, a widower, a very wealthy business man, with two sons, and he called on her the next day, doubtless expecting to be turned away because of his lower position in life. But Annabelle was an unusual woman. She admired Mr. Simpson for his intelligence and abilities, and had no desire to live a life of genteel poverty. Thus, she agreed to become his wife and the stepmother of his sons.”

“What did her stepsons think of it all?” Jane asked.

“They liked Annabelle quite well,” the lady said. “I think she was wise to allow them to define the relationship. She was only ten years older than the eldest child, and they

were away at school a good deal. It was a happy marriage, though...”

The lady sighed and continued, “It did hurt her that many of her former acquaintances cut her, even though she expected it.”

“She had no children?” Jane asked.

“Only one, little Maria, who died of smallpox before her seventh birthday. Both Annabelle and her husband also contracted the disease but survived.”

“How tragic!” Jane murmured, her eyes filling with sympathetic tears.

“Yes, she took it very hard, of course. It was a great sorrow to both husband and wife, though they were thankful that the boys were away at school at the time and did not catch the pox. Mr. Simpson died at the age of sixty, and Annabelle was only in her forties. She was left a wealthy widow and could have easily found another husband, but she far preferred the freedom of her position. I lost my own husband, Lord Appleby, two years later and was left with a modest jointure. Annabelle and I had remained friends since our coming out, and she was helpful in managing my money by investing it wisely – some of it in your husband’s company, Mrs. Gardiner.”

“Do you have any children, Madame?” Jane asked.

“Yes, three boys and two girls, all grown up now and with children of their own. They are scattered across southern England. I own a house in Bath where I live most of the time, but when I heard of Annabelle’s death, I hurried up here to meet you.”

“Because you wish to introduce Jane and Elizabeth to society?” Madeline asked doubtfully.

“Precisely,” Lady Appleby said and chuckled, her eyes narrowed with amusement. “Annabelle was a pragmatic lady, but she never quite forgave the ton for being so tiresome about her marriage to a man of business! She was very fond of you,

Mrs. Gardiner, and your nieces, and she conceived the bright idea of launching the eldest Misses Bennet into society. She could not do it herself, of course, as the widow of a tradesman, but I was quite amenable – indeed, I was honored to take on that role given our long friendship and her generous financial wisdom; however, we had to wait until my eldest granddaughter was launched and wed, and then...”

She trailed off and shook her head ruefully. “By then, Belle’s heart was failing, and she passed on before I could assist you. Now I wish to fulfill her last wish. This is all assuming you desire an introduction to the ton, Miss Bennet, and your sister as well.”

Jane shook her head and said, “It is very kind of you to offer such a thing, my lady, but while Elizabeth would probably relish it, I ... I do not think I would. Moreover, unlike Lizzy, I am not a great heiress.”

“You know perfectly well that Elizabeth would not wish to enter society without you, Jane,” Mrs. Gardiner remarked, patting her niece’s arm. She turned to Lady Appleby and said, “We will need to speak to Elizabeth, of course, but it is a very kind offer. You are aware that my husband is the girls’ uncle and is in trade, so...”

“So yes, you have connections in trade,” their guest, rolling her eyes. “I care not at all, and if I know my fellow members of society, they will be able to set such things aside in the face of so much beauty and wealth given that your nieces are the daughters of a gentleman. Now there are certainly doorways you will not cross – it will, I suspect, be quite impossible to obtain vouchers to Almack’s, but that is no great loss, really.”

The lady set her teacup down onto a nearby table and stood up, and Jane and Mrs. Gardiner stood up a moment later.

“You are free to do what you wish, of course,” the lady said. “I would find it great fun to introduce you to some of my friends with eligible sons, who would fall in love with your

face, and with your sister's fortune, but I will not be insulted if you decline, I assure you."

Jane relaxed noticeably. "Thank you, my lady."

"We will consult with Elizabeth as quickly as possible," Mrs. Gardiner continued, "and will respond to your gracious offer after we discover her wishes. I presume you are staying in London?"

"Yes, in Fenton's Hotel," the lady responded and sighed. "I always stayed with Mrs. Simpson in the past, but Fenton's will be very comfortable."

"Oh!" Madeline said. "I inherited the house on Half Moon Street, my lady, and would be very pleased if you would like to stay there!"

Lady Appleby tilted her head to one side in consideration and then nodded quickly. "Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner. I believe that would be most agreeable, especially if Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth will join me there. This seems a very comfortable house, but the location is not particularly genteel."

"I understand completely," Madeline said.

Jane was worrying her lip with her white teeth and the older lady quirked an eyebrow. "Do you have a question, perhaps, Miss Bennet?"

Jane blushed and said, "I do, but it is not, perhaps, a particularly appropriate query."

"Pray speak, my dear."

"Lizzy sent me a letter in the last days regarding her inheritance, and she wonders, as do I, why Mrs. Simpson chose her in particular to lavish so much wealth upon. She is not even a blood relation."

"Ah, but she is a very fine young woman and was a most charming correspondent to my dear friend."

"Elizabeth is the correspondent in our family and was *very* fond of Mrs. Simpson."

“I understand that Miss Elizabeth is a determined young woman and entirely capable of depressing the pretensions of greedy young men and begging younger sisters?”

Jane grinned in a rather unladylike way and said, “Yes, that is true. Lizzy is an exceptionally strong-willed woman, unlike me.”

“I suspect that is another reason why Belle left so much money to your younger sister. She wished to provide well for your family and left the funds to the person most able to shepherd a fortune successfully.”

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Elizabeth's Bedchamber

Longbourn

That Night

Elizabeth leaned back into the comforting wings of her chair as she gazed at the smoldering embers burning low in the hearth. She was weary, far wearier than a day spent indoors doing very little besides smiling and chatting merited. But the weariness was in her soul as well as her bones. Scarcely had the officers departed from the house than another carriage had rolled into the yard, and another after that, both of them bearing single, hopeful young men.

Elizabeth sighed again and snugged the rug about her shoulders tighter until all peeks of her nightgown beneath disappeared entirely. She was grateful, of course, that she now could support herself and her sisters, come what may. But she was growing sick of being the center of simpering attentions and hearing endless accolades of her beauty and charm.

There was a tap on the door, and Elizabeth, after a surprised glance at the clock on the mantel, called out, “Come

in!”

The door opened to reveal the thin figure of her next younger sister, Mary. Like Elizabeth, she was dressed in her nightclothes, and her face, in the light of two wavering candles on the mantle, was tight with worry.

“Mary!” Elizabeth said, standing up. “Do come in and sit down near the fire! It is a cold night.”

“Thank you,” Mary replied and took a seat in another chair, while Elizabeth threw another log on the fire and stirred it vigorously with a poker. The resulting blaze of heat was pleasant to both girls, and Elizabeth, after satisfying herself that the fire would not go out, walked over to the wardrobe to fetch a large woolen shawl, which she draped on her sister’s lap.

“I love my bedchamber,” she said as she sat back down, “but its position on the southwest corner of this wing makes it chilly. But come, Mary, why are you here? What is wrong?”

Mary lowered her face to stare at the polished floor of the bedroom, which was reflecting the light of the flames, and then lifted her chin to look straight at Elizabeth.

“I am worried about you, Elizabeth,” she said baldly.

“Worried about me? Why on earth?”

Mary paused, as if marshaling her thoughts, and said, “After Father called you away from the drawing room, Mamma told the officers that you inherited seventy thousand pounds.”

Elizabeth’s forehead wrinkled in confusion. “I think everyone hereabouts knows about my inheritance, Mary.”

“But not specifics, I think. I was watching the officers carefully, and they all looked delighted and eager.”

“They are not the only ones,” Elizabeth said with a moan. “It seems that every eligible young man in the neighborhood now finds me charming, beautiful, and fascinating.”

“You are all those things,” her sister said, rather unexpectedly, and at the surprised look on Elizabeth’s face, continued wryly, “I am well aware that you are very beautiful and clever, far more than I will ever be.”

“Oh Mary! Pray do not...”

“It does not matter,” the younger woman interrupted. “No, this is what really concerns me. After Mamma confirmed your enormous inheritance, the conversation turned to London and then to your love for walking, and Lizzy, Mr. Wickham asked a number of questions about your habits in walking alone on Longbourn land.”

Elizabeth stared at her in bewilderment. “Why does that distress you?”

Mary shook her head in exasperation and said, “I have difficulty explaining it, and I daresay it sounds silly, but there was a look on Mr. Wickham’s countenance that alarmed me...”

“Mary! You cannot imagine that one of the officers would harm me!”

“Perhaps they would not, but then again, perhaps one of them would, and now they know that you walk alone almost every morning, and it frightens me.”

“That is absurd! I have walked by myself for many years!”

“Yes, and until last week, your dowry was all of a few hundred pounds at the most. I know you think I am being ridiculous, but think about it! What if one of them came upon you alone and kissed you, or ... or ... worse? You would have to marry the man, would you not? Seventy thousand pounds is an incredible inducement!”

Elizabeth gazed at her in disbelief and said, “You are serious? You truly believe that Pratt or Denny or ... or Carter could do such a thing?”

“Or Lieutenant Wickham, yes. I am concerned about such a thing.”

“Well, Mr. Wickham would not. He is always the perfect gentleman!”

“Is he?” Mary demanded. “You did not see the expression on his face. He looked like ... like a wolf hunting a hapless lamb. Nor do I like the man – yes, he is charming and very good looking, but he complains a great deal.”

“He has every reason to complain! His life was ruined by Mr. Darcy’s refusal to give him the living.”

“His life was not ruined!” Mary said with surprising ferocity. “He is not a woman, whose only hope in life is to marry well, or barring that, spend her life as a dependent relation or, worse yet, a poorly paid companion or governess. He is handsome, strong, young, and charming. Presumably he went to Cambridge or Oxford if he was planning to be a clergyman, though even there – I asked him once why he did not pursue another living, and he said he never took Holy Orders! How was he to take the living in Derbyshire if he is not even ordained?”

Elizabeth blinked. “He ... did not?”

“No.”

Her sister mulled this for a long moment, her brain whirling. She had been strongly attracted to Mr. Wickham from the very moment they met. He had delightful manners and pleasant speech, along with being handsome in both face and figure. She had always prided herself on her understanding of human nature, and it seemed most unlikely that she could be so far wrong.

“Why did you never say anything about this before?” she finally asked.

“I thought you would not believe me, nor did I think it mattered very much. Given that he abandoned you to pursue Mary King, it seemed obvious that he would not make an offer

to a penniless woman. But now you are very wealthy, and it seems certain that he intends to renew his attentions.”

Elizabeth was unpleasantly reminded of her father’s words in the library about Wickham. Was it possible that the man was indeed a fortune hunter?

“You have given me much to think of,” she said reluctantly.

“Please do not walk alone, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth, seeing the genuine fear on her sister’s face, sighed deeply and said, “I do not think I can survive this season of life without my walks.”

“You can take someone with you. Gertrude, perhaps? Or her brother, young Tom?”

Elizabeth considered this thoughtfully; Gertrude and Tom Smith were twenty and eighteen, respectively, and had served as maid and stable boy at Longbourn for a year. Their father, a tenant farmer, was tall and bulky, and he had passed on those traits to his two elder children.

“Very well, I promise that I will not walk alone, Mary.”

“Thank you, Lizzy.”

Chapter 7

Hurst House

London

Two Evenings Later

Darcy was careful on the steps, wary of ice, as he and Bingley climbed to the Hursts' front door. He need not have worried; the steps had been cleared, and the pair arrived at the top without incident. Bingley had scarcely let the knocker drop before the door was opened wide by a footman, allowing them entry into the warm house. A pair of maids stepped forward from beside the entry table to accept the gentlemen's greatcoats and hats.

Darcy glanced down at his own impeccable coat and breeches and boots, ensuring he was still presentable, before running a cursory eye over his friend. Bingley's deep blue formal coat flattered him nicely, and his boots shone; there was no hint of disarray about his person.

Pattering footsteps interrupted this inspection, and both men turned as Caroline Bingley appeared in a nearby doorway and hurried towards them. She was quite a sight, the delicate blue and white stripes of her soft gauze gown flattering her figure, the dyed goose feathers of her bejeweled hat bobbing above her elaborate coiffure. Her face lit up when she saw them, eyes shining with excitement and enthusiasm as her mouth stretched into a broad smile.

"Mr. Darcy, Charles!" the lady cried out joyfully. "I was quite concerned that you would not join us this evening."

"That was my fault, Miss Bingley," Darcy said with grave courtesy. "I had an important business letter to write, which took rather longer to finish than I expected."

“Oh, but of course that is quite all right,” Miss Bingley trilled. “You have so much responsibility, and complete your tasks with such wondrous efficiency. But please, it is time for dinner, and Hurst and Louisa are waiting!”

Mr. Darcy reluctantly held out his arm, Miss Bingley took it with obvious pleasure, and the twosome made their way down the corridor and into the smaller dining parlor, with Bingley walking behind them.

Darcy cast a look of approval over the room. He did not care for family dinner parties wherein the diners were spread out over the vast expanse of the main dining table. He far preferred the informality of a smaller table and easier conversation.

His enthusiasm waned considerably upon discovering that his place was at the foot of the table, and Caroline Bingley was seated upon his right hand. He did not appreciate the woman’s matchmaking schemes; she had very blatantly set her cap for him, while he could not be less interested in marrying her.

As he feared, she kept up a stream of chatter throughout dinner, touching on such subjects as Pemberley, Lady Melissa Allwood’s upcoming ball, Darcy’s own attentiveness to his duty, his expertise in estate management, how lucky Charles was to have him as a friend, Vauxhall Gardens, the current plays in the theater, and whether comedies or tragedies were superior.

“Tragedies are very edifying, of course,” she said, fluttering her lashes up at him. “But I enjoy the comedies. There is something so very satisfying about the couples attaining their happiness together.”

“I personally prefer the tragedies,” Darcy returned dryly, and took a sip of his wine.

“Yes of course,” Miss Bingley agreed at once. “Happy endings are well and good in their place, of course, but oh!

The great emotion of the tragedies! The lessons they teach us!”

She continued in this vein for some minutes, and Darcy tuned her out as best as he was able, concentrating on the food before him – white soup with a carefully roasted side of beef and pickles and a truly excellent mushroom ragout. He knew that the Hursts’ cook was good – Hurst himself was a great enjoyer of food – but he doubted the dinner table was set with such a lavish variety every night. No, this spread was for his benefit. Caroline was showing off, tacitly boasting of the table she could set, in her bid to become Mrs. Darcy and the mistress of Pemberley.

“Mr. Darcy?” the lady said softly, which drew his wandering attention.

“Yes?”

Caroline made rather a point of looking across the table at her brother, who was speaking earnestly with his brother-in-law. Based on the words drifting toward him, Darcy concluded that they were speaking of hunting and fishing, two of Hurst’s enthusiasms, along with eating and sleeping.

“I do hope that you and my brother have not been bothered by Jane Bennet these last weeks,” the lady said in a conspiratorial tone.

Darcy thought of the last months, with Bingley quiet and morose much of the time, and staring longingly, hopefully, at every tall, blonde, handsome lady he encountered before being cast down with disappointment at not encountering the woman he loved.

“No, we have not been bothered in the least,” he said, and took a sip of dinner wine.

“Good!” Miss Bingley replied and smiled unpleasantly. “I fancy I made myself very clear when I called on her! One must be firm with country folk who wish to intrude upon their betters.”

Darcy felt bile rise in his throat, and he suppressed an urge to cough. He well knew Caroline Bingley's sharp tongue, and felt a deep throb of regret at the thought of handsome, gentle, kind Jane Bennet at the receiving end of such vitriol. Moreover, the eldest Miss Bennet was the daughter of a gentleman and thus higher in society than the Bingleys, even if she was poor!

He knew that Caroline Bingley was a social climber willing to step on anyone in her way, but it was still despicable for her to act that way towards her former friend. She had been the one to cultivate the friendship with the country gentleman's daughter, deeming Jane Bennet the only interesting lady near Netherfield. And yet as soon as Bingley had openly shown his preference for Miss Bennet, Caroline had turned viciously on her former friend.

It was not only the return to more scintillating society that had precipitated such a betrayal, Darcy knew. It was Bingley's openly declared affection for Miss Bennet, and Darcy's own suppressed and strongly fought attraction to Miss Elizabeth, that had prompted Caroline Bingley to go from supercilious friendship to vituperative dislike.

A glance down the table showed Charles picking morosely at his slice of beef, eyes distant. He continued to pine for Jane Bennet, still devastated by Darcy's revelation of the truth that the lady's gentle manners and friendly demeanor meant nothing more than the most casual of friendships. Darcy knew Miss Bennet would only accept an offer from Bingley because he was rich, but she was a mild and sweet-natured woman, and she did not deserve verbal abuse heaped on her by the haughty daughter of a tradesman.

His mind turned unwillingly, inevitably, to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. In his memory, her fine brown eyes laughed at him over some arch remark or other. He had hoped to forget her, to forget her sharp wit, vibrant beauty, and fulsome joy of life. He had thought that returning to Town would dull his attraction to her until it vanished altogether.

Instead he found himself thinking of her constantly; over his work in his office and in his bedchamber at night and certainly every time he was introduced to another well-dowered, well-connected, highly accomplished society miss. None of the compliantly agreeable women he met in Town held such charm for him as the country lady who had so cleverly debated with him and teased him.

He knew what he owed his family, and thus was *mostly* confident that his decision to enjoin Bingley to leave Netherfield was the right one. Neither he nor Bingley should pursue a courtship with a Bennet daughter. But he was having a hard time, a very, *very* hard time, convincing his heart.

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Longbourn Estate

The Next Morning

Elizabeth took a deep grateful breath of the frosty air. It was cold, stinging at her nose and ears, while a brisk breeze tugged at her curls under her warm bonnet. The ground underfoot was hard, the bare trees lining the path shivering in the bluster. The sun had emerged from the clouds at last to provide pale bright light but could not penetrate the unshakable freeze that had settled over the land.

Elizabeth thought it was glorious.

She had been cooped up inside for three days, entertaining endless streams of militia officers and other eligible young men until she felt as though she would scream. The pent-up nervous energy had propelled her from the door this morning with precipitate haste, and now she was unspeakably grateful to be able to walk once more, striding down the path at a brisk pace.

Wickham's face appeared in her mind's eye – she had certainly seen it often enough these past few days – and her brow knitted in a dark scowl. He had been seated in their drawing room every day, drinking tea and nibbling biscuits and favoring her with his smiles and entirely ignoring poor Miss Mary King, whom he had been pursuing with such determination so shortly before. She thought of her own dear Jane, still wan and heartbroken over being callously jilted by Charles Bingley so recently, and her scowl deepened.

Elizabeth had no desire to be the focus of a mercenary fortune hunter, who had no regard for the hopes and desires of the young woman he had been pursuing and was now ready to leave heartbroken in his wake. She had misjudged Wickham's character quite dreadfully, which was a humbling thought. She had permitted his handsome countenance and bright smile to win her good opinion and had inflamed her prejudice against the rude and haughty Darcy by believing his story of the denied living.

But Darcy's extraordinary discourtesy towards her did not automatically make his enemy a good man. It was quite possible for two men of poor character to be at odds. Perhaps Wickham had done Darcy some injury in the past. It did not ultimately matter, Elizabeth supposed. What mattered was that she had no interest in marrying Wickham or any other man who wanted her only for her money.

A grunt from behind her caught her attention, and she paused to turn and look back. Tom, the imposing young stable hand escorting her today, caught himself and straightened from his stumble. His red scarf had swung down across his heavy brown wool coat, and he took a moment to readjust the hat on his head that had slid down across his straw-colored hair when he slipped.

“Are you all right, Tom?” she asked in concern.

“Yes, Miss. I merely tripped over a root,” the boy responded, turning bright red with embarrassment.

“It is easy enough to do,” she said reassuringly and turned back to continue her walk, not wishing to cause further chagrin.

She herself had been considerably discomfited that morning when she went down to the stables to speak with Coachman Jack. In all her many years of walking, she had never requested that a stable boy be taken away from his duties merely to escort her, and she felt a bit awkward doing so now. But Jack – who had been with the Bennet family for fifteen years now – had merely looked on her approvingly and turned to call Tom over.

As the boy approached, Elizabeth had brushed a hand over her pelisse and said in a low voice, “I am sorry about the difficulty this may cause, Jack.”

He had bent a very paternal look on her, one all the girls were used to from their old coachman. “It is no difficulty at all, Miss Elizabeth,” he had said firmly. “Anytime you wish to walk, you just come let me know an’ me or one of the boys will accompany you on your rambles. Seein’ as you’re an heiress now, ‘tis better to have a strapping lad with you in case o’ trouble.”

She had looked at him in surprise, but had not argued. It seemed odd that Mary and the servants were fretting about her safety when her own mother and father had no apparent concerns on that score. She herself considered it absurd that one of her own neighbors or the militia officers might seek to ruin her in order to force her into a marriage. But she found their worry for her touching, and there was, she supposed, no harm in being careful.

She hopped over a tree branch which had fallen in the last few days and continued striding forward rapidly as her mind turned to the letter she had received from Jane the day before. The news that a friend of Mrs. Simpson, a Lady Appleby, wished to present the two eldest Bennet girls to society was another complication during an already bewildering season of life. Given how very tedious the

neighbors and officers were now, and how much she missed Jane, she was inclined to journey to London as quickly as possible!

The trail turned north at this juncture, and she turned her head to watch a robin redbreast take flight and land on a branch, which quivered from the minor impact. When she looked back onto the trail, she cried out in surprise as she came to a sudden stop. Mr. Wickham, dressed resplendently in his red coat, white breeches, polished boots, and black hat, black cape, and white gloves, stood in the middle of the path, blocking her from moving forward.

“Mr. Wickham!” she cried out. “This is a surprise!”

“I was on my way to Longbourn to see you,” the man said with a smile on his face, and he bowed. When he straightened up, his gaze shifted to the left and the smile gave way to astonished irritation as young Tom came to a halt a few feet behind Elizabeth.

“Shall we step aside to allow this lad to pass on by?” Wickham asked a moment later, pasting a smile back on his handsome countenance.

“No, no, this is Tom, and he is accompanying me on my walk today,” Elizabeth said, her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She had not missed the distress on the lieutenant’s face at the sight of the stable boy.

“Oh!” Wickham replied, looking remarkably nonplussed. “Are you injured, Miss Elizabeth?”

“On the contrary, I am in fine fettle,” she said calmly, and then turned to Tom. “We will turn back now, Tom; I will walk with Mr. Wickham, and you will walk behind us.”

The boy nodded, his eyes fixed forebodingly on Wickham’s face, and stepped out of the way. Elizabeth held out her arm to Wickham, who took it slowly, and the twosome began striding back towards Longbourn with the boy at their heels.

“I did not realize that you required a servant to dog your steps on your family’s land!” Mr. Wickham remarked in a teasing tone.

“For many years, I walked alone,” Elizabeth agreed brightly. “But several individuals at home are concerned about my well-being now that I am wealthy. So I will be accompanied by one of our stalwart stable boys in the future whenever I wish to walk.”

“Oh!” the lieutenant replied.

The couple continued their rapid forward march, with Tom walking but a few feet behind them, and then Wickham halted, so suddenly that the boy was forced to stop quickly to avoid running into them.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Wickham said, looking down on the lady’s face. “I confess that I came to Longbourn today in the hopes of laying my heart at your feet. From the very day we met, I was drawn to your beauty and wit and intelligence...”

“Stop,” Elizabeth said, her brow lowered. “This is neither the time nor the place for such a declaration, Mr. Wickham.”

“I believe it is,” the man said, and smiled winsomely. “Please, Miss Elizabeth, will you not send the boy away so that we can speak privately, as we often have before?”

“I will not,” Elizabeth said promptly. “Mr. Wickham, you have been courting Mary King for weeks now. I am horrified that you would so quickly turn your attention back on me now that I have inherited money.”

“Oh, pray do not accuse me so!” the lieutenant exclaimed. “I have long loved you with all my heart, but I could not ask for your hand when I had no money to support you! Surely you must see that! If Darcy had given me the Kympton living...”

“Have you taken Holy Orders?” Elizabeth demanded, retreating a step and peering attentively into the man’s face.

For but a second, Wickham looked so furious that Elizabeth was very glad that the hulking Tom was nearby. A moment later, his expression smoothed away, and he said sorrowfully, "There seemed no point after Darcy denied me the living."

"I do not understand that," Elizabeth riposted. "You told me that you were intended for the church. There are other livings; even my cousin, Mr. Collins, was successful in gaining a living. You are charming, handsome, and speak well. I do not understand why you did not at least *try* to find another position when Mr. Darcy denied you the one intended for you."

Wickham took a deep breath, his expression so rigid that Tom took a few steps closer to stand very near his mistress. Then the man's expression changed to one of melancholy and he said, "I was so grieved, so disappointed, so horrified, that my old friend would treat me so cruelly that I wanted nothing more than to leave behind all memories of the life that I had long anticipated. I daresay you would not understand, Miss Elizabeth, as you have never been betrayed in such a fashion."

"I suppose I have not," the lady replied coldly, "but then you are currently betraying Mary King. How could you abandon her like this after showing her so much favor? Her heart must be broken!"

Wickham's lips thinned, and this time the anger was more obvious. "I had thought you would appreciate the depths of my love for you. It seems that I was mistaken."

"Indeed you were," Elizabeth snapped, her own eyes blazing with indignation. "I must ask you to leave our land, Mr. Wickham."

Wickham bowed formally and said, "As you wish."

He turned on his heel and began marching back towards Meryton, muttering and kicking whatever he found on the path, and Elizabeth found herself a little breathless.

“I do not trust that man, Miss,” Tom said and Elizabeth nodded in agreement.

“I am very thankful you were with me today, Tom. I am not entirely certain what his intentions were, but I do not imagine they were honorable.”

She breathed in and out again and then continued, “Let us return to Longbourn.”

“Yes, Miss.”

Chapter 8

Library

Longbourn

One Hour Later

The door to the library opened, and Elizabeth slipped inside and shut the door quietly behind her. Mr. Bennet, enjoying another reading of *Macbeth*, looked up and smirked.

“Are you escaping your admirers again, Lizzy?” he asked.

“Yes, and I also need to speak to you, Father,” Elizabeth said, and her expression and tone were sufficiently serious that Mr. Bennet set aside his book and regarded her with narrowed eyes.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“Yes, but before I speak of it, kindly read this letter that I received from Jane yesterday.”

She handed over the letter, and Bennet spread it open, read it, read it again, and then lifted a sorrowful face toward his favorite daughter. “You wish to go to London, then, and be introduced to society by this Lady Appleby?”

“I do,” Elizabeth replied and began pacing up and down the carpeted room in obvious agitation. “I cannot bear it here, Father. I truly cannot! I always thought it would be marvelous to be rich, but to have gentlemen crawling out of the woodwork like so many insects ... it is dreadful! I daresay in London I will be but one fish in a giant pond and will garner far less interest.”

Her father laughed and said, “I am sorry, my dear. It is a pity that Mrs. Simpson did not give all the money to Lydia. She would have enjoyed the attention!”

“And spent all the money in a twelvemonth!” Elizabeth returned, and then sighed and said, “Well, I suppose even Lydia could not spend seventy thousand pounds in a mere year.”

“Anyone can spend as much as they like as quickly as they wish. I heard a story that at White’s, the premier gentleman’s club in London, two men made a three thousand pound bet on which of two raindrops would reach the bottom of the bow window pane first.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in dismay, and she said, “Surely that cannot be true! No one could be so foolish!”

“I have never been attracted to gambling, but many a gentleman has gambled away far larger fortunes than your own. But yes, I can understand why you are exasperated by the gentlemen’s crude attempts to win your favor.”

Elizabeth nodded, gathered herself, and then turned to face her father squarely. “There is another reason I wish to leave, Father. I went walking this morning on our land, and Mr. Wickham encountered me on the path. He asked me to marry him, and when I refused, he looked ... quite angry.”

Her father started, lurched to his feet, and hurried over to put his hands on her shoulders as he gazed intently into her face. “Angry? Did he harm you?”

“He did not,” his daughter said quickly. “But I had the stable boy Tom with me, and you know how big he is. If I had been alone – oh Father, there was a look on Wickham’s face which greatly disquieted me.”

Mr. Bennet took a step back and allowed his hands to drop to his sides. “Tom? Why was he with you?”

Elizabeth flushed and said, “It was Mary’s idea; she came to me three nights ago and told me that I ought not to walk alone now that I am so wealthy. I did not imagine that I would be in any danger on Longbourn land, but she was so concerned that I agreed to take a servant with me on my rambles. I truly thought she was being absurd but...” here, she

blew out a long breath and then continued softly, “truly, if he had not been with me, I do not know what Wickham would have done. He was definitely angry at me for my refusal and my reproaches over his treatment of Mary King.”

Mr. Bennet frowned at these words, but he merely said, “If Mary King thought that she could compete with you, Lizzy, then she is more of a fool than I imagined.”

Elizabeth’s eyes flashed fire, and she exclaimed, “How can you say such a thing? Do you not remember how grieved Jane was over Mr. Bingley’s desertion? Indeed, she is still depressed and sorrowful! Poor Mary King, to be so openly courted by Mr. Wickham, and then to be cast aside. It is cruel!”

“It is also the way of the world,” her father said and then, at the genuine fury on his daughter’s countenance, lifted up a placating hand. “I am merely speaking as I see it. The reality is that both men and women behave in ways that will bring them wealth or status.”

“It is horrible,” Elizabeth snapped and began stomping up and down the floor again while her father watched her in surprised concern. It was not like his Lizzy to be so upset. But then again, she had never before been confronted with even the possibility of violence against her person.

“I am very thankful that Mary was wise enough as to anticipate a problem,” he said, which caused Elizabeth to stop and turn toward him. “I confess it did not occur to me. I hope you plan to continue being cautious, both here and when you go to London?”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose and said, “Yes, to both. But Father, I really wish there was some way to warn Miss King about Wickham’s duplicitous nature.”

“You could tell your mother about the entire exchange. She would spread the news all over Meryton.”

“I assume you are joking. That would be exceedingly painful to Miss King, and Mr. Wickham might lie about what

actually happened between the two of us this morning.”

“That is true,” Bennet admitted and returned to his desk, where he sat down and pondered. A minute later he said, “Perhaps Mary and Miss Long would be willing to assist? Miss Long is a kind, tactful young woman, and I believe she knows Miss King quite well. She and Mary could, perhaps, call on the girl and her grandmother and gently inform them of Mr. Wickham’s less than salutary characteristics?”

Elizabeth mulled this over and then nodded. Anna Long, some three and twenty years of age, was a kindly young woman with a good head on her shoulders, and she and Miss King were indeed friends.

“That is a good idea, Father.”

“Good. Now, as much I grieve losing you to London – indeed, the conversation around here will be quite absurd with both of my older daughters gone – you ought to leave for Town as soon as it can be arranged.”

“I quite agree. Might I suggest that you spend more time with Mary? She is more observant than I realized, and I suspect would flower under your attention.”

Mr. Bennet considered this. On the one hand, he was a selfish man and not inclined to spend time with those daughters whom he found tiresome, and Mary *was* tiresome, with her constant reading of Fordyce and her moral prosing. On the other, it was true that the girl had a turn for scholarship, and perhaps she would prove a pleasant companion if encouraged in that direction.

“Very well,” he promised. “I will.”

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Longbourn

A Few Days Later

A frigid wind whistled around the eaves and corners of the house, tugging at heavy wool dresses and loose locks of hair where most of the Bennets stood clustered around the carriage, which was waiting in the front drive. Mary wrapped her thickly woven shawl tighter about herself as Elizabeth leaned over to hug her. Mr. Bennet waited beside the door of the carriage, his heavy brown woolen greatcoat a sturdy protection against the cold. He was grateful that his wife, at least, was not there to see them off; she had retreated to her bedchamber the previous night with a roaring fire and complaints of a head cold.

Elizabeth released her sisters and stepped up beside her father. Her own dress was eminently sensible for their upcoming journey, and she was well-wrapped and bearing a fur muff besides.

“Do write often, Lizzy,” Kitty said, her eyes large in her heart shaped face.

“Of course I will,” Elizabeth promised.

“Send us all the details of your beaux,” Lydia cried out. “I am certain with all that wonderful money, the men will cluster around you like bees to honey!”

“I devoutly hope that is not true,” Elizabeth declared with a groan.

“It almost certainly will be true,” Mary said. “Do be careful.”

Elizabeth smiled fondly at her next younger sister. She had told Mary of Mr. Wickham’s unnerving behavior and had thanked her for urging her to bring a servant on her rambles. She had also asked Mary to speak to Anna Long, and was thus confident that Miss King would soon be aware of Mr. Wickham’s true reasons for pursuing her.

“Come along, Lizzy,” her father directed, “the sooner we start, the sooner we will arrive in London.”

“Of course, Father,” Elizabeth replied, and after embracing each of her sisters once more, she took Mr. Bennet’s hand and stepped into the carriage.

Mr. Bennet climbed in after her, and they both settled into the forward facing seat, whereupon the master of Longbourn tapped the roof, and the vehicle jolted into motion. Elizabeth, whose window faced her sisters, spent the next minute waving as the carriage made its way down the graveled way and onto the road, whereupon she leaned back against the squabs and sighed in relief.

“Are you pleased to be on the way to London, then?” her father asked, hiding his sorrow under a light tone.

“Yes, I am. I will miss you all, of course, but the last days have been frantic with preparations, and now that we are on the road, that is in the past. Moreover, I have grown only more tired of all the visitors! Even with the knowledge that I was leaving for Town, we have been inundated with officers and young men, though at least Wickham had the sense to stay away. It is most annoying to realize that so many gentlemen are attracted primarily to money!”

“Perhaps you can spare a little sympathy to Mr. Darcy, then,” her father said with a chuckle.

This provoked his daughter to turn and regard him with confusion. “Mr. Darcy? What of him?”

“My dear girl, surely you see the parallel? He is master of a great estate, well connected, and very rich. I daresay he is hunted by the ladies as you are hunted by the local gentlemen. It explains, perhaps, his distant and haughty behavior.”

“Distance is well enough,” his daughter replied with warmth, “but there is no excuse at all for his discourtesy. ‘Not handsome enough to dance with’ he said about me, and loudly enough that I could hear him! That is insupportable!”

“It was very poorly done,” Mr. Bennet agreed and patted Elizabeth’s gloved hand. “Along with being stupid;

moreover, he obviously concluded that he was in error, since he danced with you at the ball at Netherfield.”

“That is true,” Elizabeth agreed, and knit her brow thoughtfully. Only a few days before Mr. Bingley had absconded for London, leaving a heartbroken Jane behind, he had hosted a ball at Netherfield Hall, where Mr. Darcy had indeed asked Elizabeth to dance. She had accepted, and they had spent much of the dance in silence, and most of the remainder arguing about George Wickham.

George Wickham, who had not bothered to obtain Holy Orders in spite of his claim that he had been meant for the church. George Wickham, who had abandoned Mary King and attempted to get Elizabeth alone on Longbourn’s path. George Wickham who was, she realized, not a particularly good man, and possibly an evil one.

She sighed, and her father asked, “What are you thinking of?”

“Mr. Wickham,” she confessed. “I was mistaken in my initial estimation of his character.”

“You are only twenty, Lizzy, and while quick and bright, not yet experienced enough to know the hearts of all those who come into your sphere. Indeed, I am more than fifty years of age, and I do not pretend to understand the intentions and plans of others.”

“Perhaps part of growing older is realizing that one does not know everything,” Elizabeth said wryly.

“That is true enough; I believe you are becoming wiser before my very eyes,” her father agreed with a hint of his usual wit.

They sat in silence for another few minutes, and then Elizabeth, determined to introduce a cheerful subject, said, “I am looking forward to being in London, where I am certain I will attract very little attention at all, and of course I am also excited to see Jane. She says that Lady Appleby is intelligent and kind and that I will like her.”

“That is good news,” her father remarked, though he could not quite hide a note of skepticism.

Elizabeth chuckled and said, “You are entirely correct that Jane likes everyone, but Aunt Gardiner has also sent me a letter telling me of her approval of the lady, so I feel quite confident.”

“Excellent,” Mr. Bennet returned, “though I intend to meet Lady Appleby in person so that I can form my own opinion.”

Elizabeth could not help but turn a surprised look on her father, who had already startled her by deciding to accompany her to London, which he despised.

“I know that I have not been a particularly attentive father,” Mr. Bennet said, tightening his grip on her hand, “but this inheritance has wakened me from my slumber to some degree, at least. Your wealth is now enormous, Lizzy, and there are many men who would take advantage of you. I will insist that you are properly guarded and protected in London.”

“Thank you, Father. May I also ask another favor?”

“You may ask, certainly.”

“Could you ... *would* you, keep a closer eye on Kitty and Lydia? They are my sisters, and I am, as you said, now rich.”

Bennet turned a frowning look on her and cogitated. On the one hand, he found his younger daughters extremely wearisome and avoided them as much as possible. On the other – well, they were foolish, flirtatious, and enamored with militia officers, and yes, if one of them was compromised by an officer, the man might well demand a substantial sum to marry, which only Elizabeth could provide.

“They will whine a great deal,” he said resentfully.

“You are their father,” Elizabeth said sternly. “You are the only one with the authority to rein in their vulgar and forward behavior.”

Bennet sighed deeply and said, “I will try, Lizzy. I will try.”

“Thank you,” she said simply, and a comfortable silence fell between them.

Elizabeth looked out of the window. The landscape outside was still barren and gloomy, caught in the grip of a slushy winter. Brown dead grasses poked dismal stalks up through layers of old snow. Few birds or beasts were moving about to lend life to the dreary scene.

But in just a few short weeks, the thaws would begin, and hard behind them new life. Crocuses and snowdrops would push up through the cold ground, and then grass would green the landscape. Birds would come out of hiding and build nests and lay eggs, and baby animals would gambol across the pastures and peep out of hedgerows.

Elizabeth’s mind turned to the last few weeks and the uncomfortable lessons they had taught her. She had long flattered herself that she truly understood people’s hearts, that she could ascertain their motivations. And yet it had never occurred to her that many people, maybe *most* people, would marry based on wealth alone. Such an idea appalled her; did respect and compatibility mean nothing?

Her mother, a solicitor’s daughter, had acquired status and wealth by marrying a gentleman. Mr. Bennet, in turn, had obtained a beautiful wife. And yet neither of them were happy in their marriage; he, sharply and incisively witty, found no pleasure in the conversation of his vapid wife, save when he teased her. Fanny Bennet fretted and bothered her husband, her fears allowing no one around her any rest.

Elizabeth abhorred the idea of entering into such a union. When the tiresome Mr. Collins, her father’s cousin and heir, had made her an offer the previous autumn, she had refused him without hesitation. She could not bear the idea of spending every day in the company of the wearying parson, enduring his foolish prating and endless obsequiousness towards his patroness – no, it was insupportable. She would go

entirely mad. Even in the face of her mother's outraged dismay, she had remained unmoved from her decision.

But the news, some days later, that her friend Charlotte Lucas had accepted Mr. Collins's offer, had left Elizabeth aghast. She could not understand why her dear and sensible friend had agreed to marry such a tiresome man.

"Will you not be bored, Charlotte?" she had asked, appalled.

"Perhaps a bit," Charlotte had agreed calmly. "But I am not so quick of mind as you are, Lizzy, and boredom is not the dread specter to me that it is to you. I consider it a small price to pay for the chance to run my own household and have children. Mr. Collins may be irritating at times, but he is a kind man, and he will be good to me and my children. That is what I want."

"Then I wish you very happy," Elizabeth had said, sincere but deeply puzzled.

She still was not sure she entirely understood. But she was coming to realize that many more people were like Charlotte than she had thought. Love, respect, compatibility; all were widely considered less important than the more material things in life.

The past several weeks had been wonderful in some ways and profoundly distressing in others. But the lessons they were teaching her, Elizabeth thought, might be one of the more valuable benefits of her enormous inheritance.

Chapter 9

The King Residence

Meryton

The Next Day

Mary Bennet followed Anna Long into the small, cheerful sitting room and took a seat across from Mary King and her grandmother, Mrs. Abigail King.

Neither lady was at all handsome. Miss King was rather shorter than was fashionable, with her plain dark hair in an unflattering bun, and even in the midst of winter, freckles spattered her nose. Old Mrs. King was a squat, homely woman with gray hair, an unappealing but warm woolen dress, a kind face, and an open affection for her granddaughter.

She and her husband had taken Mary in when the girl's parents died in a severe influenza epidemic. Old Mr. King had passed on to his reward a few months ago, leaving his ten thousand pound fortune to his adored granddaughter, and his widow and Mary King dwelt together, alone now save for the servants.

The sitting room was comfortable, if cluttered, with a lifetime's worth of knickknacks sitting on tables and shelves and on the mantle of a drafty fireplace which was producing a moderate amount of heat.

"My dear Miss Long, Miss Mary," Mrs. King said cheerfully, "it is wonderful to see you on such a gray and chilly day."

Anna Long glanced at her companion and sat up straighter in her chair. "I am afraid that our visit here has to do with an unpleasant piece of news, Mrs. King."

The two King ladies exchanged bewildered looks, and the elder woman asked, “Unpleasant? In what way?”

Anna nodded at Mary, who swallowed and said softly, “I do apologize for what I am about to say, and I hope you will take it in the spirit in which it is intended. I understand that Mr. George Wickham has been ... erm ... courting you, Miss King?”

Mary King flushed bright red and looked down at the floor, her lips quirking up slightly. Mrs. King, however, narrowed her eyes and demanded, “Mr. Wickham has called on us often, and he has indeed paid a great deal of attention to my granddaughter. What of it?”

Mary glanced again at Anna, who nodded in encouragement, and then looked back at Mrs. King. “I daresay you have heard that my sister Elizabeth recently inherited a substantial sum of money from a distant female relation?”

“Yes, I did hear that,” the older woman agreed. “I heard a truly absurd quantity mentioned – seventy thousand pounds! I assume that must be an inflation of the true inheritance?”

Mary did not quite know what to say, and apparently her expression gave her away.

“My, my, my!” said the gray haired woman, an awed expression on her face. “Miss Elizabeth is now very rich indeed.”

“Yes, she is,” Mary began, only to be interrupted by the other Mary, who demanded, “What of the rest of you? Surely you all inherited at least a little?”

Mary felt herself blush, but she managed to reply with admirable composure, “My two younger sisters and I received nothing, and our eldest sister Jane received a small bequest. Elizabeth is the only wealthy Bennet daughter.”

Both the Kings looked outraged at this news, and Mary continued hastily, “But that is neither here nor there. The truth is that, well, Mr. Wickham paid a great deal of attention to Elizabeth last autumn before he turned his attentions on you.

After the news spread of her inheritance, he – there is no good way to say this, Miss King, except to speak the truth. He asked Elizabeth to marry him a few days ago, and she refused, but he did ask her, and I thought you ought to know.”

Mary King stared blankly for a long moment and then burst into tears just as Mrs. King, her wrinkled face twisted with anger, snapped, “I knew it! I knew there was something wrong, Mary! He has not called for days...”

“Oh, Grandmother! Oh!” Miss King sobbed, hunting around frantically for a handkerchief. “Oh, oh!”

Mary and Anna Long sighed in unison and rose to their feet. “We are so sorry,” Mary began, and Mrs. King said in a harassed voice, “It is quite all right. We very much appreciate your coming to tell us.”

“Good-bye,” Miss Long and Mary chorused, and the two girls retreated in haste out of the sitting room, down the corridor, and out of the door which led to the cobble street.

They walked in silence for two minutes before Mary said miserably, “That was dreadful.”

“It was, rather,” Anna agreed with a sigh, “but far better Miss King knows of Mr. Wickham’s true character now rather than after she marries him.”

“True,” Mary agreed, as they turned onto the main road which led to her Aunt and Uncle Phillips’ house, where Mary would walk home with a maid, and Anna would wait until her aunt came to fetch her.

A cluster of red-coated militia officers lounged outside the Pig in the Poke, some leaning against the pub’s wall. Pratt straightened as the two girls approached, doffing his hat with a small bow.

“Good day, ladies,” he said courteously, and Denny turned to glance at them before following his fellow officer’s example.

“Good day, gentlemen,” Anna returned politely, both girls inclining their heads. But Mary’s gaze drifted past the two lieutenants into the knot of remaining officers. Wickham stood in the midst of them, smiling broadly to show off his white straight teeth. Even as she watched, he tipped his head back, laughing merrily at some joke from one of his companions. It was abominably rude of him to ignore her and Anna in such a manner; he had been introduced and was therefore required by the rules of polite society to acknowledge them.

But George Wickham had no use for plain women, she knew that very well. No, he saved his smiles and his charm for women who were handsome, wealthy, or both, and took callous advantage of the lighter country etiquette to entirely ignore the ladies he deemed beneath his notice. Handsome and charming he may be, but George Wickham was not, in Mary’s opinion, at all a good man.

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Half Moon Street

London

Evening

Elizabeth’s fingers moved skillfully across the pianoforte. She had been slightly relieved, upon sitting down, not to find a complicated Mozart piece ready and waiting, but instead a score composed by Thomas Augustine Arne. She had taken a moment to familiarize herself with the music, and now it flowed easily as she played. The instrument itself was well-crafted and carefully tuned, and delightful to play on.

Her father, Jane, and Lady Appleby, seated nearby, listened in appreciation. The furniture was as antique here as in the rest of the house, and in as good condition – there had

not been the slightest creak from the chair when Mr. Bennet sat down in it. Jane was seated gracefully on a blue love seat, one arm draped over the rest, and Lady Appleby sat alertly upright, watching Elizabeth with bright eyes.

Elizabeth reached the end of the piece with a flourish and turned on the bench to smile at her audience. Lady Appleby smiled back with enthusiasm, clapping her hands with Jane and Mr. Bennet joining her a second later.

“Very well done, Miss Elizabeth, absolutely lovely,” the old woman declared.

“Thank you, Madame,” Elizabeth said respectfully, and then she stood up and continued, “I hope you do not mind if I retire now? I am still not entirely used to the London noises and did not sleep particularly well last night.”

“I am weary as well,” Jane remarked, standing up.

Mr. Bennet rose as well and said, “I plan to leave in the very early hours, my dears, and thus will likely not see you in the morning. I am very satisfied with the arrangements here, and I look forward to cheerful letters of all your amusements and conquests.”

His two daughters stepped forward and embraced him, and he planted loving kisses on both foreheads and then, with a last smile, watched them walk out of the room and shut the door behind them.

Mr. Bennet waited until the sound of their footsteps faded away, then took his seat again and regarded Lady Appleby with interest.

She was thin and spare and not particularly tall, with a delicately wrinkled face and snowy-white hair. But her eyes sparkled with a zest for life and laughter, above a rather determined chin. She was clad in a practical teal wool dress with a warm gray shawl draped artfully across her thin shoulders.

“Well, Mr. Bennet, what do you want?” the lady inquired, lifting one eyebrow.

The gentleman could not help but lift his own brow in surprise. “Am I so very obvious, Madame?”

“To me you are, certainly, but then I am many years older than you, and experienced in the ways of gentlemen. What is it you want?”

Bennet hesitated and then said, “I do not know if my brother Gardiner has mentioned my younger girls?”

“I gather, from the conversation of your daughters and relations, that your middle daughter is pedantically devoted to study, and your younger two daughters are heedless, foolish, and vulgar,” Lady Appleby replied calmly.

Bennet winced at this blunt, but undeniably apt, statement. “Did they also tell you that I have been a lazy and indifferent father, with the sad result that Kitty and Lydia are reckless hoydens?”

“That much was not said, but I gathered it. It is both understandable, given the entail on the estate to a distant cousin, and dishonorable, given that your wife is incapable of providing appropriate guidance to your daughters, and thus it falls on *you* to guide and direct them.”

Bennet felt a brief surge of ire, which faded away quickly. It was all true enough; he knew he was lazy and selfish, and indeed had often teased his wife that Mr. Collins would throw her out of Longbourn as soon as his body was cold.

It was, he admitted to himself, a subtle way to punish his wife for being ... herself. He should have never married the young Frances Gardiner, who was, along with being incredibly beautiful, quite empty headed. She had pursued him, he had taken the bait, and now he was trapped in a marriage with a woman with whom he had almost nothing in common. And then, his wife had not even managed to produce a son to break the entail!

Of course that was not truly her fault, but it had been a cruel blow to both of them when they had produced only

daughters.

“I confess to being rather tired myself, Mr. Bennet,” Lady Appleby remarked, intruding on his thoughts. “So if you have something to say to me, pray say it. If you are concerned about my oversight of Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth...”

“Not at all!” Bennet cut in hastily, and then repeated himself more calmly. “Not at all. You will do a far better job of overseeing their launch into society than any of us could. No, I, well, you are correct, Madame, that I have been an aloof father. I cannot deny it, nor will I bother excusing it. But now that Elizabeth is wealthy, I realize that my younger girls are possibly in danger from greedy and immoral men. My other four girls may be poor, but their sister is wealthy. Or do you think I am being overly pessimistic?”

“I believe pessimism is entirely warranted,” the lady responded drily. “There are many honorable men out there, but a few that are not. Given that both Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia chase recklessly after officers, I would not be at all surprised if they were caught in a compromising position. Given that they are poor, Miss Elizabeth might well find herself forced to pay, and pay well, in order to bring about a necessary marriage. No, I think you are entirely correct to be concerned.”

“I *am* concerned,” Bennet said, “but I also know myself well. I find my youngest two daughters tedious in the extreme, and I enjoy my library and books. Whether I am too old to change I know not; I feel that I am, and therefore, I am. Nonetheless, something must be done, and I wondered whether you had a recommendation. A governess, perhaps?”

Lady Appleby chuckled and said, “Well, you are honest, anyway, and that is something. Yes, a governess would be helpful, and two would be even more helpful.”

Bennet wrinkled his nose. “I am not certain I can afford two.”

“What has happened with your money, Mr. Bennet?” his companion demanded. “Two thousand pounds a year is a

goodly sum. I would have expected you to set aside some money every year for the care of your wife and daughters after your death.”

“I should have done so, of course. The truth is that when my wife and I were first married, we had no interest in economy, because we assumed we would have a son, who would break the entail once he was of age and thus provide for any daughters. Even after our youngest daughter of five was born, Mrs. Bennet believed a son would eventually arrive. By the time that was despaired of, it was too late. My wife is, frankly, an extravagant woman. I have a deep loathing of debt and thus have managed to stay solvent, but amidst this tension, nothing has been saved.”

“If you can stay out of debt, you can save,” Diana Appleby said sternly. “It is merely a matter of determination.”

“I admit to having very little determination. When my wife and daughters whine and wail, I escape into my library and let them do what they want so long as they do not plunge us into debt.”

“If I do find a governess or two, they can only do their jobs if you support them properly.”

“Again, you say two,” Mr. Bennet remarked. “Do you really think two are necessary?”

“Given that Miss Lydia is headstrong, and Miss Kitty follows her into foolishness, and Miss Mary is neglected, two governesses would be better. Moreover, I know a set of twins in need of positions, the daughters of Mr. Franklin Adler of Sussex, who lost all of his money at the gambling tables. The ladies are some five and twenty years of age and very accomplished. If you can support them appropriately, I am confident they can rein in your girls. But you cannot hide in your library all day and allow Mrs. Bennet and your younger daughters to bully the Adlers. You can always reduce your daughters’ allowances, after all; that ought to penetrate!”

Bennet smiled wryly. “You seem to have a remarkable understanding of my children in spite of never having met them.”

“They are no doubt much like many young ladies, and gentlemen for that matter. We all are selfish beings at heart, and without appropriate discipline and guidance, it is not a surprise that your younger daughters behave in an outrageous manner. It is, in fact, startling that Jane and Elizabeth are as charming and well-mannered as they are.”

Bennet sat back and sighed. “You do not mince words, my lady.”

“I have no time for such things. Now, what do you think? Shall I send the Adler girls to Longbourn? Think of it this way; if you do not act, and Miss Lydia or Miss Kitty causes a great scandal, it will require an enormous amount of effort on your part to counteract it.”

Bennet nodded. “I am convinced. By all means, send the young women to Longbourn.”

Chapter 10

Meryton

Two Days Later

Wickham smiled and bowed automatically to the acquaintances he passed; he had long ago perfected the art of appearing pleasant even while in a foul mood. He was wending his way now to the King residence in the heart of Meryton to resume his interrupted courtship of the homely Mary King and her ten thousand pounds; a mere pittance next to the fabulous wealth of Elizabeth Bennet.

He had, he admitted to himself, misjudged the lady. He had assumed that she would fall easily under his spell again, but it seemed that she had a jealous streak. She was obviously angry that he had abandoned her for Mary King. It could not be that she actually pitied Mary King; the girl was genuinely ugly, and deserved no special attention from him. Surely Miss Elizabeth was intelligent enough to realize that a poor man must seek a fortune however he could find it, regardless of any genuine attachment to a woman. And Miss King was a nasty little freckled thing, whose only advantage was her ten thousand pound fortune!

In any case, Miss Elizabeth was now well out of his reach, having departed to London. He thought every day of his failed proposal on Longbourn's path, of the burly and deeply inconvenient servant boy Tom, and of what Wickham himself might have done had the retainer not been there. He preferred his women willing, but seventy thousand pounds was not a prize to let easily slip away.

He pondered as he strolled. Would he have been able to do it? Would he have been able to bring himself to kiss Elizabeth Bennet unwilling? Or even force himself on her? The thought of such a thing was humiliating; he was a

handsome, well built, charming gentleman, and had prided himself on his ability to tantalize women into doing what he wanted without pressure or violence. But for seventy thousand pounds, he might have made an exception.

It mattered not, now. Elizabeth Bennet and her riches had waltzed off to London, and it was time to renew his attentions to the moderately wealthy Mary King. He hoped Miss King was well today. He had called on her yesterday and the day before, and both times had been turned away brusquely at the door with the information that she was unavailable due to poor health.

Truth be told, he cared little for the lady's well-being, but his debts were mounting, and he was in sore need of some ready money.

Wickham turned the corner onto the side street which held the King residence and came to a sudden, startled halt. A carriage was drawn up to the front of the home, with four fine horses in harnesses, and servants were rushing to and fro with trunks. Obviously someone was preparing for a journey, and a long one by the looks of it.

Wickham walked around to the front of the carriage, giving the horses a wide berth, and slowly climbed the shallow steps which led to the front door of the house.

He knocked, and the butler opened it and stared at him silently.

"Are Mrs. and Miss King available?" Wickham asked with his most charming smile.

"The ladies are not available, sir," the butler responded promptly, and then turned as his mistress, the elderly Mrs. King, dressed in a gray pelisse and traveling boots, appeared out of a side hall and took her position next to the butler.

"Mrs. King, I hope you are well?" Wickham asked, lifting his foot and planting it on the polished wood of the entry way.

“I am not particularly well, no,” the woman replied coldly. “I am preparing for a long journey to Liverpool with my granddaughter today, and I do not enjoy traveling, especially in early spring when the weather is so uncertain. It is necessary, however, given Mary’s heartbreak at your cruel behavior, Mr. Wickham.”

Wickham’s eyes flared wide with confusion and dismay. “I do not understand, Mrs. King.”

“Did you really think that we would not hear of your offer to Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn, Lieutenant?” Mrs. King demanded, her blue eyes sparking with outrage. “You spent days haunting this door and wooing my dear granddaughter, and then you promptly turned and offered for Miss Elizabeth when she came into a great fortune. How dare you, sir!”

“I assure you,” Wickham began feebly and then lapsed into silence as Mrs. King turned on her heel and stalked out of the foyer. The butler, a surprisingly burly man, took a step forward and said, “You are not welcome here, Mr. Wickham. I suggest you pull your foot back before I slam it in the door.”

Wickham did so, turning like an automaton to walk down the stairs and slowly back towards the barracks.

His mind reeled in shock and bewilderment and no small amount of dismay. In less than a week, two excellent chances at wedding an heiress had slipped through his fingers. But how had the Kings found out about his offer for Miss Elizabeth?

She must have told them, he realized, anger surging through him. Besides himself, she and the yokel servant boy had been the only ones present at his marriage proposal on the Longbourn path. Given her high-minded prating about breaking hearts – yes, she would feel quite noble warning Mary King of his designs.

He stepped into his room, hot with rage, and closed the door very carefully. Oh how he wished he could punish the

pert Elizabeth Bennet! How dare she ruin his chances to make a good marriage?! But she was inaccessible now, the clever, viperish female.

Wickham crossed to his window and stared sullenly out of it at the busy street below. Anna Long and Maria Lucas passed, and he glared at them – Anna, a friend of Mary Bennet’s, and Maria, who was often to be seen with ... Lydia and Kitty Bennet.

A slow smile spread across his face. Elizabeth herself might be unreachable now, but her foolish, headstrong, flirtatious sisters were still very much present. Both were ripe for the plucking; Lydia, willing to let her head be turned by a handful of fulsome compliments and a charming smile, Kitty, perpetually in her younger sister’s shadow and hungry for affection. Either of them would do nicely, or even both. If they were to be ruined, it would taint the entire family, and it would bring him great pleasure and, perhaps, some fortune if he played his cards correctly.

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The Streets of London

En Route to Matlock House

One Week Later

“I am so looking forward to seeing Cousin Richard!” Georgiana Darcy exclaimed, leaning closer to her brother and smiling up at him. “It has been a full two years since he and I have been in company, you know!”

“I do know, my dear,” Darcy replied, wrapping an arm around his much younger sister. “We are all very thankful to have him safely back on English soil.”

“And his wound is truly minor?” the girl asked, her blue eyes dark with concern.

“I believe so. Just a flesh wound from a bullet, and it is healing well.”

“Do you think that he will need to return to the war in the near future?”

“He has, at least, promised to accompany me to Rosings, so he will be in England for a few months.”

He felt her wince, and she said, “He may find that more challenging than battling Napoleon himself.”

Darcy could not help but laugh at this, and pressed a kiss on his sister’s capped head. Rosings, home of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, sister of the Darcys’ deceased mother, was a handsome and impressive estate, but her mistress was dictatorial and obnoxious. Darcy disliked his visits to Rosings very much, but regrettably, duty required him to attend to his aunt every year or two.

“I do not need to go to Rosings, do I?” Georgiana asked timidly.

“No, no, of course not,” Darcy said hastily. “No, you will stay with our Uncle and Aunt Matlock starting next week after our cousin’s wedding, with Mrs. Annesley to bear you company when the Matlocks are otherwise engaged.”

“Thank you,” the girl replied immediately. “Lady Catherine frightens me.”

Darcy opened his mouth in protest and then closed it. He was not afraid of his aunt, but then he was not of a timid disposition, whereas Georgiana was.

He tightened his arm around his sister and turned toward the window. Several minutes passed in comfortable silence until Darcy’s wandering eye caught sight of two women exiting a well-known dressmaker’s shop, and he jumped in surprise.

“What is it, Brother?” Georgiana demanded in a concerned tone, and Darcy, whose head was now twisted to look over his shoulder, shook his head and turned to look at her.

“It is nothing, my dear. I thought I saw someone I recognized.”

“Who?”

“Erm, two ladies from Hertfordshire, though I must be mistaken. They could not possibly be coming out of Madame Fanchon’s establishment.”

“The Misses Bennet?” his sister asked shrewdly, which provoked a surprised exclamation from the master of Pemberley.

“How did you know that, my dear?” he demanded.

“Oh, you spoke of them in your letters last autumn, especially Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” Georgiana said. “She sounds like a very interesting lady.”

Darcy, thinking of the bright-eyed woman who had captivated him a few months earlier, and even now haunted his dreams, could only agree. “Yes, she is a most fascinating young lady, Georgiana.”

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Matlock House

Two Hours Later

A cozy intimate group was gathered around the Matlocks’ informal dining table. Lord Matlock sat at the head of the table with his wife opposite him at the foot. To his right sat his daughter Rebekah, and beyond her, her little sister Rachel, while beyond Rachel, nearest his mother, sat Richard.

To the earl's left sat Darcy, with Georgiana between her brother and her aunt, Lady Matlock.

The earl smiled at Rebekah, who would not grace his table much longer. She would be married within a week to a wealthy baron's eldest son. Lady Matlock had wished her long-absent younger son to sit near to her tonight, and her husband had conceded without protest. He too longed to speak with Richard, who had been overseas for far too long.

Not for the first time, he wondered why his son had insisted on joining the army. Richard, as a second son, was not particularly wealthy, but his parents had many connections in the church and government. Richard could have been a clergyman of a valuable living, or served as a diplomat in a safe city, but no, Richard had always been army mad, and had insisted that his father purchase a commission in one of the more respectable regiments.

He wondered whether this time, now that his son had been injured on the field of battle, whether Richard might be willing to sell out and settle down.

Darcy, looking around him, thought that the fare was considerably more lavish than would be usual for a simple family dinner party. Lady Matlock's joy in her son's return was plainly visible in the ample spread placed across the white linen-and-lace tablecloth tonight and in the affectionate looks and solicitous attention with which she plied the patient Richard. The silverware sparkled in the abundant candlelight, as did the gilded edges of the finest china.

Darcy ate steadily and silently, listening to his male cousin. Richard was, between bites taken from the fork in his left hand, delighting his sisters and mother and little cousin with tales from the camp. He spoke of mules being let loose by a careless guard and running amuck and knocking over a dozen tents before being caught; of the shenanigans of the junior officers, bored in their downtime; and of strange and exotic and peculiar meals of necessity cooked over a campfire.

Darcy appreciated that Richard was holding to lighter topics. Sensitive Georgiana would be deeply upset by the recounting of battles, but hearing the amusing anecdotes had her eyes sparkling, as Darcy himself took the opportunity to study his military cousin.

Richard's skin had bronzed deeply in the Continental sun, his brow grown craggy and his eyes keen. He held his wounded right arm as still as he could, adept at substituting with his left hand.

"Do you intend to return to the Peninsula when you are fully healed, Cousin?" Georgiana asked timidly.

"Well, as to that, my dear, I do not know," Richard said, casting a humorous look toward his mother. "It depends on the upcoming Season."

"Oh Richard, are you finally intending to take a wife?" Lady Rebekah cried out excitedly.

"Well, if I can find her, certainly. The question is whether I can find an appropriate woman who wishes to marry an ugly, injured, swarthy officer like myself."

There was a general outcry at this remark from the ladies, and Darcy, though he kept his mouth closed, shook his head reprovingly when he managed to catch Richard's eye. Colonel Fitzwilliam was not conventionally handsome, but his face was pleasing, as were his demeanor and conversation. He was also the second son of an earl, which was enticing to many a gentleman's daughter.

"I am certain that Rebekah and I can develop a list of likely ladies for you," Lady Rachel offered, her blue eyes dancing merrily.

"Thank you, dear sister," Richard replied with a dramatic bow of his head. "That would be most helpful. I believe that a lady with a dowry of twenty thousand pounds would be sufficient."

"That rules out Miss Cates," Lady Rebekah remarked, "but I believe Miss Stephenson has a substantial dowry."

“Bekah!” her younger sister suddenly exclaimed.
“Richard should attempt to win the mystery heiress!”

“The mystery heiress?” Lord Matlock repeated, speaking for the first time in some minutes. “What are you speaking of?”

“Oh, there are rumors floating around that a new heiress has arrived in Town, Father,” Lady Rebekah said eagerly. “She is supposed to be incredibly rich, with a fortune of seventy thousand pounds!”

“Where did you hear this?” Lady Matlock demanded.

“It was Patricia Coventry who told us, and she heard it from her cousin Sarah, who met Mrs. Blacklock at Gunter’s, and she said that her elder sister told her that the woman is staying with Lady Appleby in a house on Half Moon Street!”

“Stuff and nonsense,” Lord Matlock grunted. “You cannot trust rumors. There are very few women in the kingdom with such a fat dowry, and all of them are known to your mother and me.”

“Oh, but Papa!” Lady Rachel said, turning a saucy look on him. She was, as the youngest Fitzwilliam, the apple of her father’s eye, and she did not hesitate to argue with him, though always in a charming way. “Truly, I do think there is some truth to it, though as you said, the amount has likely been inflated dreadfully. But if she is worth forty thousand pounds, well, she might be the perfect wife for my dear brother!”

“By all means, track down this lady of mystery and tell me her name,” Richard requested, grinning. “Who knows, perhaps I will ride into battle and win her favor!”

Chapter 11

Lucas Lodge

Hertfordshire

The Next Day

The drawing and dining rooms of Lucas Lodge were full, with clusters of people happily talking with one another and eating enthusiastically from the buffet tables set up in the dining room, which were lavishly furnished with tea, coffee, cakes, small finger sandwiches, and biscuits. Multiple candles were set carefully in front of mirrors to reflect their light throughout all the rooms, and Miss Anna Long carried one candlestick over to set on the pianoforte in search of music scores of merry dancing melodies.

Wickham glanced around from his vantage point in the corner of the drawing room facing the door. Plenty of frocks and gowns were in evidence as the local ladies were out in force. Indeed, he thought the only ones missing were the Kings and the Bennets. Miss King's absence he mourned not at all, and he awaited the Bennet ladies with a nauseous mixture of hope and unease. His looks and easy charm would get him a long way, but it would not be easy to explain if Mrs. Bennet and her daughters were to cut him directly.

He took another drink of his ale and looked around at his companion officers, all with glasses or tankards in hand. Most of them, like him, were watching the door with anticipatory eyes. He was not the only one awaiting the Bennet ladies, it seemed.

"They are not a particularly pretty lot, are they," Lieutenant Smythe commented, drawing Wickham's attention. Smythe had joined the regiment only the previous week, and the spring rains had prevented him from meeting the local ladies until this evening.

“I fear that the loveliest ladies in the area, the two eldest Misses Bennet, are in London at the moment,” Lieutenant Pratt said gloomily.

“Are they intending to return?” Smythe asked.

“I doubt it,” Captain Denny said mournfully. “Miss Elizabeth inherited a great fortune recently and has settled in London for some time. Miss Bennet is keeping her company, I expect.”

“How much of a fortune?” Smythe inquired.

“Seventy thousand pounds,” Wickham said shortly, clenching his jaw as the other man gasped.

“Seventy thousand pounds?” the newcomer repeated in an awed tone.

“Yes,” Denny concurred and shook his head. “Four of the five Bennet girls are handsome, but until this unexpected windfall, none of them had any money to speak of. Now Miss Elizabeth is a great heiress, but naturally she ran off to London where some lucky gentleman will snatch her up. Indeed, given her fortune and her beauty, she might well snatch up a member of the nobility!”

The main door opened at this juncture, and Wickham turned his head in time to observe Mrs. Bennet, dressed in a dark green gown, bustle into the room. He watched, his throat slightly constricted, as Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia followed their mother indoors. Miss Lydia, dressed in a low cut gown which showed rather more bosom than was appropriate for her years, looked around eagerly and then, at the sight of him, waved happily, her pretty face lighting up with pleasure.

He relaxed and smiled broadly in return. It seemed that either Miss Lydia had not been warned off from him, or if she had, did not care in the least.

Miss Long began playing at this fortunate moment, and Wickham left the group of officers to stride over to Lydia Bennet.

“Miss Lydia, might I have the honor of this dance?” he asked.

“Oh yes, Mr. Wickham! Thank you very much!”

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Half Moon Street

London

Two Weeks Later

Elizabeth looked around fondly at Jane’s bedchamber as her elder sister prepared for the evening. The room was largely unchanged since Mrs. Simpson’s time, and while the furniture was quaintly old-fashioned, Jane had elected to use it as it was. She had fallen in love nearly at once with the delicate spring-blossom pink of the room, and after a thorough cleaning, it was perfectly charming. Antique lace, turned ivory with age, ruffled the curtains and pillow slips, lending an air of sophistication to the pink it adorned.

Jane glowed like a daffodil in the yellow gown that her maid Sally was currently helping her into. Her lace overdress matched her hair almost perfectly, with her hair braided into an elaborate coiffure held in place with a pearl comb and pearled pins. A single pearl strand wrapped around her white throat directly above her neckline.

Elizabeth, studying her approvingly, thought she had never beheld such a lovely creature. She turned to examine her own reflection in the mirror and nodded in approval. Her dress flattered her, she thought; it was a pale green muslin gown hemmed with lace, with the same lace decorating her neckline and arms. The maid had grimly tamed Elizabeth’s wild curls into an elegant coiffure that shone in the light of the six wax candles set about the room.

There were benefits to being wealthy, Elizabeth thought, considering the candles. They were not exactly frugal at Longbourn, but even her extravagant mother did not burn so many candles in a single room outside of special occasions.

As Sally set about putting the finishing touches to Jane, Elizabeth allowed her mind to wander. She had greatly enjoyed these last few weeks in London with Lady Appleby, who, while the epitome of kindness, also displayed a will of steel as necessary. She had presented the Bennet sisters with a list of her favorite modistes and milliners and cobblers, instructing them firmly to patronize the listed shops and mention her name.

But between all the shopping trips, life had been peaceful. Elizabeth had enjoyed the leisure to curl up with a book in the library or her bedroom. It was a marked contrast to the endless parade of visitors that had so plagued her at Longbourn, and she had thoroughly enjoyed the lack of company.

All of that was to change tonight, as Lady Appleby was determined to start building the Bennets' connections, starting with this dinner party. She had carefully selected and invited several friends and family members to Half Moon Street with an eye to their connections.

This meant, regrettably, that Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner could not be present at the party. Elizabeth had been discreetly and entirely displeased with this exclusion at first, no matter how well she understood the social necessity of it. After all the aid and comfort the Gardiners had rendered her in her inheritance – both her Uncle Gardiner's expertise with money and her aunt's steady sweet kindness – it had seemed churlishly ungrateful.

"Do not fret, Lizzy," Aunt Gardiner had assured her with a warm smile. "We are well aware of the conventions you must follow, and it does not bother us in the least. Besides, I would sooner stay in at nights with my children than spend the evening unprofitably among the haut ton."

Elizabeth's attention was recalled as Sally stepped away at last, looking pleased with her work. "There you are, miss."

"How do I look, Lizzy?" Jane asked, turning towards her sister, who smiled mistily and declared, "I am confident that you are the most beautiful woman in all of London, my dear."

"I do not think that is true," Jane said, and compressed her lips. "I am a little nervous, Lizzy. It will be quite peculiar meeting so many new people, especially ones that are ranked high in society."

"You may go, Sally," Elizabeth said to the maid, who immediately retreated out of the door.

Once the door had shut behind her, Elizabeth stepped forward and took Jane's hands in her own, aware that an embrace would unduly ruffle their attire.

"It is quite normal to feel anxious at meeting a host of highly born individuals," she said.

A smile formed on Jane's lips. "And yet, you are not nervous in the least."

"I am not, but I am not prone to nerves. I expect the ladies and gentlemen coming tonight are much like other people, with their own hopes and dreams. I promise I will protect you if any of them prove obnoxious, though I do not think Lady Appleby would invite anyone prone to that."

"I appreciate your reassurances," Jane replied and then smiled. "In any case, they will pay very little attention to me. You are the rich Bennet sister, after all!"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes just as the door opened, and Sally appeared again and said, "Misses, Lady Appleby requests that you both come downstairs."

Jane smiled and hooked her arm in her sister's. "Onward, Lizzy?"

"Onward."

Chapter 12

Dear Father,

We had our first dinner party last night. Lady Appleby invited more than a dozen people, all of them friends or connections of hers. There were several young, single gentlemen present, all in search of a wife.

I suppose I should have expected it, but I did not; I was more popular than Jane because of my money. When I think of how beautiful Jane is, and how wonderful her character, it seems wrong that I was blessed with so much money and she was not. She, of course, is not upset in the least. I am not certain that makes it easier for me.

In any case, it was largely a pleasant party, and the men seeking a rich wife were at least courteous. There were also some young ladies – sisters and cousins of the men – who were pleasant to speak to.

That is enough about me; how is everyone at Longbourn? Lady Appleby told me about the Adler twins. They sound wonderful, and I look forward to hearing more about them. I have no doubt that all of my younger sisters will benefit greatly.

Now I must prepare for a trip to the opera tonight. I have never been to the Opera house and wonder whether I will like tonight's performance. I confess to not being entirely thrilled at listening to and watching something written in a language I do not know. There are those who would despise me for such a view, but I think it entirely reasonable.

With much love,

Your Lizzy

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Green's Gentlemen's Club

London

Four days later

The card room of the club was tastefully done up in fir and forest greens. The cushions on the chairs were so dark as to be almost black, and the tasseled cloths over the mahogany tables were as verdant as summer fields. Sunlight slanted in through the windows to stripe the carpet in viridian and glowing emerald and glanced across unlit sconces holding neatly trimmed wax candles. A lone violin played from behind a screen painted with a tranquil lake surrounded by willows.

The room hummed with low conversation, with men sitting around at some dozen tables exchanging coins and vowels over games of whist and loo, quadrille and piquet. Silent liveried waiters drifted through the room, refilling glasses and bringing new cigars or paper and sealing wax as requested.

Charles Bingley and Fitzwilliam Darcy sat together at a small table pushed near to a wall, a decanter of port to hand and two half-filled glasses forgotten beside it. The game was piquet, and both men were concentrating.

“To the jack,” Darcy said, and Bingley grinned and said, “Not good. King.”

Darcy sighed and made a note of Bingley's points on a piece of paper. He was behind, which was rather unusual, as he was generally a better player than his friend. Well, he *was* a better player, but today the cards had favored Bingley. He had no more sequences, and moved onto sets. “Quatorzes.”

“Good,” Bingley replied with a disappointed sigh, and Darcy put down the appropriate points in his own column.

The game continued apace, and Darcy was irritated when a noisy group of four gentlemen entered the room and walked toward a table near them, distracting him from play. One of them, a gentleman named Mr. Jameson, Darcy knew. "Please tell me that she is ugly, at least?" Jameson pleaded in a jocular tone.

"Not in the least," one of the unknown gentlemen retorted. "She is quite beautiful, with dark glossy hair and fine eyes, along with being charmingly petite. Furthermore, she has an elder sister who is even more handsome, a blonde, blue eyed beauty who is quite one of the loveliest creatures I have ever seen in my life."

This talk, naturally enough, jolted Darcy considerably, and he openly turned his face toward the men, as the enticing features of Elizabeth Bennet danced in his mind's eye. Could it possibly be that they spoke of her?

The words regarding the elder woman also caused Bingley to also jerk in surprise and turn toward the group, his lips parted in wonder.

"Is the elder girl also an heiress?" Jameson asked curiously.

"She is not. It is quite a peculiar situation; the girl inherited from a distant connection, a Mrs. Simpson, who chose to divide her fortune between a great-niece, whose husband is in trade, and this Miss Elizabeth Bennet..."

"What!" Bingley blurted out, which, naturally enough, drew the attention of the neighboring table.

"Bingley, Darcy!" Jameson exclaimed. "Do not tell me you know of this Miss Bennet?"

Bingley and Darcy exchanged bewildered glances, and Bingley said, rather weakly, "I know of a Miss Elizabeth Bennet, but it can hardly be the same lady. She is not wealthy."

Darcy, whose mind was a maelstrom of confusion, was cognizant enough of the social niceties to stand and bow toward the group of men, with Bingley lurching to his feet a

moment later. “Jameson, would you be willing to introduce us to your friends?”

“Of course. Gentlemen, Mr. Darcy of Pemberley, and his friend, Mr. Bingley. Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, Lord Talbot, Mr. Sinclair, and Mr. Selkirk.”

The gentlemen bowed toward one another, and as soon as they had all straightened, Mr. Bingley said, “I do hope you do not take this amiss, Lord Talbot, but this eldest Miss Bennet – do you know her Christian name?”

“I do not. However, we spoke at some length at a dinner party some nights ago, at the Bennets’ current abode on Half Moon Street, and she told me that she is the eldest of five daughters, and her home is in Hertfordshire. Could this be the same family that you know?”

Bingley gulped and said, “Indeed, it must be, though I confess to being incredibly confused.”

“How do you know them?” Mr. Selkirk demanded. The young man was some five and twenty years, slender, dark, and reasonably handsome. Darcy knew him by reputation as being an enthusiastic gambler with a moderate income, and thus greatly desirous of wedding an heiress.

“The Bennet ladies hail from Longbourn, an estate in Hertfordshire,” Bingley explained in a slightly shaky voice. “I am currently leasing Netherfield Park, which lies to the east of the Bennets’ estate.”

“And you say there is no money aside from this new inheritance?” Sinclair demanded, frowning.

Darcy felt his lips tighten at these questions; he disliked gossip very much, and to be spreading information about the Bennets to all and sundry...

“Their father’s estate is entailed to the male line and the ladies have no brother,” Bingley said, his blue eyes glazed in confusion. “Thus, the estate will go to a distant cousin.”

Lord Talbot wrinkled his brow and said, “That is a pity. Miss Elizabeth Bennet is a charming young lady, but obviously clever and quick in her mind, far more than I am. The elder Miss Bennet is gentle and sweet, along with being breathtakingly lovely.”

“I wonder why this Mrs. Simpson bequeathed seventy thousand pounds to the one daughter, and nothing to the others?” Jameson mused.

Bingley choked, coughed, and sputtered, “Seventy thousand pounds?”

“That is the rumored amount,” Lord Talbot said and clapped Bingley on the arm. “Come now, sir; is it possible that you are in love with Miss Elizabeth already?”

“Not her, no,” Bingley replied and then turned bright red, which provoked chuckles from the other men.

“Miss Bennet, then,” Jameson remarked. “Well, you are a rich young man, Bingley, and can afford to marry without considering the wealth of your bride. You are most fortunate!”

Bingley seemed unable to speak, and Darcy, though himself baffled and distressed, pulled himself together sufficiently to say, “Gentlemen, I do apologize, but my friend and I have an important appointment. Good day.”

He bowed, Bingley bowed, the other men bowed, and Darcy pushed his friend out of the door of the card room, guided him down the hall, out the front door, and down the steps, whereupon he hailed a hack.

Once he and Bingley were safely ensconced in the carriage, and the coachman had been directed to carry them off to Darcy House, he forced himself to look directly into his friend’s dazed face.

“That was ... erm ... quite a remarkable piece of news,” Darcy said finally, as it seemed Bingley was too stunned to speak.

“Remarkable,” Bingley repeated in a hollow tone, and then released a maniacal laugh. “Remarkable, yes! That did just happen? The eldest two Misses Bennet are in Town? I am not dreaming?”

“You are not,” Darcy confirmed, and his stomach performed an odd flip. Elizabeth Bennet was currently residing on Half Moon Street, which was no more than a few miles from his house. He could call on her, he could...

“It seems that you and my sisters were correct,” Bingley said, turning his head to stare mournfully out the window. “Miss Bennet does not care for me, for our family, in the least, or she would have visited my sisters. I suppose that now that Miss Elizabeth is a wealthy heiress, Miss Bennet has no need to pursue a rich man with ties to trade.”

Darcy was briefly, cravenly inclined to stay silent, but his honor would not permit it. He had already lied by omission, and his heart now throbbed with guilt.

“Miss Bennet has been in Town for several months, and she called on your younger sister in January,” he said, turning his head to gaze rigidly ahead. “Miss Bingley waited some weeks to return the call, and made it clear, by her speech and demeanor, that any relationship with the Bennets was at an end.”

Silence fell for a full four minutes, and Darcy grew more and more uncomfortable until at last he forced himself to turn his head toward his friend. Bingley was pale as a sheet, his jaw was clenched, and his nostrils pinched.

“Miss Bennet has been in London for months, and you did not tell me?” he whispered at last, so softly that Darcy could hardly hear him over the rattle of the carriage and the clapping of the horses.

“Yes,” Darcy said and sighed deeply. “I do apologize, my friend. I thought it unwise for you to encounter the lady so soon after you ended your relationship.”

Again, silence, until Bingley hissed furiously, “Ended my relationship? I did not ... you told me she did not care for me! It was you who persuaded me to abandon the woman I love! And now you tell me that Caroline ... that Caroline...!”

Darcy felt an absurd inclination to open the carriage door and leap out. Given that the vehicle was traveling at a moderate rate of speed, and that the street was stone, and that it was winter, the very idea was extremely stupid, but there was a look on Bingley’s face that Darcy had never seen before. He wondered, for a frozen moment, whether his friend might actually hit him.

“I am sorry,” he repeated meekly and pressed himself to one side to give Bingley more space.

The man was now red with fury, but even as Darcy watched, Bingley’s color subsided, and his lips turned down sadly.

“It is my fault,” the younger man stated, turning to look outside again, his demeanor drooping and disconsolate. “I knew better. I knew she cared for me.”

Darcy opened his mouth and then closed it. He still did not think that Miss Bennet was truly attached to his friend, but now that Elizabeth Bennet was a great heiress, it mattered far less. Presumably Miss Bennet would no longer feel pressured to marry his friend for monetary reasons, and if Bingley chose to call on her, he would realize that.

“I am still shocked and horrified at your behavior,” Bingley said abruptly, turning back to glower. “While I have tried to support my spirits these last months, I have been more downcast than usual as I pined over Miss Bennet. How could you conceal from me that she is in Town? How could you permit my sister to treat the kindest woman in the world so dreadfully? It is so ... malicious of you, and cruel, to both me and Miss Bennet. I had not thought it of you!”

Darcy felt a trickle of anger at these words, but he forced himself to speak calmly. “I do not look at it that way,

Bingley. I still do not think Miss Bennet was in love with you, as she was far too serene and calm in your company. Perhaps I am wrong, and if so, what I did was poorly done. But I also know that you would not be happy in a marriage of convenience. I sought to protect you. Regarding Miss Bingley's treatment of Miss Bennet, I do regret that deeply. I had thought that the former friendship between the two women would keep your sister from being unpleasant, but I was wrong on that account."

Bingley glared at him mulishly. "You know that Caroline is a social climber, and she obviously decided that Miss Bennet was a hindrance to her hopes of ascending the ranks.

"All the same," and here the younger man's shoulders slumped, "I have been in the habit of allowing you to direct my life, Darcy, and that is my fault. From Cambridge to London to Netherfield Hall, I have leaned on your position in society, your experience as a master of an estate, and on your intellect. I was a weak minded fool to listen to you and my sisters, and it is as much my fault as yours. Now I can only hope that I can repair the damage done by my craven retreat to London last year."

"So you intend to call on the Misses Bennet?" Darcy asked carefully.

"Yes, as soon as possible, which is, I suppose, tomorrow. It is too late now."

"I would like to come with you," Darcy blurted, and then felt himself flush at the bemused look on Bingley's face.

"You wish to come with me? Why?"

"I ... do feel guilty about Miss Bingley's treatment of Miss Bennet. I would like to make it up to her in some way."

Bingley frowned, considered, and said, "Miss Bennet will not like it if you come, Darcy."

"Why?"

“Even assuming she does not know of your interference in my affairs, she is very fond of Miss Elizabeth. The situation is ticklish enough without her worrying that you will argue with her beloved sister.”

Darcy blinked in confusion. “I have no intention of arguing with Miss Elizabeth.”

Bingley snorted and said, “You may not *intend* to, but I daresay you will. You and the lady could never meet without your conversation devolving into a spirited debate. The last thing I need is for your obvious dislike of Miss Elizabeth to mitigate my apology to Miss Bennet.”

“My ... what are you speaking of? I do not dislike Miss Elizabeth! How could you think such a thing?”

The light was fading as the sun set in the west, but even in the comparative darkness, Darcy could make out Bingley’s expression of disbelief.

“Everyone knows that you and Miss Elizabeth detest one another! Your first action on seeing her across the room was to comment that she was ‘not handsome enough to tempt you’ to dance, after all.”

Darcy felt himself flush again, and he said, “I did say that, but it was mere foolishness and borne out of my general distaste for dancing with ladies with whom I am not acquainted, and it is not as if she heard my words.”

“Of course she did,” his friend riposted in exasperation. “Many people heard it, as you did not exactly lower your voice! Caroline heard rumors of your boorish comment within days of the assembly, and mighty glad she was of it, since it coincided with her own arrogant belief that she was better than any of the local gentry. Given how Miss Elizabeth contradicted and teased you on every occasion you met, it seems odd that you did not realize that she does not regard you with favor.”

Darcy had already experienced numerous shocks this evening, but this one was so astonishing that his vision

wobbled. “You truly believe that Miss Elizabeth *dislikes* me?”

Bingley leaned over to stare intently into his friend’s face and said roughly, “Yes. And why does it matter, since you have disdained her since the day you met?”

Fitzwilliam Darcy, Master of Pemberley, felt sick. Even if he could not marry Miss Elizabeth, it was horrifying to think that she despised him.

Chapter 13

On the Road to Longbourn

Hertfordshire

The Next Morning

The smell inside the post chaise was not entirely fresh, and the upholstery was not precisely clean, but the view out of the grimy windows made up for it. A fine green mist had settled across the gently rolling hills of the passing landscape, with trees dressed in delicate green buds and grass stretching blades up towards the sun. Patches of color dotted the landscape here and there, pink and purple and yellow and white, like leftover drifts of snow – the first wildflowers of the season, emerging ahead of their fellows. The sun beamed down upon the world, turning the air mild and driving away any lingering chill.

The two ladies alone inside the carriage each sat gazing out a window. Both were pretty and dressed alike in sober gray traveling dresses. A casual observer might be forgiven for mistaking them, at first, for the same person; the only obvious difference was their hats – one green and one blue. From their auburn hair, styled alike, to their light hazel eyes, all the way down to the toes of their shoes peeking from under their frocks, they were identical.

“Well,” Miss Sophia Adler remarked, breaking a long silence, “at least we will be together.”

“For that, I am very grateful,” Miss Phoebe Adler replied, and sighed. “It does not sound so very terrible, though the youngest Miss Bennet is likely a termagant.”

“We will have trouble with Mrs. Bennet as well,” Sophia stated gloomily. “Lady Appleby tells me that she is a

daughter of a solicitor, and she will probably be very conscious of her own position.”

“At least we will be together,” Phoebe said, echoing her sister’s words from a moment earlier. “Moreover, I doubt that Longbourn can possibly be as terrible as Ravenswood was.”

Sophia turned anxious eyes on her sister and leaned over to grasp her twin’s hands in her own. “Was it so very awful?”

“It was, rather,” Phoebe said. “The three children were horribly spoiled, of course, which made it difficult to teach them. Worse was the children’s brother, who was eighteen. He was, of course, absurdly too young for me, but that did not keep him from eying me in a way which I found repugnant.”

“My poor sister,” Sophia returned, grimacing expressively, “I am so very sorry. Did he...?”

“No, no, he kept his hands to himself. Indeed, his mother would have turned me out instantly if he had actually done anything – *naturally*, it is not the fault of the boy in such a situation, but the woman! I have never been so thankful to receive the letter from Lady Appleby telling me of these positions at Longbourn.”

Sophia nodded and could not help but sigh to herself. She and Phoebe ought not to be working for their daily bread, but their father’s idiocy and a small extended family had jettisoned them into the position of governesses, in spite of their birth and accomplishments.

Added to that, the twins were attractive women, which caused matriarchs to worry that their sons would offer for them. Sophia’s previous position had been a relatively pleasant one, with only two young girls under her charge, but then an elder son had returned home from Cambridge for the summer, and his mother had made up an excuse to get rid of her.

At least she and her sister would be together for a time now, and that was enough to make her smile. “Longbourn is inhabited by Mr. Bennet, who is over fifty years of age, his

wife, and their three younger daughters. There are no young men to harass either of us.”

“Not in the house, anyway,” Phoebe remarked. “Oh, is this Longbourn?”

The two ladies shifted in their seats to better look out the windows as the carriage rolled smoothly along a well maintained carriage way. The house itself, they observed, was built from charming red brick, and dark green ivy climbed all over one wall. The chaise rolled into the stable yard around back of the house. Servants and stable boys moved hither and thither – maids carrying buckets and baskets up to the house, men taking care of animals and boys scrambling around carrying pails of water and armfuls of hay.

The carriage driver pulled the horses to a stop in front of the stables. The stable door opened immediately, and a grizzled older man exited, moving swiftly across to the post chaise to hand the ladies carefully out.

“Misses Adler?” the man asked and, upon their nodding, continued, “I am Coachman Jack. Young Thomas here will guide you to the front door, and we will arrange to have your trunks delivered to your room.”

“Thank you,” Phoebe said with a smile, even as she noted the awestruck looks on the various servants’ faces. It was not an uncommon reaction to the appearance of two young ladies who were identical in form and feature. Indeed, when they were but children, they had often traded places with no one the wiser.

Back when they had been young, before their father’s idiocy had ruined them, before they were left penniless orphans.

“Will you come this way?” Thomas, a young man of some sixteen years, asked nervously, and Phoebe took her twin’s arm in her own and said, “Lead on, please.”

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Library

Longbourn

The sound of the carriage captured Mr. Bennet's attention, and he set down his copy of *King Lear* and looked out as two young women descended from the vehicle drawn up near the stables.

He heaved a sigh of relief and set the folio aside, stood up, and made his leisurely way out of the library to welcome the two governesses. It had taken longer than he had hoped for the Adler twins to arrive at Longbourn, but they were here at last and would shortly be in charge of teaching his younger daughters to behave as true ladies.

The last few weeks had been eye opening in an unnerving sort of way. Now that he was truly paying attention, he realized that Lydia, and to a lesser degree Kitty, were well on their way to ruining the family. They were heedless, vulgar, vain, and spent far too much time running around flirting with and pursuing officers.

At least Mary had shown herself a surprisingly pleasant companion. He had taught her to play chess and backgammon, and Mary had proven adept at both. The girl was still prone to moralizing in an annoying way, but a quick change of subject generally turned his daughter's thoughts away from Fordyce and onto whatever topic he found more interesting.

The problems with his younger girls would end now. The Adler twins would provide both oversight and guidance, and with Elizabeth now a very wealthy heiress, it was quite possible that his younger daughters would make good marriages. Even if they did not, they would, at least, be prevented from plunging the family into scandal.

Yes, life was actually quite pleasant now. Mrs. Bennet, now freed from terror of the hedgerows, was far calmer than she had been before Elizabeth's inheritance. She was no more

sensible, but there was a peaceful aura in the house which had been sadly lacking before. He missed his older girls, and especially Elizabeth, but he was a sanguine man and easily able to find pleasure in his books.

He arrived in the vestibule of Longbourn just as the butler opened the door and two young ladies stepped in, with young Tom at their heels.

Bennet blinked in astonishment at the sight before him, of two ladies as alike as two pence. He had been aware that the two were twins, but had never met identical twins before. It was extraordinary!

“Miss Adler and ... Miss Adler,” he said with a smile. “Welcome to Longbourn. I am Mr. Bennet.”

“Mr. Bennet,” the girl in the blue cap said, “I am Miss Sophia Adler, and this is my younger twin, Miss Phoebe Adler.”

“Miss Adler, Miss Phoebe, please accompany me to the drawing room, and I will introduce you to my wife and daughters. Do not be distressed if they are unhappy at your arrival; my daughters have never had a governess before and will likely protest, as will my wife.”

“Surely Mrs. Bennet agrees that given Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s recent inheritance, it would be wise for all her daughters to gain some accomplishments,” Phoebe suggested. While she was the younger twin, she was also the bolder one.

“I think it unlikely that she will think so,” Bennet said cynically. “We will see. By the way, I chose not to inform any of my womenfolk here of my decision to hire governesses. It will be quite an exciting discussion, I am certain, but fear not; I will give you free rein over my younger two girls, who are silly, heedless, and feckless.”

The twins exchanged startled glances, and Phoebe said bravely, “Do lead on, sir.”

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The House on Half Moon Street

London

The carriage came to a gentle halt, and Darcy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He had struggled to fall asleep the previous night, and when he had finally fallen into fitful slumber, his dreams had been haunted by the disapproving faces of Jane and Elizabeth Bennet.

He was still in shock at the very idea that Miss Elizabeth did not like him, when he liked her very well. Indeed, he realized that he was on the verge of loving her. It was horrible to contemplate that she harbored disgust in her heart toward him. It seemed so unlikely! Had they not cheerfully debated with one another? Had she not flirted with him?

But on the other hand, she *had* overheard his rude words at the assembly where they first met. That was not a propitious way to begin a relationship!

He had to know the truth, and in any case, he was acquainted with Lady Appleby, and Bingley was not, and thus he had managed to talk his friend into allowing him to come along on this vital visit to Half Moon Street.

“Are you *certain* you wish to do this, Darcy?” Bingley asked, his usually cheerful face dark with worry.

“Of course,” Darcy replied, pulling himself together. A moment later, the carriage door was opened by a servant, and he stepped out, with his friend following a moment later.

Darcy took a moment to look around at Half Moon Street. It was lined with elegant houses of brick and stone, with well painted shutters and graceful trees and neat flowerbeds facing the street. It had all the pleasing appearance

one would expect from a quiet upper-class neighborhood in London.

The stairs of the house in which the eldest Bennet daughters now dwelt were swept clean, with trimmed bushes on either side of the pavement. Neat curtains and glimpses of charming rooms were just visible through the windows.

He quickly touched his neckcloth to ensure that it was still well arranged and then turned to inspect Bingley, who was carefully dressed in a dark green coat, pale pantaloons, and polished boots. They both looked very well, he knew. They also both felt as if they were marching into a potential firing line.

“Shall we?” Bingley asked softly and began climbing the steps without waiting for an answer. Darcy hurried to catch up, and at the top of the steps, the pair exchanged uneasy glances before Bingley reached forward to knock on the door.

It was opened with commendable speed by a butler, who gestured them inside and took their cards. The entry room was not large, but it was pleasantly appointed with two tables, both of which held a single vase of hothouse flowers. Darcy furrowed a brow at this; it was rather extravagant to purchase such flowers, but then again, Miss Elizabeth was now very wealthy and could afford to spend money on frivolities.

The butler, who had walked off with the cards, returned two minutes later and said politely, “This way, please.”

Bingley and Darcy both sighed in relief. It appeared that they would not be turned away at the door. They followed the butler, who opened the door into the drawing room, and Darcy stepped in with Bingley a pace behind.

The room seemed rather full of people. Elizabeth Bennet, dressed simply and charmingly in green muslin, and Lady Appleby, dressed in a blue woolen gown, were holding court near the fire, with Lord Talbot and two unknown gentlemen clustered in chairs drawn as near to the ladies as was at all proper. Two tables in the room, as well as the

mantel, were adorned with expensive and showy bouquets, and the vase of the one set closest by was still bedewed by water spilled from filling it.

Darcy suddenly realized that almost certainly the flowers were gifts from gentleman callers. It still boggled his mind that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, second daughter of a country gentleman whose estate was entailed away to a distant relation, was now not only an eligible, but desirable, parti. She had always been pretty and clever but until recently had no connections and no wealth to recommend her. Now she was wealthy enough to have her pick of gentle husbands and even some lesser nobility, and her beauty was an added attractant.

Currently those fine brown eyes were cutting him a fiery glare, before turning warmly polite again as she faced the gentleman whose chair was closest to her own.

“Thank you for the flowers, Lord Talbot,” Elizabeth said, standing up in a way which unquestionably was a dismissal.

“It was my honor,” the nobleman said, also rising to his feet a second ahead of his companions. “I do hope that you will attend my mother’s ball next week.”

“I believe we will,” Lady Appleby said graciously, though she did not rise.

The threesome bowed again and, after Talbot had bowed to Darcy and Bingley, and they had bowed in return, he and his companions departed. Darcy could not keep his rapt gaze from Elizabeth and was startled when Lady Appleby said, “Mr. Darcy, will you please introduce your friend?”

“Of course,” he responded and felt himself flush. Where were his manners?

“Lady Appleby, my friend, Mr. Bingley. Bingley, Lady Appleby.”

Bingley bowed while Lady Appleby looked startled. “Mr. Bingley? Mr. Charles Bingley? Of Netherfield Hall?”

Bingley coughed and flushed. “Erm, yes, I am leasing Netherfield Hall in Hertfordshire, my lady.”

Lady Appleby turned a curious look on Elizabeth but merely said, “Please, do sit down, gentlemen. It is a moderately pleasant day outside, is it not?”

“Indeed. Cool but not stormy,” Darcy replied automatically, his gaze shifting to Bingley. The younger man was staring at Miss Elizabeth with a woebegone expression, and thus Darcy was not surprised when Bingley said suddenly, “How is your family, Miss Elizabeth? Your whole family?”

“Oh, they are well enough, I suppose, though my sister Jane is upstairs with a serious headache.”

“I am sorry,” Bingley said, looking crestfallen. “I ... well, a headache is most unpleasant.”

“It was rather a sudden headache,” Elizabeth replied in the arch tone which Darcy remembered. “Oddly, it coincided with the butler bringing in your cards!”

Darcy felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. He remembered that tone very well, and had always assumed that Miss Elizabeth was flirting with him when she used that particular intonation. In this case, her words very obviously told another story. Bingley stared in bewilderment at the young lady and then turned completely pale as her statement penetrated his consciousness.

Darcy hesitated and then decided that it behooved him to be more direct than was considered proper.

“Lady Appleby, Miss Elizabeth, Mr. Bingley and I were playing piquet in a club yesterday when Lord Talbot and several of his companions entered the card room. It was during the ensuing conversation that my friend discovered Miss Bennet’s presence here in London; he had not been previously aware that she left Hertfordshire for Town after the New Year.”

Elizabeth turned to face him, her eyes smoldering with indignation. “But *you* knew that Jane was in London, sir?”

“I did, as did Bingley’s sisters,” Darcy admitted. “I confess that we deliberately chose to keep Mr. Bingley in the dark.”

“I see,” the girl replied and lifted her chin. “But now that I am a great heiress, I am more worthy of your friend’s attention? It is *my* fortune, you know; not Jane’s.”

Bingley choked before gasping out, “No, no! I am ... I assure you that I am entirely indifferent to Miss Bennet’s fortune. No, I was told ... I was assured that Miss Bennet...”

He trailed off, looking miserable, and Darcy, though he knew it would only sink his standing in Miss Elizabeth’s eyes more, continued, “I am largely responsible for my friend’s decision to depart Netherfield suddenly, as I worried that he was preparing to offer for a woman who did not love him in return. I studied Miss Bennet very carefully during the ball at Netherfield, and while her look and manner were open, cheerful, and engaging, I saw no symptom of peculiar regard, and that while she received Bingley’s attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any participation of sentiment. I informed my friend of my conclusions and urged him to stay in London after following him there.”

As anticipated, the young woman glared at him with such fury that he felt a strange sensation of being scorched, along with a definite feeling of shame.

“Mr. Bingley,” Lady Appleby said quietly, “It seems obvious that there has been both deceit and confusion regarding your relationship with Miss Bennet. What is your purpose in calling here today?”

“I wish to speak to her,” Bingley choked out. “I am very much at fault in leaving last autumn, in abandoning her...”

“Yes, you *are* at fault,” Elizabeth snapped. “You paid such particular attention to my sister that she was humiliated by your sudden departure, not to mention heartbroken.”

Bingley hunched down a little, his face a picture of misery. “I have no excuse, Miss Elizabeth. All I can do is

apologize and ... well, I do have hopes that perhaps, in time, she can forgive me, and more. I have never stopped loving your sister, and these last months I have been disconsolate. I stayed away only because, with the entail on Longbourn, I feared that Miss Bennet would be forced to accept my offer even if she did not care for me. I did not wish for her to be pressured into such a marriage.”

The glare continued for another ten seconds, and then Miss Elizabeth relaxed, and her shoulders slumped a little. “Jane is very loyal to our family,” she admitted.

“I suggest that you depart, gentlemen,” Lady Appleby said, “and Elizabeth will speak to Jane. If she wishes to speak to you, Mr. Bingley, I will send word.”

“Thank you, my lady,” Bingley said and stood up, with Darcy following his lead. Bingley frowned and said, “Regardless of Miss Bennet’s decisions, I do intend to take my sisters to task, especially Caroline. I understand that she was very rude to Miss Bennet.”

“And to my Aunt Gardiner,” Elizabeth said coldly.

Bingley nodded and said, “I do apologize on her behalf. It is my fault; I have been far too lenient with my sisters.”

Elizabeth inclined her head but did not speak, and the two men bowed and departed.

Chapter 14

The House on Half Moon Street

That Evening

Candlelight filled the small dining parlor at Half Moon Street. Jane, Elizabeth, and Lady Appleby sat in a cozy little group around the table set with a one-course dinner. A nice ragout sat in the midst of various roasted vegetables, an apple pie, and a plate of ratafia cakes.

A pair of tall large-shouldered footmen passed silently in and out of the door, bearing dishes to and from the kitchen. At Mr. Bennet's insistence, the footmen had been chosen for their strength as opposed to their looks. He wanted to be certain that his daughters would be well guarded while accepting gentleman callers at home, and he had also ordered that they be appropriately escorted any time they went out of the house.

Lady Appleby helped herself to the last of the potatoes, and one of the servants stepped forward, lifting the empty bowl and bearing it away. His colleague closed the door and returned to his post beside it.

"You were very hard on Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth," Jane said worriedly.

Elizabeth spooned more pickled beetroot onto her plate and said, "He deserved it. It was very rude of him to leave Netherfield without a word of farewell. He was so attentive to you for weeks and to depart so suddenly was not the action of a gentleman."

"There is some truth to that," Lady Appleby remarked, "but I was not present at any of your interactions with the man back in Hertfordshire. Jane, do you think there is any genuine

reason for Mr. Bingley to be uncertain of your attachment to him, or was he merely being ridiculously stupid?"

Jane and Elizabeth exchanged glances, and the former said, "I thought that I was being quite open in my feelings, but I am aware that I do not express emotion with ease."

Elizabeth opened her mouth in protest and then closed it. She remembered that her friend Charlotte Lucas, now Charlotte Collins, had expressed concern that Jane was too reserved to 'catch' Mr. Bingley.

"Perhaps it is my fault," Jane continued, obviously distressed.

"It is not your fault, dear one," Elizabeth said warmly, reaching out a hand to pat her sister's arm. "Our mother and younger sisters are so noisy and boisterous that it would be dreadful if you were equally uproarious."

Jane wrinkled her nose and asked hesitantly, "Do you think I ought to see Mr. Bingley again?"

Elizabeth frowned. "It is your decision, of course, but I confess that while he seemed appropriately regretful, I am concerned he will not be able to hold his own against Mr. Darcy and his sisters. You are a lovely woman, and there are many fine gentlemen here in London who would be honored and blessed to marry you."

Lady Appleby cleared her throat, drawing the attention of both girls, and turned a stern eye on the younger Miss Bennet.

"Elizabeth, if I may say so, your recommendation to Jane is quite similar to Mr. Darcy's advice to Mr. Bingley. You both seek to guard the hearts of those you care for. But this is Jane's life you are talking about, and she is sensible enough to make her own decisions, do you not think?"

Elizabeth flushed red and turned an apologetic look on her sister. "I am sorry, Jane. Lady Appleby is entirely correct. If you wish to pursue a relationship with Mr. Bingley, you should."

Jane smiled. "I did ask you your opinion, Lizzy. But you are correct, Madame; I need to make this decision on my own, and I will pray and ponder the situation this evening."

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Longbourn

That Night

"This way, Misses," Mrs. Hill said, and the Adler twins climbed the stairs to the west wing, whereupon they walked along a corridor which ran parallel to the frontage of the house.

Hill proceeded to the second door on the left, opened it, and entered, with Sophia and Phoebe walking behind her, glancing around the chamber as they entered. A light and fresh blue papered the walls, with a simple rug of blue and green on the floor. The furniture was plain and no longer fashionable, but it was sturdily built and clean. The four-poster bed, heaped high with myriad quilts, was quite adequately large for two women, and a polished candlestick with three wax candles sat before the dresser mirror. White curtains were drawn across the windows.

"I had Molly air the sheets, and there seems to be enough firewood," Mrs. Hill said, looking around with a critical eye. "I will send Tom up with your trunks in the next hour. If you need anything else, please speak to me."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hill," Phoebe said with a grateful smile, and the woman departed.

Sophia looked around herself appraisingly and said, "This is very pleasant. Surprisingly pleasant, truthfully, for governesses. It looks like one of the guest bedchambers."

“Yes,” her twin agreed, “and Mrs. Hill seems a kindly sort. That will make our time here much more palatable.”

“I suspect that the upper servants, who are well aware of Miss Lydia’s shortcomings, are delighted to have two governesses present who can restrain her.”

Phoebe rolled her eyes and walked over to a side door, which she opened. It led into a small sitting room, also decorated in blues and greens, and another door led to a small water closet.

“May I?” her sister asked, gesturing toward the water closet, and Phoebe smiled, nodded, and retreated back into the bedchamber.

A few minutes later, her sister returned, and the twosome sat down on a small couch which was pulled near the fireplace. Both were tired and very glad to be resting after a physically and emotionally taxing day.

“I like Miss Mary,” Sophia remarked. “She seems a diligent soul with a genuine love for music. I fear that she has been neglected because she is not particularly handsome, and Mrs. Bennet thinks mostly of beauty as currency.”

“Miss Kitty is, I think, not so very bad either,” Phoebe remarked. “I know we have spent very little time with her, but she seems more of a follower than an instigator.”

“Unlike Miss Lydia,” Sophia said, and both women sighed deeply.

“That girl,” Phoebe said, standing up to poke the fire viciously, “is a scandal waiting to happen!”

Silence fell as the twosome considered the last hours. Mrs. Bennet had been outraged to have two governesses foisted upon her household, though Phoebe had managed to calm her by suggesting that, with Miss Elizabeth now so very wealthy, each of her other daughters had a good chance of attracting the attention of wealthy men if they gained some fashionable accomplishments. That turned out to be perfect phrasing, and afterwards the only person to truly fuss was

Lydia Bennet, who went on at some length about how she had no intention of being accomplished since she intended to marry an officer in a red coat.

“She is dreadfully forward,” Sophia remarked. “I hope that Mr. Bennet is serious about supporting us in our efforts to curb Miss Lydia’s behavior.”

“I wonder if perhaps the younger two ought not to be out in society anymore,” her sister said.

Sophia shook her head and said, “I agree, but I doubt that Mrs. Bennet will accept that; she seems extremely eager to have her girls out in the hopes of winning them husbands as soon as possible.”

“We will see,” Phoebe said and then turned a joyful face on her cherished sister. “At least we are together.”

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Darcy House

London

Darcy lay in bed, absently tracing with his gaze the familiar shapes of the wooden moldings on the ceiling. Across the room on the mantel, the clock struck an hour past midnight, and yet sleep was no nearer than it had been when he had retired some two hours previously.

There was no physical reason for his sleeplessness. The temperature in his room was exactly at his tastes, the low-burned fire emitted a dim unobtrusive glow, his sheets were freshly laundered and aired and crisp. The ticking of his clock was a soothing quiet rhythm he had always enjoyed.

But his mind would not rest. Self-recriminatory thoughts chased each other around and around his head. He

was still stunned at the new-found and dismaying knowledge that Elizabeth Bennet despised him.

He had been so terribly mistaken. He had thought – had truly believed – that she enjoyed their witty repartee and had smiled at their banter from pleasure. But no. It seemed instead that her arch smiles and swift replies had been merely a polite way to show her displeasure and disdain. A courteous and, yes, charming, mask for her loathing.

It was a crushing realization. He had been enchanted with the lady's saucy retorts and clever responses which had displayed the keen intelligence behind those fine eyes. He had even, Darcy thought, been on the verge of falling in love.

He listened to the ticking clock and then blew out a long, slow breath. He *had* fallen in love with her.

He had, he confessed to himself, been considering an offer toward Miss Elizabeth. Not consciously – no, consciously he had thought himself vastly her superior, not just in fortune, but in connections, and thus felt that he could not marry her.

But he was in love, desperately in love, and somewhere in the distant recesses of his mind, he had been waiting to see if he would fall out of love with Elizabeth as quickly as he had fallen in love with her. Subconsciously, he had been aware that he adored her, that she was the only woman for him. Moreover, he had thought that he could have her with a mere flick of a finger. He realized, to his shock, that he had been more or less planning to make her Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy and had envisioned her being delighted and honored by his willingness to lift her into the rarified social heights of the haut ton. There had been not even a hint of a thought in his mind that she might despise him or refuse him!

Her open scorn during his visit to the house on Half Moon Street had laid bare his own heart. He was a complete idiot – all this time, he had been telling himself that she was not worthy of his hand, when in fact it was he who was not worthy to be her husband. Beautiful, passionate, clever

Elizabeth was not the beggar maid to his King Cophetua. He did not deserve her. He had never deserved her, with his pride and arrogance and incivility.

And now that he had accepted the truth, that he *adored* her, it was agonizing to realize that he had virtually no chance of winning her hand in marriage. If she had held him in such contempt when she was but a poor country miss, how much more so now that her wealth nearly equaled his own and her connections and acquaintances were rapidly expanding into vaunted circles? He had nothing to offer her now that she could not easily acquire for herself, and she – she was beautiful and charming and clever and very wealthy indeed.

She could have her pick of husbands now, as there would be no shortage of men flocking to woo a pretty gentleman's daughter with an enormous dowry. Why would she consider for even one moment rude Mr. Darcy, who had insulted her so egregiously when first they encountered one another and then convinced his friend to abandon her beloved sister?

He turned over in search of a cool place on his pillow, forcing himself to think of Anne de Bourgh, awaiting him in Kent. He knew that Lady Catherine de Bourgh, his maternal aunt, intended that he wed his cousin. He had never been particularly fond of the notion, but now, as he thought of Anne's frail drooping figure beside Miss Elizabeth's vibrancy and vitality, he could not restrain an audible groan.

How could he have been such a complete and utter fool?

Chapter 15

Hurst House

London

The Next Morning

A gentle aria trickled through the drawing room as Louisa Hurst reinforced her proficiency on the pianoforte. Her husband had dragged his favorite leather wingback chair closer to the fire and eased his bulk down into it. Now he snored softly in the pleasant warmth, a deep bass counterpoint to his wife's playing. Across the room, Caroline Bingley sat at a small table next to a small window, the drawn curtains beside her brushing her scarlet-clad elbow as she sorted through invitations to parties, with each going into a small pile to accept, refuse, or consider.

The door opened, and the butler stepped inside and announced, "Mr. Bingley."

Louisa Hurst promptly stopped playing and stood up with a smile, which faded away as she caught sight of the expression on her brother's face.

"Charles," she said, hurrying forward, "whatever is the matter?"

Miss Bingley, who had not bothered to look up, now lifted a curious face and was startled to observe the anger on her brother's usually cheerful countenance.

"You may go," Bingley said to the butler and waited until the man had departed before turning an icy glare on his sisters. "Caroline and Louisa, Darcy confessed to me that you and he plotted to hide the fact that Miss Jane Bennet has been in Town for some months. Furthermore, I have learned that Miss Bennet called on you in January, Caroline, and that you

waited weeks to return the call, and then treated both Miss Bennet and her aunt with disdain and incivility.”

Caroline had concluded long ago that the best defense was a good offense.

“Of course I did!” the lady snapped. “Miss Bennet did not care about you, Charles, she cared only about your money! Moreover, a marriage into that family would have been a social disaster, and you know it! I grant that Jane is well behaved, but her mother is a vulgar solicitor’s daughter, and her sisters are hoydens! I merely did what needed to be done.”

Bingley ground his teeth at these words, sufficiently loudly that Mr. Hurst woke up with a grunt and a snort and turned toward his brother-in-law in obvious surprise.

“Caroline, Louisa,” Bingley said with controlled fury, “I do not know if I will succeed, but I intend to pursue Miss Bennet in the hopes of winning her hand in marriage. I advise you not to interfere in the future, or you will find yourself without any further financial assistance from me. I am confident that none of you would enjoy that.”

Mr. Hurst was an indolent man, but he had an eye for the main chance and popped up to a standing position like a jack in the box.

“I am certain that Louisa will not hinder your courtship in the future,” he said promptly, casting a stern look at his wife. “Indeed, I wish you the very best of luck. Miss Bennet is a charming creature.”

Caroline looked at her brother-in-law in disgust and said, “Mr. Hurst, I do beg you to return to your place by the fire. This has nothing at all to do with you.”

“On the contrary, dear sister,” the man replied with aplomb. “I am, as you know, more fashionable than wealthy, and my life is far more comfortable thanks to Bingley’s generosity. I have no desire to tamper with such good fortune. Do you not agree, Louisa?”

Mrs. Hurst, having had time to ponder, nodded immediately. “Of course I agree. Charles, I apologize for my interference. I like Jane very much.”

“Louisa!” Caroline screeched, bending a furious glare on her sister. “The Bennets are low born and impecunious...”

“Caroline,” Bingley interrupted, “I advise that you think *very* carefully before you speak further. You are of age, and I am prepared to hand over your dowry into your care, but I will no longer provide any additional financial support if you denigrate Miss Bennet. Furthermore, you will no longer be permitted in my home or at my table if you continue to interfere with my pursuit of the lady.”

Caroline was now plum red with outrage, but this threat had the rare effect of silencing her. Her dowry of twenty thousand pounds provided a very respectable yearly income, but she always overspent and inevitably requested her brother’s help with bills. Charles rarely grew angry, but when he did, it was best to wait until he had calmed down before approaching him again. She would get what she wanted eventually – she always did – but now it was time to be quiet.

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Half Moon Street

London

Elizabeth opened the door into the drawing room, stepped in, and looked around. The only occupant of the room was Jane, who was seated on a chair near the fire, her gaze fixed on the undulating flames. At the sound of the door, however, the eldest Miss Bennet jumped a little, turned a surprised look on the clock and then stood up.

“Dear Lizzy! How the time has flown. I had no idea it was already well past noon! Do let me call for tea!”

“That would be lovely,” Elizabeth replied, setting a sheaf of papers onto a nearby table, pulling off her gloves, and sitting down across from Jane’s chair. The warmth was welcome as it was a chilly day outside.

Jane returned from requesting tea, sank down into her chair, and smiled at her sister. “Did everything go well?”

“Yes, very well,” Elizabeth said, reaching out to grasp the papers on the table. “Do read this copy of the financial arrangements, so you are aware of the legalities.”

Jane opened her mouth in protest and then, at the stern look on her sister’s face, closed it and took the papers silently. Elizabeth leaned back in her chair and watched in anticipation for the moment when Jane discovered...

“Lizzy, no!” Jane’s blue eyes flared wide in shock, and she lifted her gaze to meet her sister’s.

“Jane, yes,” Elizabeth replied with an amused smile. “I do not need seventy thousand pounds, dear one; eight and fifty thousand pounds is still a vast fortune, and I am honored to be able to provide for my sisters.”

“I do not need an additional three thousand pounds when Mrs. Simpson already gave me three thousand!”

“So now you have a dowry of six thousand pounds,” Elizabeth replied with a shrug. “Please do not distress yourself, dear sister. I spoke at length to both Uncle Gardiner and the solicitor, and we debated the details for some time before I signed the main document. Every one of my sisters now has three thousand pounds, but the younger three have their money held in trust by Mr. Gardiner until Mary is one and twenty, and Kitty and Lydia are five and twenty. I am pleased to know that none of you will be entirely poverty stricken.”

Jane still looked distressed, and Elizabeth leaned forward to pat her sister’s knee. “Please know that I will sleep better tonight knowing you are provided for.”

Jane wrinkled her nose and then sighed dramatically. “I cannot argue with that, I suppose. Thank you, Lizzy.”

“It is my pleasure,” Elizabeth returned, just as the door opened and a maid entered with the tea tray. She smiled at the neatly dressed girl and said, “Jane, would you mind pouring?”

This had the desirable effect of distracting Jane, and Elizabeth, after accepting her tea with sugar, leaned back with a slight smile. She was pleased that Jane knew that she was now mistress of six thousand pounds, as she hoped it would give her sister a sense of financial security. She had chosen *not* to tell her elder sister that she was Elizabeth’s main beneficiary in her will, though the money would be in the charge of Mr. Gardiner and Mr. Phillips, her other uncle who lived in Meryton. No one liked to think of death, of course, but if something happened and Elizabeth passed on, her money would largely go to the eldest Miss Bennet, who was far more sensible than the rest of the immediate family.

Once Jane had settled in with her own cup of tea, Elizabeth asked, “So, have you made any decisions about Mr. Bingley?”

The eldest Miss Bennet flushed rosily and lowered her gaze to her cup. “I have, Lizzy. I am still very attached to him and wish to see him again. I know you do not approve of that...”

“It does not matter what I think,” Elizabeth interposed immediately. “Lady Appleby is correct; both Mr. Darcy and I have been guilty of trying to control the lives of those around us, and I, at least, am determined to stop.”

Jane chuckled, and her face relaxed. “It seems that you and Mr. Darcy have several things in common.”

“I do not think so,” Elizabeth replied indignantly.

Jane continued on with an air of mischievous delight. “Oh yes. You are both clever individuals who like to read, you are both very wealthy, and you both are strong willed and inclined to direct the lives of those around you.”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose and then sighed. "I suppose there is some truth to that, Jane."

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On the Road to Meryton

Hertfordshire

The Next Day

A gentle breeze wafted across the fields, picking up the scents of early flowers and tugging lightly at ribbons and hair and pelisses. Clouds scudded across a washed-blue sky, the road underfoot dry and hard-packed, with pink and white and purple flowers peeping through the grass.

The Bennet daughters and their governesses moved along the road in a knot of color and shade. The Misses Adler wore simple tan pelisses, and Mary likewise wore a sensible dark blue. But Kitty and Lydia had opted for pale pink and light yellow garments, heedless of the dust that spattered across their hemlines and the toil and effort required from the servants to return the clothes to spotlessness.

Mary and Phoebe walked ahead of everyone else, with Kitty and Lydia behind them murmuring to one another, and Sophia bringing up the rear and keeping a sharp eye on her charges.

"The book shop also has music," Mary said. "I still have some of my allowance for this quarter, and perhaps you and I could choose some new music, Miss Phoebe?"

"Music?" Lydia demanded, tossing her bonneted head. "How very dull, Mary! If you have enough money to buy music, you certainly can lend me a few pence to purchase the blue lace that I need!"

“Absolutely not, Miss Lydia,” Phoebe responded, glancing over her shoulder. “Miss Mary’s money is her own; if you wish to purchase ribbons, you will need to use your own allowance.”

“But I spent it all weeks ago!” Lydia pouted.

“That was your decision,” Sophia chimed in. “Mary was sensible enough to save some for the future, and in any case, music is a fine use of funds.”

Lydia’s blue eyes narrowed, and she said, “You have no right to interfere with my discussion with my sister! You are only the governesses!”

Phoebe stopped and swung around so quickly that Lydia nearly plowed into her. Lydia was a tall, healthy girl, but the Adler twins were taller still, and Phoebe did not hesitate to take a menacing step toward the youngest Miss Bennet while she twisted her face into a forbidding frown. Sophia came up beside Lydia as well, so that the girl was partially boxed in.

“You are certainly free to be rude and disdainful to me and my sister, Miss Lydia,” Phoebe said coldly, “but if you do, there will be consequences. Your father only permitted you to walk to Meryton today because we said we would look after you. If we tell Mr. Bennet that you are being difficult and refuse to cooperate with our directives, you will be forced to stay home.”

Lydia stared at her in amazement, and then shifted her attention to Sophia, who did her best to look equally fearsome.

“That is ... that is ridiculous!” the girl exclaimed, though she sounded a trifle uncertain. “I have been walking to and from Meryton since I was a girl of ten. My father has never cared!”

“He does now,” Phoebe said.

“I do not believe it! Merely because he has hired governesses...”

“Sophia,” Phoebe interrupted, “it seems that Miss Lydia does not wish to accompany us to Meryton today. I will walk back with her, and you can...”

“No, no!” Lydia protested, and then lowered her voice and managed what could possibly be considered a meek smile. “No, I wish to come with you, and I will ... cooperate.”

Phoebe considered the girl with care and then nodded slowly. “Very well. That was your one warning, Miss Lydia.”

Chapter 16

Office

Darcy House

Darcy's pen scratched with slow care across the paper. The letter from his steward sat open beside his hand, and on occasion he consulted with it as he penned his reply. The fire crackled warmly in the hearth, and sunlight beamed through the window. Yet all this brightness and warmth did nothing to dispel the heavy gloom and sorrow that lay upon his heart.

But he must respond to his steward's letter. Regardless of his state of mind, he had a duty to the estate of Pemberley and all her tenants. The business of the estate settled his mind with the solid practicality of sums and logical decisions. He sank with long practice into the familiar world of his work as time slid by.

"Darcy! Darcy!"

Fitzwilliam Darcy looked up as Bingley bounced through the door, his eyes gleaming with enthusiasm, his mouth stretched in a joyful smile.

"Yes?" Darcy asked, setting aside both pen and paper.

"I just received this," Bingley replied, handing over a piece of stiff paper.

Darcy obediently turned his eyes on the missive and discovered it to be an invitation to Lady Talbot's ball three days hence. Written in the lower margin was the following note:

"Mr. Bingley, I hope you will forgive this late invitation to my ball. Lady Appleby visited me yesterday and asked me to invite you. I pray that you will be able to come."

Darcy was an intelligent man, and therefore it took but a few seconds to remember that Lady Appleby and the eldest Misses Bennet were attending the same ball. He forced himself to smile at his friend and said, “It seems that Miss Bennet desires to see you.”

“It does,” Bingley agreed, flopping rather inelegantly on a chair. “Oh Darcy, I am so grateful, so thankful! I am not assuming that she has forgiven me for abandoning her, but at least I have a chance...”

He trailed off as his eyes shifted toward the window, which opened out on a rose garden, whose plants were currently furling out new leaves in preparation for blooming later in the spring.

Darcy regarded his friend with a peculiar mixture of gratitude and envy. Gratitude, because he was happy for Bingley, genuinely so. If Miss Bennet, now elder sister to a great heiress, still wished to marry Bingley, then it would be for true affection. Envy because he loved Elizabeth Bennet, and there seemed little hope that he had any chance in winning her hand.

Bingley suddenly jerked and turned an ashamed glance on his friend. “Darcy, I did not realize – it seems that you were not invited. I...”

“I received an invitation a week ago,” Darcy said absently. He had formerly had no intention of attending, but the Talbots and the Darcys were connected through a distant relation, and thus he was always invited to the Talbots’ balls.

“Oh, wonderful! Will you accompany me, then?”

Darcy breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth as he contemplated an answer. On the one hand, he ardently desired to see Eliza – Miss Elizabeth again. On the other, how could he bear to watch the lady he loved being courted and pursued by eager gentlemen of the ton?

The door opened again at this juncture, and Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam hurried into the room, provoking a startled yelp from Darcy.

“Richard!” he exclaimed, leaping to his feet. “Well, this is a surprise!”

The colonel reached out a long arm to shake Darcy’s hand, and then turned to Bingley, who had likewise risen to his feet.

“Bingley, it is good to see you,” the colonel said and held out a hand to the younger man, who shook it.

“Would you care for some brandy, Cousin?” Darcy asked, moving toward a silver tray on a finely carved wooden table nearby.

“No, no, I fear I must fly as my mother wishes me to accompany her and Rachel to Hookham’s library today. I merely wished to ask if it is true that you know the new heiress in Town.”

This provoked a peculiar tightening in Darcy’s throat, and he was grateful when Bingley said, “New heiress? Do you mean Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

“Yes, that is the one!” Richard said eagerly. “I heard from my mother, who heard it from Lady Talbot, who heard it from her son, that you and Darcy know the Bennets.”

“Indeed we do,” Bingley cried out. “We met the Bennet family in Hertfordshire, where I have leased the estate of Netherfield. The Bennets live in Longbourn, which lies adjacent to Netherfield.”

The colonel scrunched his nose, glared, and said with mocking disapproval, “Let me guess, Bingley, you are in love with Miss Elizabeth and have every expectation of winning her hand.”

“I am in love with the *eldest* Miss Bennet,” Bingley said, straightening his back, “and sadly, I am not at all certain that I will win her hand, though I will try.”

“Is she also an heiress?”

“No, not at all. It was Miss Elizabeth who received a vast fortune from some distant relation, or connection, or something of the sort. But Miss Bennet is the lady for me. She is an angel!”

“So as far as you know, Miss Elizabeth is not attached to any gentleman?”

“As far as I know, she is not,” Bingley agreed.

“Excellent! Darcy, I know you have an invitation; will you come to the Talbots’ ball and introduce me to the lady?”

Darcy stared at his cousin in horror, though he forced himself to keep his face calm. If it was dreadful to think of Elizabeth being courted by acquaintances, it was worse to imagine his own cousin pursuing the lady he loved. But he could hardly say no, could he? Richard was among the very best of men and deserved a good wife. It was Darcy’s own fault that he had been rude to Miss Elizabeth on the day they met, and overly proud, disdainful and haughty ever since.

“I will attend the ball and introduce you to the Misses Bennet, Richard,” Darcy said quietly.

“Thank you!”

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Meryton

Sophia Adler glanced around the stationery store with wistful nostalgia. The large windows across two walls let the sunlight pour in, illuminating the blue and green carpets on the floor like magical pools. The entire store smelled of paper and ink, the leather-bound volumes on the shelves glowing in the sun. It reminded her of the library in her childhood home, and many happy hours curled up in the window seat with an apple

and a book. But it had been many years since she had had the chance to read solely for pleasure, though on occasion she had read novels because her charges were also reading them, and she needed to know the contents.

Kitty and Lydia stood before her at the shelf of Gothic novels, whispering too softly to be heard. Across the room, Mary and Phoebe stood with their heads together, passing music sheets back and forth as they discussed possible purchases. Sophia glanced to her side, brushing light fingers across the spines of the books closest to her.

Kitty turned to face her governess and said, "I have heard of Maria Edgeworth, but I have never read one of her books. Have you read this one, Miss Adler?"

Sophia looked at the title and frontispiece and nodded. "Yes indeed. *Belinda* is well written, and my sister and I enjoyed it very much. Interestingly, there are two significant changes in the plot between the second edition, which was published nine years ago, and the third edition, which was published only last year."

Kitty opened her eyes very wide and asked, "What kind of changes?"

"In the first two editions, the heroine nearly marries a West Indian Creole, and an English farmgirl named Lucy marries a..."

Sophia trailed off and narrowed her eyes. She did not know Kitty well, but she was familiar enough with young ladies to sense when they were being devious. Kitty was not, she thought, a great reader, and that wide eyed look was extremely suspicious.

She looked around hastily and discovered that Lydia was no longer in sight.

"Where is Miss Lydia?" she demanded of Kitty, who promptly glanced toward the door before saying, "Oh, I do not know. Perhaps she is in the other corner looking at ... erm ... paper?"

Sophia strode toward the door of the bookshop and, upon spying her errant charge, opened the door and rushed over to Lydia, who was standing on the pavement in front of the shop chattering with two red-coated officers.

“Oh, we will be there!” Lydia exclaimed, just as Sophia arrived and said, “Miss Lydia, would you be so kind as to introduce me to the gentlemen?”

Lydia turned in obvious surprise and displeasure and shot a scowling glance at Kitty, who was now a few feet behind them.

“Yes, Miss Lydia,” the more handsome of the officers said. “Please do introduce us to your friend?”

“She is not my friend, she is my governess,” Lydia said sulkily.

“Is she indeed?” the man replied, smiling at Sophia. A moment later, the smile was replaced with a look of wonder as the sound of booted feet announced the arrival of Phoebe and Mary.

“Miss Mary,” Sophia said, turning toward the third Miss Bennet. “Would you be so kind as to introduce my sister and me to the gentlemen?”

There was a strange, hard look on Mary’s face, but she took a step forward and said, “Miss Adler, Miss Phoebe, may I introduce Lieutenant Wickham and Captain Carter? Gentlemen, our new governesses, Miss Adler and Miss Phoebe.”

The two men were looking at the Adlers with the usual amazement; identical twins were rare, after all.

“It is an honor to meet you both, Misses Adler,” Mr. Wickham finally said, bowing courteously. Phoebe, out of the corner of her eyes, saw Mary compress her lips into a narrow line and felt herself stiffen. It was obvious that Mary did not like Mr. Wickham, and the girl had more sense than her younger sisters.

“It is pleasant to meet you as well,” Phoebe chimed in. “But I do believe we must be returning home to Longbourn so that we are not late for dinner.”

“Oh, but Mr. Wickham and Mr. Carter were telling us about the upcoming ball on Friday!” Lydia declared.

The twins exchanged hasty, suspicious glances. The upcoming ball, hosted by Colonel Forster, had been the primary topic of conversation at Longbourn since they had arrived. It seemed most unlikely that the officers would know more about the ball than the Bennet girls.

“Miss Lydia,” Wickham said with a charming smile, “might I have the honor of the first set?”

“Of course, Mr. Wickham!” Lydia exclaimed and giggled.

“Might I have the first set, Miss Kitty?” Captain Carter asked.

“Oh yes!” Kitty agreed happily.

“Miss Kitty,” Wickham continued, turning toward the lady, “might I have the second set...”

Phoebe was irritated but unsurprised when neither officer asked Mary to dance. The girl was not as pretty as her sisters, but it was remarkably rude to openly ignore her.

“It is time to return to Longbourn,” Sophia said sternly when Lydia showed an inclination to linger.

Lydia pouted but bobbed a curtsey and said, “Until Friday, gentlemen!”

“We look forward to it,” Captain Carter replied, and both officers bowed.

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Darcy's Bedchamber

Darcy House

Midnight

Fitzwilliam Darcy, dressed in night clothes, pleasantly warm from the fire and the quilts covering him, stared into the darkness above him.

He knew himself to be intelligent and diligent and hardworking.

He also knew himself to be stiff in company, overly proud, and sometimes – often? – offensive to those around him.

But surely he was capable of changing?

Yes, he was in love with Miss Elizabeth, while she obviously disliked him.

Yes, the second Miss Bennet was now a great heiress and would be pursued by many London gentlemen, and he was already behind in the hunt because he had, like a fool, insulted the lady on the day they met.

Yes, he had urged Charles Bingley to abandon Elizabeth's elder, most beloved sister, which was another black mark against him.

There seemed little hope that he could court the lady with success, but his heart would not allow him to give up entirely. He was in love, passionately, deeply in love. Surely it was worth trying to win the lady of his dreams?

And if he failed; well, he would face that bravely as well. At the very least, he could become the sort of man whom his Elizabeth approved of.

Chapter 17

Talbot House

London

Friday Evening

Darcy lifted one nervous hand towards his cravat before lowering it again without making contact, knowing full well his appearance was impeccable. He sent another nervous glance towards the open door nearby – still no sign of the Bennets – and let his gaze ghost across Bingley and his cousin Richard Fitzwilliam. Both of them were attired in evening wear calculated to show them off to best advantage, as both hoped to win the favor of the Bennet ladies tonight. Bingley's bright blue coat looked remarkably well with his eyes and blond hair, and Richard was quite striking in a rich dark brown with an elaborately tied cravat.

Darcy looked around the ballroom, seeking to calm himself. Only a few other guests had yet arrived; the majority of the ball's attendants would appear at a later, more fashionable hour. Across the room, the musicians sat upon a low dais hung with swathes of silk, quietly tuning their instruments for the dancing to come. The massive grand chandelier overhead sparkled, the newly polished pendulogues and prisms catching and flinging back the light of dozens of wax candles. Around the room, more candles had been set before mirrors, their light blazing off of perfectly polished candlesticks. Bouquets of hothouse flowers glowing with color sat on tables set along the walls. Bolts of silk draped gracefully down from ceiling to floor, elegantly smoothing hard corners.

It was a beautiful scene, but it did little to calm Darcy's nerves. He thought once more of his plan to ask Miss Elizabeth to dance with him, his heart pounding at the idea. He

hoped she would not deny him, though he would not blame her if she did. He did so wish for a chance to show her that he could, indeed, be a gracious and honorable gentleman.

“I have always been impressed by Miss Darcy’s playing,” Bingley remarked, which drew Darcy’s attention to his companions.

“Yes, she plays like an angel,” Fitzwilliam agreed. “Lady Matlock and my sister Rachel are very pleased to have Georgiana staying with them. They are both a trifle gloomy as Rebekah is so lately wed. They are happy for her, of course, but the house seems overly quiet without my loquacious sister in residence.”

Darcy felt a sudden stab of compunction at these words; he had been neglecting Georgiana of late, and he knew it. He dined at Matlock House once or twice a week, but he should start calling there on some mornings as well. It was difficult, though. Georgiana was surprisingly adept at reading his moods, and it would be challenging to hide his agitation.

A sudden gasp from Bingley caused him to turn toward the door as Lady Appleby entered with her two protégées at her heels. Darcy absently noted that Miss Bennet was a radiant goddess in her blue evening gown, which matched the blue in her eyes. His own eyes were fixed immediately on Miss Elizabeth, who was dressed in a green gown, a simple cross suspended around her throat, and her hair twisted in an elaborate bun, with a few simple flowers decorating her hair.

She was exquisite.

“Lady Appleby, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth!” Bingley exclaimed, hurrying forward.

Richard gasped and murmured, “Those are the Bennets? Dear God, man, you did not tell me how handsome they are!”

“Yes, they are very handsome,” Darcy said, and knew that he spoke stiffly when his cousin shot him a confused look.

“Allow me to introduce you,” he said hastily and guided Richard up to the ladies.

Bingley had, he discovered ruefully, already obtained dances with Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth, but the foursome turned toward them as they arrived and Darcy said, "My lady, Misses Bennet, may I please introduce you to my cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, second son of my uncle, the Earl of Matlock."

Richard bowed and the ladies curtsied, and the colonel said, "I am honored to meet you all."

"It is our pleasure," Jane Bennet replied with a smile which only enhanced her glorious beauty.

Though Darcy, of course, did not notice, as he could not wrench his eyes away from Elizabeth, who was looking a trifle uneasy.

"Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth," Richard said, "I hope I might have the opportunity of dancing with you tonight?"

"Oh, thank you, yes," Jane said, and Elizabeth nodded as well. Within moments, Richard had captured the second dance with Miss Bennet and the third with her younger sister, and Darcy, his heart beating rapidly, said, "Might I be honored with the first dance with you, Miss Elizabeth?"

She looked thoroughly startled and quickly peeked to her left, and then bestowed a surprisingly warm smile on him. "Yes, of course, Mr. Darcy. I would be honored."

At this very moment, Lord Talbot appeared and bowed dramatically. "Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth! It is wonderful to see you..."

Three seconds later, another gentleman arrived, and then a noble with an unfortunate penchant for gambling on horses, and the trickle turned into a flow, and Darcy and Bingley and Richard retreated as the two ladies were surrounded by numerous men who were, not surprisingly, eager to dance with the new heiress and her lovely elder sister.

"It was wise to arrive here early," Richard said with a grin, slapping Bingley on the shoulder. "There would have been no dances available if we had been fashionably late."

Darcy, looking over at the court rapidly forming around the Bennet ladies, could not help but agree.

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The Assembly Hall

Meryton

A handful of candles glittered strategically before mirrors set to reflect their light as much as possible. Miss Long sat at the pianoforte playing a lively reel, with another of the young ladies from Meryton standing nearby to play next. Colors shifted and flashed, the dancers whirling through the set, while gentlemen and matrons in clusters along the walls discussed crops and the latest gossip. Militia officers stood in knots of bright red, watching the young ladies keenly and awaiting their next partners. Colonel Forster sat in the corner with his wife, laughing with Sir William Lucas and beaming out upon his ball.

March was, George Wickham thought, the perfect time for a dance. It was not bitterly cold outside, so walking to and from the barracks was a pleasure. Nor was it overly hot inside, as was all too common in midsummer when the heat of dozens of dancing bodies caused him to sweat in a manner unbecoming to a gentleman.

He looked down on his dance partner, Miss Lydia Bennet, who was beaming up at him adoringly, and spun around her with his usual grace. In the midst of his twirling, he noted the stare of Miss Adler – he did not know which one – who was standing at the side of the dance floor. She was obviously keeping a close eye on Lydia.

“I have missed you these last days, Miss Lydia,” he said, and Lydia promptly replied, “I have missed you too, dearest Mr. Wickham.”

She cast a darkling look toward the nearby Miss Adler and continued, "Our new governesses are quite dreadful, wanting me to learn to play the pianoforte, read Shakespeare and study French. Moreover one or the other of them is always around! I never have a moment to myself!"

"Perhaps they will grow less diligent in time?" he suggested.

"I hope so," Lydia muttered irritably. "In any case, I am determined to slip away soon so that we can be together!"

"That would be delightful, my dear one," Wickham replied, allowing his gaze to drift down to her décolletage. "Most delightful indeed."

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Talbot House

London

The music began, and the line of gentlemen, who were facing a parallel line of ladies, began the figures of the country dance.

Darcy, looking down on Miss Elizabeth's face, found his mind shifting to the ball at Netherfield Park the previous November, the only other time he had danced with the lady he adored. He had been fighting his attraction back then, convinced that Miss Elizabeth Bennet was beneath him. What a fool he had been, to set aside true love and admiration in favor of connections and wealth!

"I hope that you are enjoying the ball, Miss Elizabeth?" he asked.

Elizabeth looked a trifle startled but responded with a slight smile. "Indeed I am, Mr. Darcy."

Another minute went by in silence, and Darcy, gathering his courage, began the conversation again. "I do think that private balls are pleasanter than public ones."

This remark, an exact repetition of Elizabeth's own words back at the Netherfield ball months previously, provoked a genuine laugh from the lady, and Darcy felt a surge of exultation. He had made her laugh!

"Mr. Darcy!" she said playfully. "It seems that London balls are more to your liking than country ones!"

"I do not like dancing unless I am acquainted with my partner," Darcy said. "That, of course, does not mean that I should avoid dancing with strangers when partners are scarce, but in the past I have given into my own selfish nature and refused to dance. Moreover, on at least one occasion, I idiotically made a rude remark about one of the fair maidens awaiting a partner."

The twosome performed another figure which drew them apart, and when they came back together, Elizabeth asked, "Is that an apology, Mr. Darcy?"

"It is," he replied, his hand grasping her own gently. "I was a fool at the Meryton assembly, and a discourteous fool at that. You are, without a doubt, one of the most handsome women of my acquaintance."

Elizabeth's eyes widened at these words, and after they had completed another figure, she asked daringly, "I do hope, Mr. Darcy, that you have not recently endured any reverses on the Exchange."

"I have not," her companion assured her. "I am as wealthy as I have ever been, but I hope that I am a good deal more sensible. I have come to realize that I was very much at fault in urging my friend to abandon Netherfield last year."

Elizabeth glanced to the right, where Jane and Bingley were dancing, and said, "I would agree that it was poorly done, but Mr. Bingley is his own man, and he made his own choices."

Darcy sighed. “Bingley has great natural modesty, with a stronger dependence on my judgment than on his own. It is a flaw in my own character that I tend to direct the lives of those around me, even when it is inappropriate.”

“I suppose that given your position as master of a great estate, you are used to being in command.”

“I am, yes, but it has been borne upon me that I have transferred my reasonable role of overseeing my tenants and servants to an officious role of directing my friends. It is poorly done of me.”

Elizabeth looked up on him in amazement, and the couple finished the rest of the dance in silence.

Chapter 18

Talbot House

London

“Miss Bennet?” Mr. Bingley said, taking the lady’s gloved hands in his own as the music began for the first set of dances.

“Yes, Mr. Bingley?”

“I wish to apologize for leaving Netherfield last autumn. It was cowardly and stupid, along with being cruel to you, especially as I understand that my sister sent a most unpleasant letter in regards to my retreat to Town.”

Jane twirled in time with the music and said courteously, “I accept your apology, Mr. Bingley.”

Silence fell for another minute, as Bingley cogitated.

“Are you ... have you enjoyed your time in Town?” he finally asked.

“Quite well, yes,” Jane replied, as the two turned in the same direction, joined hands, and stepped forward in time with the music. “I always enjoy visiting the theater and the museums.”

“Have you had the opportunity to visit the Mint?” her partner asked, grimly determined to continue the conversation.

“I have not. It is interesting?”

“Very much so; it is fascinating watching the coins being stamped.”

“Perhaps I can visit the Mint someday...”

/

“Are you in the militia, Colonel Fitzwilliam?” Elizabeth asked as the next set began.

“I am with the Regulars, Miss Elizabeth,” Richard explained as he spun gracefully around in time with the music.

Elizabeth slanted her eyes in his direction and asked, “Are you indeed? Have you served in the Peninsula, perhaps?”

“I have; in fact, I returned only in the last month from my time serving in Cadiz and Andalusia.”

“I am grateful for your service against the Corsican tyrant, sir. I hope you are enjoying your time back in England.”

“I am, very much. I recently had the pleasure of attending my sister Rebekah’s wedding, and I am treasuring time with my family.”

“Among whom are the Darcys?”

“Quite so. My young cousin, Miss Darcy, is currently staying at Matlock House, and Darcy often visits us.”

“I believe Miss Darcy to be a most accomplished young lady, or at least so I understand from Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley, Mr. Bingley’s sisters.”

“Georgiana is indeed a most charming and gifted young woman, though rather shy.”

Elizabeth furrowed her brow at these words, which were counter to her understanding of the only daughter of Pemberley. A moment later, she remembered that all she knew of Miss Darcy was from the lips of George Wickham, who was not the most reliable of informants.

“I believe you and your family hail from Hertfordshire, Miss Elizabeth?”

“Yes, we live at my father’s estate of Longbourn, which is situated near a town called Meryton...”

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Longbourn

After Midnight

Two candles glowed steadily on the small table next to the couch, and the fire was crackling merrily after some attention by a maid.

The Adler twins, curled up next to one another on the settee, heaved a simultaneous sigh of relief. It had been a long, wearying day, and they were glad to be at the end of it. It was also a great pleasure to spend these few minutes before bed together, as they had so often in their girlhood.

“I do not trust Lydia and Kitty with the officers, especially Lydia,” Phoebe remarked. “She should not be out in society, but when I hinted that she should return to the school room, her mother was outraged. In her mind, the sooner her girls are out, the sooner they can find a husband.”

Sophia huffed in frustration. “Given that Lydia is naïve, volatile, and wildly flirtatious, she is far more likely to be ruined than find a respectable husband. I am certain that Mary does not like Mr. Wickham, by the way, while Lydia seems most enamored with him.”

“He is very handsome,” Phoebe mused, “but I trust Mary far more than Lydia.”

“I do as well,” her twin replied and yawned. “Shall we go to bed?”

“Yes, tomorrow will be another long day...”

“But we will be together,” they chorused.

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The House on Half Moon Street

London

Elizabeth, curled up in a cushioned chair drawn near the fireplace, stared absently at the dancing flames. Her dressing gown was wrapped over her night-dress and her hair pinned under her cap. She felt delightfully warm and so very tired after all the fuss of the evening.

So much fuss it had been, too. From the moment she had stepped foot in the Talbots' ballroom, she had been at the center of a court of gentlemen, perfumed and exquisitely attired, all attentive to her every word, endlessly complimentary, begging her for each dance. It had been exhausting, and she found herself missing the country dances of Meryton, before she was an heiress, with just the four and twenty families dancing together.

She truly had not expected to be the center of so much attention – she, the daughter of a mere country gentleman. But it was not really her, of course. It was her money. Seventy thousand pounds was quite the lure, and the gentlemen swarmed to it like ravenous fish. All of them chose to flatter her person and her character, saying whatever they thought she might wish to hear.

How was she to know, amidst this fortune-hunting clamor, which voices were sincere? Which admiration was true? She had no wish to marry a man who saw only her money. She wanted to be admired, respected, and loved for herself.

Her mind drifted to Mr. Darcy. The dance with him had been a reprieve, and a surprisingly pleasant, if puzzling, one. She had not expected him to apologize for his rudeness in Meryton. She had been confident, when she accepted his offer of a dance, that he was not making himself agreeable in hopes of gaining her as a wife. As the master of a highly prosperous

estate, with an income of some ten thousand pounds a year – and no debts, according to rumor – he had no need to seek an heiress as a wife. But why would he go out of his way to be amiable to her?

The door to her bedchamber opened, and a voice called out, “Lizzy?”

Elizabeth turned toward the door and called out, “Do come in, Jane.”

Jane entered, wrapped in her favorite blue dressing gown, and said, “I hope I am not keeping you from your bed?”

“After such an evening, my mind is far too busy to settle into sleep yet. Do come and sit down, dear one.”

Jane moved closer and took a seat next to her. “Did you enjoy the ball?”

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose and shrugged. “It was well enough, I suppose. But before we speak of my experiences, how was your evening? Did you speak much to Mr. Bingley?”

Jane hesitated for a moment and then said, “We spoke a little, yes. He apologized for abandoning Netherfield and, by extension, me.”

“Did he indeed? And what was your response?”

“I said that I accepted his apology,” Jane replied in a subdued tone.

Elizabeth tilted her head and asked, “Have you?”

“I have forgiven, yes, but certainly not forgotten. I truthfully do not know entirely how I feel. I thought that – I do not know – perhaps that we could start up where we left off, but I realize that I am angry, Lizzy. I am angry that he left me, that he listened to Mr. Darcy and his sisters. It was so cruel of him to leave without a word, and surely he knows his sisters better than I do. Surely he knew that they were plotting against our possible marriage.”

Elizabeth considered this for a moment and then said, “I do not wish to excuse Mr. Bingley, but in many ways he is like you, my dear sister. He wishes to believe that those around him are as honorable as he is, and thus he gives more credit to his sisters’ veracity and honesty than they deserve.”

Jane sighed and nodded. “You told me months ago that Miss Bingley, in particular, did not truly care about me. You were right. You have told me that I am a great deal too apt to like people in general. I thought that I was being realistic and kind, but it seems I was merely being naïve. The Bingleys have their share of flaws, all of them.”

“*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*” Elizabeth quoted from the Bible and then sighed deeply. “I have a confession to make as well. I have long prided myself on my understanding of human nature, but my sudden acquisition of wealth has opened my eyes! Mr. Wickham, whom I thought the very best of men, is a vile fortune hunter. I also realize that most of the men at this evening’s ball were far too flattering to a young, unknown woman from the country.”

Jane frowned as ferociously as was possible for such a tender woman and said, “You are beautiful, clever, and intelligent, Elizabeth. Any man would be honored to win you as his bride.”

“But you are more beautiful than I,” her sister riposted, “and while you never sat out a dance, you did not have men clustering around you like hummingbirds around a blossom. No, it is my money that they all want, and how I am to discern who is truly a good and godly man in the midst of all those avaricious gentlemen, I do not know!”

“Ideally, you would fall in love with a wealthy man who does not need your riches,” Jane suggested with a chuckle.

Elizabeth found, to her astonishment, that her mind quickly called up the handsome face of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, and her fingers tingled at the thought of his strong grasp on her hand during their dance.

She blushed and was relieved that the light was too poor for Jane to observe it.

“Indeed, that would be most advantageous,” she said lightly.

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Darcy House

Fitzwilliam Darcy, curled up comfortably in his bed, with the fire crackling softly in the grate, was hopeful that he would sleep well tonight.

The ball had been a moderate success from his viewpoint. He had danced with Miss Elizabeth Bennet and apologized for his harsh and stupid words from the previous year. He had even succeeded in making her laugh during their dance, which was a triumph.

It remained to be seen what would happen with the woman he loved, who would, if he knew anything about it, be one of the rages of the Season. She was beautiful, clever, charming, and rich, and only very high sticklers and truly wealthy gentlemen would be distressed by her oblique ties to trade.

She would – and here he found himself breathing in and out carefully – probably choose another man to marry. He could not blame her for that, not at all. If she did, if he lost her ... well, he would mourn and grieve, but silently, and be happy for her, so long as she chose wisely, anyway.

And she would. She was an intelligent, clever lady, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Was there any hope for him? Any at all? It seemed unlikely after the unfortunate start to their relationship. If he could go back in time – but he could not, of course.

He could, at least, become a better man for her sake. He could and would do that.

Chapter 19

The Music Room

Longbourn

Two Mornings Later

Phoebe smiled at her charge. Mary was seated beside her on the bench before the pianoforte, and the two young women were playing a duet together. When needed, Phoebe would lift a hand from the keys to turn the page of the music so that Mary would not need to break her concentration, as Phoebe's own skill slightly surpassed that of her companion.

It was a delight to both their souls to find in one another the same love and enjoyment of music, both playing and listening. Today they were performing the piece they had bought in Meryton so recently, and it sounded, Phoebe thought, very pleasant indeed.

A movement outside the window drew her attention, and she glanced over absently. A frown gathered across her forehead; Miss Lydia was skulking furtively towards the entrance of the paths that meandered across the Longbourn estate, casting shifty glances about to ensure she was unobserved.

"Miss Mary?" Phoebe said, ceasing her playing as she stared out the window. "Does Miss Lydia often walk alone?"

Mary looked up at her curiously. "No, practically never. She always has Kitty with her." She followed Phoebe's gaze out the window just in time to see Lydia's bonnet and shawl disappear behind some the trees and startled. "Perhaps..."

"Perhaps she is going to visit the officers?" Phoebe asked grimly, rising from the bench.

“I fear so,” Mary admitted, twisting her hands in her skirt a little. “She and Kitty both spent far more time than proper with the officers before you and Miss Adler arrived, and I know my younger sisters resent the curtailing of that liberty.”

This was, indeed, Phoebe’s conclusion, and she and Sophia both had been appalled that such license was permitted. The twins had spoken to Mr. Bennet just that morning in his library, where he was always to be found, cloistered away from his womenfolk. Sophia had brought up Mary’s distrust of George Wickham, and both sisters had listened in mounting dismay as Mr. Bennet had told them what he knew of the scoundrel.

When he was through, Sophia had said boldly, “I am surprised we were not informed of this rogue and warned to be on the lookout for him, sir.”

Mr. Bennet had waved a dismissive hand. “That is why I hired you two, to look after my girls. In any case, I have thought it over, and now that Elizabeth is in London, I think it unlikely that any young men here would be fool enough to compromise or offer for either of my younger daughters, who are as empty headed as kittens. No one knows the specific details of Elizabeth’s inheritance, and any sensible young man would realize that the wealth might be securely tied up.”

There were, of course, even worse scenarios in which an idiotic girl might be trapped, and the Adler twins had traded speaking looks. Their employer was lazy and, as he said, not concerned with his younger daughters. He would not inconvenience himself for them.

Now Phoebe stood frowning with worry as she watched Lydia vanish into the woods. “I must go after her. I fear she may be doing something foolish.”

“Perhaps we should tell Father and go on horseback?” Mary suggested tentatively.

Phoebe shook her head. “There is no time. If she has agreed to meet with someone along the path, we must hurry to prevent a scandal. I have always been fleet of foot, so I will run after her. I am sorry for cutting short our playing, Miss Mary.”

“Of course safeguarding my sisters is paramount,” Mary said firmly, and Phoebe nodded in gratitude before dashing from the room. In the vestibule, she snatched up her hat and donned it without care and wrapped her pelisse over her shoulders before sprinting from the house.

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Lydia, now free from any possibility of being spied from the house, slowed her steps and looked around with pleasure. She did not particularly enjoy walking for walking’s sake, but she was happy that the weather was pleasantly cool, and she even enjoyed the pink and white wildflowers clustered thickly on the right side of the path.

She had, she thought, been quite clever in escaping Longbourn this morning. Miss Phoebe had been simple enough. The woman was apparently as enthusiastic about music as dull, plain Mary, and she was generally sequestered in the music room this time of day.

Miss Adler herself had been more difficult. The woman was most exasperating, with her quiet step and penchant for appearing in the drawing room and suggesting that Kitty and Lydia read Shakespeare, or practice drawing, or something of the sort. She did not need accomplishments, not in the least, when she had already won the love and adoration of Mr. George Wickham, surely the most handsome and clever man in all of England!

She would see him in a few short minutes, and they would make their plans to run away to Gretna Greene, and she would be Mrs. Wickham, the first of her sisters to be married,

and that in spite of her lack of fortune. Elizabeth, so proud of her sudden wealth, would be surprised indeed when she learned of her youngest sister's triumph!

She was a few feet from the fork in the path when she heard a voice behind her. "Miss Lydia!"

She spun around in shock, which transformed into outrage. Miss Adler, or possibly Miss Phoebe, was running toward her with surprising rapidity.

"Miss Lydia!" the woman repeated, coming to a stop and puffing inelegantly. "Where are you going?"

Lydia spent a few seconds being taken aback and then decided to be angry.

"It is not at all your business where I am going!" she snapped shrilly. "You have no right..."

"I have every right," the governess replied sternly, "and the responsibility as well. Why are you creeping off alone? Are you intending to meet the officers, or perhaps one officer in particular?"

Lydia tried for an innocent look and failed, and Phoebe said, "Miss Lydia, how could you? Do you not know that you could destroy not only your own reputation if you are compromised by a man, but also those of your sisters?"

Lydia was briefly tempted to tell the truth, that she was engaged to George Wickham – *that* would show her spinster governess that she was a mature woman who did not need oversight. A second later, she thought better of it. Her dear Wickham had insisted that their love remain a secret for now, and in any case, she would not confide in the Adlers; they were thoroughly annoying! Calling upon her considerable powers of deception, Lydia exclaimed, "I am not such a fool! There is no shame in speaking with the officers on the streets of Meryton in front of everyone. Perhaps it is different in Town, but this is the country! Moreover, you have no right to spy on me and berate me. You are merely a governess, and I

am a daughter of the house. I insist you return home, Miss Adler!”

“I am Miss Phoebe,” the lady replied sternly, “and I will *not* return home. Your father has given me the responsibility of looking after you, and I intend to fulfill my task to the best of my ability. Now do come home, Miss Lydia. Your creeping away from Longbourn is most improper.”

“I will not return!” the girl shrieked angrily. “I will not! And you cannot make me!”

Phoebe breathed in deeply and then produced a chilly smile. “You are quite correct that I cannot drag you home, but neither can you get rid of me. I am, as you can see, a very fast runner and wherever you go, I will go. So by all means, let us walk to Meryton, and we can enjoy speaking with the officers together, though I suspect that your father will hunt us down in short order, since I left word that I was pursuing you when I left Longbourn.”

Lydia felt a strong inclination to burst into tears. She was already a trifle late to her meeting with Mr. Wickham, and of course she could not meet with him while Miss Phoebe dogged her steps.

“I will tell my mother on you!” she exclaimed petulantly, reluctantly turning toward her home.

“And I will tell Mr. Bennet about you,” Phoebe replied sternly.

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On the road to Half Moon Street

Rain-slicked cobblestones rattled and glistened under the wheels of the Matlock carriage, but the passengers inside scarcely felt or heard a thing. Plush seats and excellent springs

kept all travelers comfortable, the door and the curtains firmly shutting out the day's mist and trapping warmth inside.

Darcy and Bingley swayed along backwards. Across from them sat Richard Fitzwilliam and his mother, Lady Matlock, in the choicest seats. Small lanterns hung in the corners, compensating for the lack of daylight through the windows.

"You say that the Bennets have close ties to trade?" Lady Matlock demanded suspiciously.

"Moderately close ties, yes," Darcy responded. "Their mother is the daughter of a solicitor, and they have an uncle in trade."

The lady turned her attention on her son and said, "My dear Richard, I am not entirely certain that it will do. You are the son of an earl and owe it to your name to marry appropriately."

This was, of course, exactly what Darcy had thought the previous autumn, and which he now knew to be idiotic, and he found himself biting his tongue.

"I love you dearly, Mother," Richard said, "but I am my own man and will marry as I see fit. I have met both Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth and they are charming, lovely, well-mannered ladies. Any man blessed to win the hand of either lady should thank providence for his good fortune!"

"Hear hear!" Bingley exclaimed and then winced as Lady Matlock turned a gimlet eye on the previously silent passenger.

"Am I to understand that you are also entering the lists in an attempt to win the heiress, Mr. Bingley?" she asked.

"No, not at all. I am pursuing Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth's elder sister. She is not wealthy, but she is an angel, and I hope, in time, to win her hand in marriage."

Lady Matlock peeked through a gap in the curtains as the carriage turned onto Half Moon Street and then turned her

attention on her nephew.

“What do you have to say, Darcy?” she demanded. “You are a sensible gentleman with an appropriate understanding of what you and Richard owe to your name. Do you think that Miss Elizabeth Bennet is a worthy wife for your cousin?”

Since his stupid pride had caused him to lose the woman he adored, he felt a strong urge to respond loudly and rudely. Longstanding civility restrained him, and he merely said, “Indeed, Bingley is correct; the Bennet ladies are charming women and worthy of any man.”

Chapter 20

The House on Half Moon Street

The door to the drawing room swung open, and Elizabeth looked up in exasperation. She had hoped that since the weather was changeable today, with occasional periods of showers, they would not have quite so many visitors. A moment later, though, her feelings changed as the butler entered to announce the Countess of Matlock, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Darcy, and Mr. Bingley.

She rose to her feet along with Jane, even as she cast an anxious look at her sister. To her relief, Jane looked calm as she greeted the countess, who was a woman of some five and fifty years, dressed expensively and becomingly in blue silk, with a charming bonnet framing a face that once must have been extraordinarily handsome.

“Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth,” the countess said. “I am delighted to make your acquaintance, especially as you are the protégées of an old friend.”

Lady Appleby, who had not risen, smiled and said, “My dear Lady Matlock, it has been far too long since we have seen one another. Pray do sit down by the fire, and we will call for tea!”

The countess settled into the chair nearest the fire, Charles Bingley hurried over to sit across from Jane Bennet, and Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam took their seats on a settee across from Elizabeth.

“Miss Elizabeth,” the countess said, fixing the girl with a curious eye, “I understand that this is your first Season?”

“Yes indeed, Madame. I have spent some months in London in the past, but I have never taken part in the Season.”

“I daresay it was not considered advisable for you to have a Season before you inherited Mrs. Simpson’s wealth.”

“Mother, really!” Colonel Fitzwilliam exclaimed in comic dismay, but Elizabeth merely laughed and said, “I appreciate your directness, my lady. You are entirely correct. My father is a country gentleman of moderate fortune, and he certainly does not have the resources to sponsor a Season for each of his five daughters. Indeed, without Lady Appleby’s generous sponsorship, I expect very few doors would be opened to us.”

Lady Matlock tilted her head and regarded Elizabeth thoughtfully. “There is some truth to that, though with the Simpson fortune at your back, and the beauty of your face, I have no doubt that you will be one of the stars of the Season. Now Miss Bennet, pray tell me about yourself. Are you enjoying your time in Town?”

Jane, who had been engaged in somewhat stilted conversation with Charles Bingley, looked up and said, “Yes, Madame, very much.”

“It is a pity that *you* are not wealthy,” the Countess mused, regarding Jane through narrowed eyes. “My dear Lady Appleby, Miss Elizabeth is a pretty girl, but Miss Bennet is quite the loveliest creature I have beheld in the last three years. How extraordinary.”

“She is also the kindest and most generous of women,” Elizabeth said, which made Jane blush vividly and protest, “Lizzy!”

“I think you have embarrassed them enough,” Lady Appleby remarked with a chuckle. “Shall we let the young people talk while we speak of the past?”

“Very well,” the countess said, a trifle reluctantly, and turned toward Lady Appleby. “How is your Eric doing?”

Elizabeth, freed from additional questions, turned toward Darcy and Fitzwilliam and observed that Darcy was looking blank and the colonel ruefully embarrassed.

“Miss Elizabeth, I hope that you will forgive my mother for her rather impertinent questions.”

“Happily, Colonel,” Elizabeth replied, her lips quirking up in obvious amusement. “I appreciate a mother who cares deeply for her children. I assume that the countess wishes to be assured that we are appropriate possibilities for her beloved son?”

Darcy made a peculiar sound, drawing Elizabeth’s bewildered look, and the colonel said, rather shamefacedly, “That is correct, Miss Elizabeth. I am a second son, you see, and am expected to wed an heiress.”

“But do *you* wish to marry an heiress, Colonel Fitzwilliam?” the lady asked pointedly, tilting her head to one side.

Richard stroked his chin and said, “Yes, I do. As the son of an earl, I have habits of expense which preclude my marriage to a poor woman. That is the plain truth, Miss Elizabeth.”

“I appreciate the plain truth,” Elizabeth replied with a saucy smile. “But tell me, would you marry a wealthy woman if you had nothing in common with her? If you did not even like her?”

“I would not,” the gentleman replied immediately. “Wealth is not a reasonable exchange for compatibility in marriage.”

“And what of you, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth demanded, turning her sparkling eyes on the master of Pemberley. “You, of course, are a wealthy man, so do not require a rich bride. But perhaps you feel that you must marry a woman of substance, with excellent connections?”

Darcy, who had been watching the woman he adored with yearning, jumped in surprise at being thus addressed, and forced himself to think before he spoke.

“In the not very distant past, I had a far higher view of wealth and connections than I do now,” he said, striving to

sound studiously calm. “I have realized that my former perspective was foolish. My own parents were blessed with a happy marriage, and Pemberley thrived under their care.”

He noticed, in the periphery of his vision, that Richard was regarding him with surprise. He kept his own gaze fixed on the exquisite face of the lady he loved and was pleased when she nodded in approval and said, “I quite agree that a congenial marriage is beneficial for an estate, and for the children of the union as well. To have a husband and wife with very little in common is a dreadful state of affairs.”

“It is worse yet when husband and wife dislike one another profoundly,” Darcy said. “It would have been far better for our Regent...”

He trailed off, and the threesome nodded in unison. The Prince, who had married his first cousin Caroline of Brunswick, had loathed the princess on sight, and the two had been estranged for most of their marriage. The one child from their union, the Princess Charlotte, was yanked to and fro by her warring parents, which was not good for either the princess or the nation.

“I entirely agree,” Elizabeth said, which warmed Darcy’s heart. A moment later, he became aware that Richard was still staring at him with a peculiar expression on his face, and he turned to glare back. What reason did his cousin have for peering at him so intently?

“Do you have any recommendations for interesting places to visit here in Town?” Elizabeth asked, and the conversation turned to more general topics.

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Charles Bingley looked upon his beloved Miss Bennet and said, “Miss Bennet, how are your younger sisters?”

“They are well enough, Mr. Bingley,” Jane said in a composed tone. “My father has chosen to employ two governesses to oversee their instruction.”

“Two?”

“Yes, twins. I have not met them, but Mary has written and tells me that they are an intelligent and kindly pair of women, and that the younger is a most accomplished musician and is thus able to provide additional instruction to her, while the elder is a gifted artist and is working with Kitty.”

“That sounds delightful,” Bingley said, and an awkward silence fell. When he had spent time with Miss Bennet back in Hertfordshire, conversation had always flowed easily between them. But then he had fled Netherfield like an idiot and left the lady behind, and she obviously was still disturbed and uneasy.

“Will you be attending the ball at Damaral House tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yes,” Jane said with a smile. “We are looking forward to it.”

“Might I have the honor of a dance with you, Miss Bennet?” he asked, and held his breath as he waited for her response.

Jane hesitated and then nodded. “Yes, that would be pleasant.”

“The first dance?” he asked daringly.

Again, the lady hesitated before saying, “The first dance, yes.”

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Matlock House

Later

The fire crackled contentedly in the hearth, while three wax candles glowed on the marble mantle. The three occupants of the room were seated in the chairs clustered closest to the hearth, as the night was a chilly one. The drawing room looked considerably different from the last time Darcy was there because his Aunt Matlock had entirely redecorated it in the latest fashions the previous year. It was a charming room, not gaudy or ostentatious, and Lady Matlock had not exchanged comfort for aesthetics, to Darcy's great relief. He thought there was nothing so absurd as furniture which was beautiful but uncomfortable.

Lord Matlock sat across from Darcy with Richard adjacent to them both, each man holding a glass of truly excellent port. Darcy rolled his wine around his mouth, appreciating his uncle's choice of alcohol.

"Well, I for one am tired," Lord Matlock declared, rising slowly to his feet and glancing at the clock, which was pointing to the midnight hour. "Darcy, it was good to see you this evening."

"It was good to see you too, sir," Darcy replied, also standing up and extending a hand toward his uncle. "Many thanks for caring for Georgiana so well."

"It is no trouble at all, I assure you," the older man said, shaking his nephew's hand. "Indeed, your aunt and cousin are delighted to have Georgiana here as a distraction from Rebekah's departure."

"Have you heard from Rebekah at all, sir?" Richard asked from his seat by the fire.

"I have not, but your mother has. She seems very happy in her marriage."

"That is excellent," Richard said and then, turning to his cousin, continued, "Darcy, if you are not too fatigued, I would appreciate some advice about a matter of importance to me."

Darcy turned toward him in surprise, as Matlock exited the room, and then wandered over to the fire to toast the back

of his legs with the flames.

“What can I help you with, Richard?” he asked, and wondered when he would be able to go to bed. He had treasured his time with Elizabeth and Georgiana earlier in the day, but now he was greatly fatigued.

“You can tell me about your relationship with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Are you in love with the lady?”

This provoked a gasp of astonishment from Darcy, followed by a croak, and then a cacophony of coughs, and when he had sufficiently recovered, he found his cousin staring at him as if he had never seen him before.

“You *are* in love with her!” Richard exclaimed. “I truly was not certain!”

Darcy opened his mouth to protest, and then closed it. He might never be able to tell his lady love of his adoration, but he would not, at any rate, deny it to Richard.

“How did you guess?” he asked in a subdued tone, wandering over to drop in the wingbacked chair nearest the fire.

Richard stood up and made his way to the bottle of port, poured the liquid into his and Darcy’s two glasses, and ordered, “Drink that up. The truth is that I was not certain, but your claim that love and respect are far more important than wealth and connections was notably peculiar, and you could not keep your eyes off the lady during our visit today.”

Darcy groaned dramatically, provoking his cousin to ask, “Whatever is wrong? She is a clever, charming young woman and would be a wonderful mistress of Pemberley.”

“She is all of those things, but do you not see? I have very little hope in winning her hand or heart!”

“Because she is wealthy? But surely since you knew her back in Hertfordshire, you have an advantage over the young sprigs of the nobility and gentry currently pursuing her?”

Darcy groaned again and shook his head. “I was a dunderhead and a fool. I thought she was beneath me because of her connections and lack of fortune. The very day we met at an assembly, I insulted her looks and refused to dance with her. I also encouraged Bingley to abandon her elder sister, when they had been close to an engagement. No, Richard, I fear that I have little hope of winning the lady’s favor after my idiocy, and I...”

He actually felt tears start in his eyes, and he quickly, shamefacedly, wiped them away with one hand. When he looked up, Richard was staring at him with obvious compassion.

“I am sorry,” he said simply.

“As am I, but nothing can change the past,” Darcy said heavily. “At least I have learned from my failure, and will, I hope, be a better man in the future.”

Richard contemplated his cousin gravely and then said, “In any case, I will not pursue the lady. I can only imagine how painful it would be if I won her favor.”

“No, no, Richard. Elizabeth ... Miss Elizabeth deserves the very best husband, and you are one of the finest men of my acquaintance. If she chooses you, I will be happy for you, I promise.”

The colonel shook his head and said, “In any case, I doubt that I will win the lady’s favor; she is a great heiress, along with being a beauty, and I am merely the poor, second son of an earl.”

“One of the aspects of Miss Elizabeth’s character which I admire the most is that she truly is not terribly interested in wealth and position. She ... well, back in Hertfordshire, she made rather a point of arguing with me on every occasion. I thought that she was enjoying our debates, that she was flirting with me, but I discovered as of a few days ago that she ... she despises me...”

He trailed off, and looked so woebegone, so miserable, that his cousin took pity on him and said, "I am sorry, Darcy. It is late, and we should both sleep. I do not think that you should entirely give up hope, though. You are an intelligent and honorable man, and Miss Elizabeth would doubtless like you very much if she knew you better."

Darcy felt a slight ray of hope in the midst of his despair and could only smile gratefully at his cousin.

Chapter 21

Damaral House

The Next Evening

Caroline Bingley glanced around as she stepped into the ballroom situated at the back in the Damarals' mansion. It was a proper squeeze, she saw with satisfaction. Her own family had arrived at a fashionably late hour, and while it was likely there would be more preeminent families appearing later yet, most attendees had already arrived. The ballroom was not small, but it was nearly filled with a flurry of color, with the ladies and gentlemen dressed in bright dresses and coats of the latest fashion. Jewels winked at ears and throats and gloved hands and wrists, sparkling out of nests of hair and silken turbans, gleaming upon breasts. Plumes dyed magenta and blue and green and yellow bobbed merrily above careful coiffures.

The chandelier above the dance floor glittered brilliantly, casting a thousand facets of light upon the polished parquet below. All around the walls and upon each table, dozens upon dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of candles shone in their matching sticks. At one end of the room, several musicians were already playing a violin, a cello, a flute, and a set of rare Pandean pipes.

Caroline glanced down at herself; only briefly, of course, as it would not do to be seen to be ogling oneself. She needed to ensure that she looked her very best.

Her gown of bright canary yellow silk flattered her figure wonderfully, she knew. An examination in her mirror earlier in the evening had shown that it was all she wished it to be. Pink lace rosettes at her sleeves and décolletage added a hint of the demure while subtly drawing the eye towards her greatest assets. Her ears dripped diamonds, a pale pink ruby

adorning her throat. She knew she cut a handsome picture, and she lifted her head in serene complacency.

As she scanned the room again, Caroline caught sight of a familiar face, Miss Alice Rumford, dressed in light teal silk and fanning herself in the particular way she had that indicated irritation. The Bingley sisters had attended school with her, and the ladies were, if not good friends, at least affectionate acquaintances.

As the crowd shifted, the man beside Miss Rumford became visible. Mr. Simon Rumford was dressed as befitted the heir to the barony of Montban, in Cornwall. The family was not wealthy, but they were inclined to remember their dignity as nobility, and Caroline prized the friendship highly.

Caroline caught her sister's eye and nodded across the room pointedly. Louisa glanced over, and her eyes lit up. The two sisters began wending their way over, ignoring Mr. Hurst entirely. He, unbothered, made his way purposefully for the tables of refreshments, which was situated pleasingly near the card room.

As the ladies grew closer, they caught a fragment of the conversation between Miss Rumford and her brother.

"You cannot even be certain that she will come, Simon," Miss Rumford protested and then, at the sight of Caroline and Louisa, turned a smiling face on her old school friends.

"My dear Caroline! Louisa! It has been too long!" the lady cried out. "Were you not in Hertfordshire or something of the sort over winter?"

"Only through November," Caroline replied, grimacing expressively. "My brother leased an estate in Hertfordshire but fortunately was prevailed upon to return to Town by Christmas. It was a dreadful place. The house was well enough, but the society was dreadful! The families who made up the local society were a dull, tedious lot, with no taste or refinement."

“That does sound dreadful!” Miss Rumford replied, opening her eyes very wide. “Brothers can be so foolish, can they not?”

This was obviously meant for Mr. Rumford, but he, at this moment, jerked to attention and exclaimed, “There is Lady Appleby, so one of those two girls behind her must be the heiress. Do excuse me!”

The young man hurried off in the direction of the main door, and Caroline turned a puzzled look in the same direction, which transformed into one of incredulity. In fact, she wondered if she were dreaming, and therefore turned to look at her sister, whose jaw was drooping unbecomingly.

Old Lady Appleby was walking ahead of the Bennet sisters, which was the only reason anyone paid any attention to her. She was dressed flatteringly in deep purple velvet with paler lavender highlights and was leaning on an artfully carved cane budding with wooden flowers, but she was entirely outshone by the splendor behind her.

Jane Bennet was nothing short of breath-taking. Her gown of sky-blue set off her eyes to perfection, and was enhanced by the delicate white spider-gauze over it. She wore demurely little in the way of jewelry, with only a simple cross around her neck. Her hair was piled high on the back of her head and pinned in place with filigree combs, and three artful curls dangled to frame her enchanting face.

At her side, her sister Elizabeth was no less stunning. Forest green crape over a white satin underdress made her dark eyes glow and leant a creamy tint to her skin. Her hair, like Jane’s, was piled high, and her combs were of pearl to match her exquisite necklace. Their gloves were quite as high as propriety demanded, and when Elizabeth walked, green satin slippers peeped from under her hem.

“What are *they* doing here?” Caroline finally sputtered in outrage, which caused her friend Alice to peer at her in wonder.

“Do you know the two ladies with Lady Appleby?” she demanded.

“I most certainly do,” Caroline exclaimed, her brow furrowed with indignation. “They are the eldest Bennet daughters, one of the local families in Hertfordshire. Their mother is the daughter of a solicitor, and their younger daughters are hoydens. I cannot imagine why they are here!”

“Which one is Miss Elizabeth Bennet?” Miss Rumford asked eagerly.

“The one with the darker hair,” Caroline said and then gasped as the crowd parted sufficiently to allow two very familiar men to hurry up to the Misses Bennet. “Louisa, did you know that Charles was to be here? And Mr. Darcy as well! Oh, we must do something!”

Louisa, more level headed than her sister, now turned a bemused look on Miss Rumford and asked, “Why did you ask which one was Miss Elizabeth?”

“Why, because Miss Elizabeth Bennet is a great heiress, did you not know?” Alice explained, her eyes gleaming with curiosity.

The sisters exchanged shocked glances, and Caroline declared, “That is nonsense! Longbourn, the Bennets’ estate, brings in only two thousand pounds a year at most, and furthermore it is entailed away from the female line. It will go to a distant cousin, a most tedious clergyman! The Bennets are nearly penniless.”

“Ah, but I understand that Miss Elizabeth inherited from a distant connection to her family, who was also a close friend of Lady Appleby’s,” Miss Rumford declared.

The sisters exchanged glances again, and Louisa demanded, “How much?”

Alice lowered her voice, though there was no reason to do so in the crowd, and said, “Rumors are that Miss Elizabeth is mistress of seventy thousand pounds!”

Caroline gasped, choked, and, a long moment later, spots appeared in her vision. It could not be! It could not!

“Caroline, pull yourself together,” Louisa hissed. “Do not let the Bennets see you so overcome!”

This had the desirable effect of stiffening Caroline’s spine and knees, and she straightened her neck as her brother and Miss Bennet stepped out onto the dance floor, followed by, a moment later, Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Miss Elizabeth.

She watched in disbelief as the country dance started, and the two Misses Bennet pirouetted by, while she stood on the sidelines without a partner.

A moment later, she observed Mr. Darcy standing on the other side of the dance floor, gazing gravely at the ladies she abhorred, and she made her apologies to her friend Alice and hastily made her way to the master of Pemberley’s side.

“Mr. Darcy!” she cried out. “What are we to do? This is awful!”

The gentleman turned to look down on her, his expression blank, and said, “I fear I do not understand, Miss Bingley. What is awful?”

Caroline opened her eyes dramatically and said, “My dear sir, surely it is obvious! Miss Bennet has successfully sunk her claws into my brother again.”

A muscle twitched in Darcy’s cheek, but he merely turned back toward the dance floor and said calmly, “I think that is an inappropriate way to describe the situation, Miss Bingley. I have always thought Miss Bennet a kind and honorable lady. I merely was concerned that she might accept your brother’s offer out of a sense of duty toward her family instead of true affection. Now that Miss Elizabeth is wealthy, that is no longer a concern. Nor do I feel at ease with my role in the matter. Your brother is a grown man and entirely capable of making his own decisions about marriage.”

There were so many things dreadfully wrong about this speech that Caroline felt a strong inclination to faint again, but she rallied sufficiently to snarl, “That assumes that Miss Elizabeth *is* actually rich. I think it most unlikely; it is probably a duplicitous scheme on her part to win a husband of substance!”

Darcy did not bother to look at her but merely remarked, “Lady Appleby, who is sponsoring the Bennets, is an old acquaintance of my aunt, Lady Matlock. She is an honorable and truthful woman, and I have no doubt that Miss Elizabeth is now as rich as she is purported to be.”

“*Seventy thousand pounds?*” Caroline demanded shrilly.

“Yes,” Darcy said baldly, keeping his eyes on Elizabeth, who, based on the smile on her face, was enjoying her conversation with Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Caroline felt tears of fury spring to her eyes and decided that she had best retreat to the ladies’ cloak room to recover some semblance of her poise. But when she entered the cloak room, even she was surprised by the squeal that escaped her lips. “It is not fair!”

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“How does it feel to be the rage of London, Miss Elizabeth?” Colonel Fitzwilliam inquired, as he and Elizabeth made their way down the floor.

“I do not believe I am,” Elizabeth responded promptly. “Certainly there are many gentlemen who are enamored with my fortune, but I know well enough that they are not particularly interested in *me*.”

“A cynical view,” the colonel said, “but alas, I fear a reasonable one.”

“I inherited my cynicism from my father,” his partner said with a smile, which faded away into gravity. “Though I

will confess that I did not realize how many people would marry solely based on monetary concerns. I was rather naïve, I think, in that regard.”

“It is not surprising, perhaps, given that you gained your wealth suddenly. As a second son, I was not raised with the expectation of riches, but both my elder brother and my cousin Darcy were. I fear it has hardened both of them to some degree.”

Elizabeth looked thoughtful at these words, and after completing a few more figures, remarked, “My father said something similar, that perhaps Mr. Darcy’s reserve is won from years of being pursued by avid and enthusiastic ladies who flatter and pursue him for his fortune and connections.”

Fitzwilliam, who had every intention of promoting his cousin’s courtship with Miss Elizabeth Bennet, said, “That is entirely true, I assure you. Darcy is actually wealthier than my own family, and he finds it difficult to know whether a woman cares for him because of his wealth or his person.”

His companion was silent for another two minutes, before saying, “What is Pemberley like, Colonel? I have heard it is marvelous.”

“It is, largely because of the diligent effort of Darcy and, before him, his father. My cousin is truly a decent and hardworking man. He has sought to maintain the tenant cottages and promote modern farming methods...”

Chapter 22

Damaral House

An Hour Later

Caroline had recovered sufficiently to emerge from the cloak room and into the ballroom, and she was pleased when Mr. Vincent Harris, the elder son of a respectable gentleman from Essex, asked her to dance the supper dance. He was an elegant dancer and reasonably wealthy, though his father's estate was nothing compared to Pemberley.

The lines formed for a cotillion, and the music began, and Caroline smiled up at her partner. The gentlemen and ladies started twirling and stepping, and then, to her utter, complete horror, she observed Miss Elizabeth Bennet nearby, who was, as impossible as it seemed, dancing with Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.

How could this be happening? How could it be that the Bennets, despised and discarded the previous autumn, were now the belles of the ball, and she, who was far more beautiful, accomplished, and until recently, more wealthy, was largely ignored?

She would, she decided, need to drink more wine than usual to survive this nightmarish evening.

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Midnight

Some two dozen or so tables were placed artfully around the dining room, each shining with its own lit candelabra placed carefully in the middle of the white linen

tablecloth. Silver bowls and plates arranged around the candles shone like courtiers around their monarchs, six settings to a table. Along the walls, vases of hothouse flowers had been set up, splashing the room with color and delicately perfuming the air. Liveried caterers slid with practiced ease between each table bearing platters and tureens and decanters.

Richard Fitzwilliam cast a satisfied eye over his own table. He, Darcy, and Bingley would be seated with Lady Appleby and the Bennet sisters, and he quietly congratulated himself on his own unobtrusive arrangements to ensure the seating plan. He was coming to the firm conclusion that Elizabeth Bennet and his cousin Darcy would be an excellent couple, were they to make a match of it. He intended to exert his own limited power – subtly – to encourage such an outcome.

“I do enjoy walking very much, Colonel Fitzwilliam,” Elizabeth said in response to the military man’s question. “I have been to Hyde Park and have skirted the Serpentine, but have never been to either Greenwich or Green Park. Are they pleasant?”

“They are,” Richard said. “Darcy is particularly fond of Green Park, are you not?”

Darcy shot an indignant glance at his cousin and rolled his eyes, and then turned a wry look on Elizabeth. “There are cows at Green Park, with attendant milkmaids, and one is able to buy fresh milk, directly from the cow, for a very trifling sum. I, however, loathe and detest the taste of milk, so am not enamored with that particular feature of the park.”

Jane laughed and said, “Well, in that case, Lizzy is entirely in agreement with you. She too abhors the taste of milk by itself.”

“Though I am fond of cheesecakes and syllabubs and puddings,” her sister declared. “I like things *made* of milk, but not the milk itself!”

“Exactly!” Darcy said enthusiastically. “I remember very well when I was a child that on special occasions my mother would order cherry ice cream for the sweets course at Pemberley, and those are some of the best memories of my boyhood!”

“Is it possible that you have a sweet tooth, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth asked, her eyes sparkling in an enchanting way. “I would not have guessed it of you!”

“You have caught me quite out,” Darcy said dramatically, enjoying the sight of her fine eyes. “I know that I am supposed to enjoy hearty meats and the like, and I do, but oh, how I relish a cake or an ice...”

Richard, satisfied that he had promoted his cousin’s courtship as much as was possible, turned to discover Bingley speaking courteously to Lady Appleby, while Miss Bennet ate her ragout with dainty bites.

“Are you also enjoying your time in London, Miss Bennet?” he asked.

“I am,” Jane replied and smiled at him. “I hope that you are enjoying it more, given that you spent so many months fighting against the Tyrant. Thank you safeguarding our homes, sir.”

Richard smiled and attempted to turn the subject, but it was to no avail. It quickly became apparent that Jane Bennet was a reader of newspapers and was surprisingly well informed about the war against Napoleon. He always took care to soften his accounts of war when speaking to ladies, and thus he was mindful in his report of his experiences on the Peninsula. He was surprised, when dinner ended, to find himself comforted by the conversation with Miss Bennet, who was obviously more than merely a lovely face.

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Damaral House

Two Hours After Midnight

It was, Caroline mused, the last blow of a particularly painful night, when the Hurst carriage and the Darcy carriage were next to one another in the line of vehicles waiting at the front of Damaral House.

Caroline, who was angry, resentful, and more than a little inebriated, glanced over at the Darcy carriage and was outraged to observe Elizabeth Bennet, standing between Lady Appleby and Mr. Darcy, glance at her with what Caroline thought to be an insolent look.

Regrettably, this caused Caroline's slender hold on decorum to shatter, and she took an impetuous step toward the second Miss Bennet and snapped, "I understand that congratulations are in order, that you are now a great heiress!"

Her rival looked startled at being addressed but merely said, "Thank you, Miss Bingley. It was a surprise but also a blessing."

"Yes, quite a blessing," Miss Bingley replied with an angry titter, "though I do urge you not to reach too high in your search for a highborn husband. You are, in spite of your newfound wealth, still merely the granddaughter of a solicitor with an uncle in trade!"

Bingley, who had been gazing raptly at Jane Bennet, swung around at the beginning of his sister's speech and said, "Caroline! Please be quiet!"

"I will not!" she cried out. "I will not allow you to bring shame upon our family name by pursuing a woman who has nothing to recommend her but a beautiful face, whose sisters are reckless hoydens, whose mother is garrulous and vulgar, who..."

"Bingley, I advise you to escort your sister away immediately!" Colonel Fitzwilliam snapped, taking a

protective step toward Jane, who was now pale in the wavering lights of the carriage lamps.

Bingley, who had been goggling in shock, leaped forward, grabbed his sister's arm in one hand, and clapped the other hand over Caroline's mouth. He said to the others, "My friends, I fear I must escort Caroline home. Ladies, my heartfelt apologies for this most unfortunate scene."

"Good evening, Mr. Bingley," Jane said automatically, her stunned gaze fixed on her former friend's face. Tears of fury filled Miss Bingley's eyes, but she was unable to say anything with her brother's gloved hand across her mouth, and within a minute, her sister, brother, and brother-in-law were shoving her into the Bingley carriage.

When she had been pushed into a seat, and the others had climbed in as well, and the door had been shut, and the horses were in motion, Bingley finally removed the offending hand, and Caroline screeched, "How dare you restrain me in such a way?"

"Are you mad?" Bingley hissed in return. "How could you make such a scene in front of Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, not to mention Lady Appleby? Did you not see that we were surrounded by the cream of the ton?"

Caroline stared at him, open mouthed, and then looked toward Louisa, whose face was in shadow.

"Louisa!" she whined. "Tell Charles to leave me alone!"

"I will not, Caroline," the older woman said, leaning forward to allow the light of the full moon to illuminate her stern face. "You embarrassed yourself and us with your antics tonight. If you cannot hold your wine, you had best go without!"

This provoked a scream of outrage from Caroline, followed by extravagant tears, and the rest of the journey was completed in silence save for the younger woman's sobbing.

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The Breakfast Parlor

House on Half Moon Street

Noon

The late morning sun streamed in the windows of the breakfast parlor, illuminating a pair of plates heaped high with bacon and eggs and ham and toast spread thickly with marmalade and preserves. The steam curled up from two coffee cups to dance fairy-like in the sunbeams before dissolving away.

Elizabeth and Jane sat adjacent to each other, each speaking little as they addressed themselves heartily to their breakfasts, both lost in their own thoughts. Some residual weariness from the late night of the previous day clung to Elizabeth, weighing down her limbs and leaving her pleasantly lethargic.

The ball had been lovely, and to her surprise, Elizabeth had found most of the evening delightful. Quite unlike Meryton, where the ladies outnumbered the young gentlemen almost two to one, she had not wanted for partners all night. Indeed she had found herself in the novel position of having to refuse many a hopeful young gentleman and more than one member of the nobility. Since she loved dancing, and most of her partners were experienced and gifted dancers, she had enjoyed herself very much while on the floor.

And then there was supper, which had proven pleasurable indeed. The conversation had been at times amusing, at times fascinating, at times stimulating. Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam were well informed men with a substantial knowledge of the world, which she found pleasing. Moreover, it had been oddly touching to hear Mr. Darcy speak of his boyhood at Pemberley and of his love of cherry ice cream.

He had previously seemed so reserved in company – autocratic, stern even. There were, she concluded, hidden depths to the man. According to the colonel, he was a conscientious master of Pemberley, and he certainly adored his little sister and cared for her diligently.

Of course, and here she shook her head, it was not as if he was interested in her. She was grateful for his apology regarding his words at the Meryton assembly, but there was no reason to imagine that he regarded her with true admiration.

Indeed, perhaps he was being gracious because he hoped that the colonel would succeed in wooing her.

That was not, she admitted to herself, a particularly cheerful thought for some reason. She liked Colonel Fitzwilliam, but was uncomfortable with the thought of marrying a man who was primarily concerned with the wealth of his bride. His view was not an unusual one in society, of course, but she wished to marry for affection alone.

She sighed and forced herself to turn her thoughts to more practical matters. A stack of mail sat upon a silver salver in the middle of the table, brought in by the butler earlier. Elizabeth had not yet broached it but now sat eyeing the pile as she chewed her toast. A few bills she could recognize by their envelopes, but the vast majority were plainly invitations to yet more balls, and to routs, and picnics, and Venetian breakfasts. The Bennet sisters were indeed quite popular among the society of London.

The door opened, and Lady Appleby entered, dressed in a morning dress made of dark green poplin, with an elegant tan shawl wrapped warmly around her shoulders.

“Good morning, Madame,” Elizabeth said, standing up, and Jane stood up as well, prompting a chuckle from the older lady, who said, “Do sit down, my dears, and eat. You will need your strength if you are to survive the multitudinous festivities of the Season.”

Elizabeth laughed and said, “You are entirely correct, my lady. I had not imagined that we would garner so many invitations!”

“You are pretty and wealthy, and your sister Jane is one of the most handsome women in London. I am not surprised in the least. Now tell me about that truly annoying young woman who behaved so rudely last night when we were departing. I presume that was the younger sister of your paramour, Jane?”

The Bennet ladies exchanged longsuffering glances, and Jane said, “Yes, that was Caroline Bingley. For reasons I do not entirely understand, she has decided that I am not worthy of her brother and has plotted and schemed to keep us apart. Now that she has failed, she seems to have lost her reason.”

“I daresay she was a trifle drunk,” Lady Appleby observed. “She had the look of a lady who had over imbibed. I will say that she sounds like a most unpleasant sister by marriage, and that you ought to keep that in mind before accepting Mr. Bingley.”

Jane blew out a breath and said, “You are quite correct. Of course, I understand the frustration of having unruly younger sisters, so perhaps I am the perfect wife for a man so blessed, or cursed, as the case may be.”

Elizabeth cast an amused, astonished look at her sister and said, “That is quite an unforgiving speech for you, Jane, and I am proud of you. All the same, if Mr. Bingley will not restrain his younger sister, that is actually a serious matter. You are a gentle woman, and I would not like to think of you being harassed by Miss Bingley. Now I, of course, would combat her with ease, but unless I live with you all the time, I will not always be available to manage her.”

“You are always welcome to live with me,” Jane said, buttering a piece of bread, “whether I am married or single, but I am confident that you will make a fabulous match and will be happily content with your own husband and children.”

Elizabeth huffed and said, "I do not want a fabulous match, Jane. I wish to marry a man whom I love and respect, and who feels the same about me. It really is quite frustrating, as I still have no idea how to tell whether a man admires me or is merely enamored with my money!"

"I have found your launch into society unexpected in some ways," Lady Appleby admitted, pouring herself some tea. "In general, the families of the haut ton are very aware of the fortune, or lack thereof, of the young ladies being launched each year. It is unusual for a new heiress to burst on the scene, so to speak, and when you add beauty and intelligence, well, it is no surprise that many of the gentlemen are nearly drooling."

Elizabeth chuckled at this, though her forehead remained creased.

"What do you think of Colonel Fitzwilliam?" the elderly woman inquired.

Elizabeth pondered for a minute and then said, "I like him. I am aware that he is eager to marry an heiress, which I find unnerving, but he does not flatter me foolishly, which I greatly appreciate."

"I am glad of that, because I spoke with Lady Matlock yesterday, and she has taken an interest in you. I told her that, if possible, we would call on her today."

The Bennet girls exchanged glances, and Elizabeth nodded. "That sounds pleasant, Madame."

Chapter 23

Hurst House

London

Charles Bingley glanced at his pocket watch and moaned in exasperation. He had spent the night at Hurst House and wished to speak to his sister Louisa before departing for Darcy's home. He picked up his fork and took a bite of his eggs, chewed, swallowed, and then leaned back and closed his eyes in weary exasperation.

What *was* he to do with Caroline? He had, of course, threatened to release her dowry to her and cut her off from his own wealth, but could he truly do that? His mother had, before her death, asked him to look after his younger sister. Would he not be dishonoring Mrs. Bingley's memory if he abandoned Caroline entirely? Moreover, if he did release her money and turned his back on her, the Lord only knew what she would do! She had always been stubborn and selfish, but for some reason she absolutely loathed Elizabeth Bennet and was likely to cause a scandal if he did not take her in hand.

His immediate inclination was to rush back to Darcy House and ask for his friend's advice, but he really ought to manage this situation on his own; it was *his* sister, after all. Moreover, he was afraid that if he left the house, he would find reasons to stay away for at least a week, as dealing with Caroline was bound to be exceptionally tiresome and frustrating. No, he had best stay here and determine what to do.

The door opened at this juncture, and Louisa Hurst swept in, her expression stormy, which in turn made Bingley feel even more anxious and apprehensive.

"What is wrong, Louisa?" he demanded.

“What is wrong? What is *wrong*? Caroline has caused a scandal, that is what is wrong! We have already received two notes this morning disinviting us from balls!”

Bingley moaned and ran his hand across his forehead. “This is terrible!”

“It is,” the lady replied, her brown eyes snapping. “Obviously the rumors of Caroline’s horrific behavior are spreading far and wide. You must take her out of Town!”

This was, without a doubt, a most attractive suggestion, and Bingley perked up hopefully. “Do you truly think so?”

“Of course I do,” Mrs. Hurst returned, striding over to the buffet and hastily gathering toast and eggs.

“I can take her to Netherfield,” Bingley said eagerly. “It will only take a few hours...”

“Netherfield?” Louisa interrupted. “That will not do at all, Brother. Netherfield is far too close to London! She must be packed off to Scarborough to live with Aunt Houston!”

Bingley blinked at this statement, considered, and then nodded his head. “That is an excellent idea, Louisa! She will not be able to cause any trouble that far north. I will arrange for outriders and several manservants to accompany her north, and I think we should plan for her to depart as soon as...”

He stopped at the disapproving look on his elder sister’s face. “What is wrong?”

“*You* need to take her to Yorkshire, Charles,” Louisa said. “It is not at all fair for you to send Caroline, who will be in a rare temper, to our aunt without going with her.”

“I cannot leave Town! I am courting Miss Bennet.”

Louisa waved a hand and said, “You will not be gone for much more than a week, Brother, so long as you do not linger in Scarborough. Hurst and I would go ourselves but,” and here a smile filled her face, “I am quite confident that I am with child now and am not feeling particularly well. I do not wish to be away from my physician in London.”

Bingley stared, first in surprise, and then in delight.
“My dear sister, many congratulations to you and Hurst!”

“Thank you,” Louisa Hurst replied, her eyes bright with joy. “We are very happy!”

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Longbourn

Pencils scratched across paper as Sophia Adler and Kitty Bennet, sitting shoulder to shoulder, looked out the window. The ambient sunlight illuminated two sketches across two pads of paper, one more skilled, and one less, but both very obviously of the same tree, which stood some fifteen feet away from the house, its evergreen needles shining in the sun.

Sophia glanced down at her pupil’s drawing in approval. Kitty was not an expert by any means, but she had a certain amount of natural talent and plainly loved drawing, with the pleasant result that her pictures were improving visibly. She still required a certain amount of reassurance after completing each sketch, but Sophia’s praise was encouragement enough for Kitty to continue working on her skills.

Strains of Mozart drifted through the wall from the music room where Mary sat at the pianoforte, practicing a new score. No singing today, but her playing was growing ever more adept under Phoebe’s careful tutelage. Now she was not only pleasant to listen to, but positively delightful, and Sophia enjoyed the music for some minutes.

A snore from behind her drew her attention, and she turned to observe Mrs. Bennet sitting in the chair closest to the fire, her mouth hanging open a little as she dozed. Sophia smiled slightly and glanced around the room in contentment. Mrs. Bennet was not the most refined of employers, being loud, vulgar, and with an unfortunate tendency towards gossip,

but she was remarkably kind to the two governesses who had arrived on her doorstep with so little warning. She did not deny them any necessities or even creature comforts, had welcomed them to her table, and was as polite to them as she was to those around her. Considering the discourtesy and unkindness shown by some of her former employers, Sophia was sincerely grateful.

It was wonderful, also, to find a position with her twin in the same house. The two sisters had always been close growing up, though they had not been able to remain in close contact throughout their adulthood as the necessities of their positions pulled them apart. To be dwelling under the same roof – in the same room! – was blissful.

Sophia's gaze settled on Lydia Bennet, curled up in a chair across from her mother, with a novel drooping from her limp hand as she gazed sullenly into the fire. The governess studied her young charge thoughtfully for several minutes.

Lydia had been unusually quiet since her interrupted clandestine trip to Meryton. Phoebe had marched the girl straight into Mr. Bennet's library upon their return with Sophia trailing in their wake, and thus both twins had been privy to the unusual scene which followed; she had not known their indolent employer was even capable of such anger. He had been truly furious, berating his youngest daughter and confining her to the house unless firmly escorted, under threat of losing her allowance. Lydia had cried out in indignation, tears standing in her eyes at this perceived cruelty, before quailing before her father's incensed visage and subsiding with a rebellious mutter.

The housekeeper and butler had both been instructed to tell the under-servants to keep an eye on Lydia, lest she attempt once more to slip away without anyone noticing. Mrs. Bennet, stung by this gross injustice towards her favorite daughter, had braved her husband's inner sanctum but had backed down quickly, awed by the sternness with which he had refused her entreaties.

Lydia spent much of her time in her room now, sulky and silent and rarely emerging. Longbourn had been blessedly quiet for some days, which in turn had been an unprecedented opportunity for Mary and Kitty to flower without having to compete with Lydia for attention. But watching the youngest Bennet daughter now, Sophia could not help her feeling of unease. Lydia would not remain this compliant for long.

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Matlock House

London

The Next Day

Fitzwilliam Darcy ran lightly up the steps and tapped the great wooden door of the Matlock mansion. The door opened promptly to reveal, to Darcy's surprise, his cousin Richard, though the butler and two footmen were hovering behind him.

"Thank you for coming so promptly," the colonel said, stepping out of the way so that Darcy could enter.

"I came immediately upon receiving your message," Darcy replied, stepping into the tiled vestibule and handing over his hat, coat, and cane to a footman. "Whatever is the matter?"

Richard waved the servants off and gestured for his cousin to accompany him down the hall. "Nothing is the matter," he said as the pair made their way toward the drawing room. "The Misses Bennet are visiting, and since you are better acquainted with them than I am, I wanted you here."

Darcy stopped in his tracks and turned an incredulous look on his cousin. "The Misses Bennet..."

“Are here,” Richard said, pasting an innocent expression on his face, “along with Lady Appleby, of course. They are in the drawing room with my mother, Rachel, and Georgiana.”

Darcy frowned at his cousin. His first thought, that Richard was deliberately tormenting him by forcing him to spend time with his love, was quickly set aside. Richard did enjoy teasing, but he would never deliberately harm him.

The other, more likely scenario, and one that he much preferred, was that Richard was plotting to bring Miss Elizabeth and Darcy together.

It was difficult to hope that the lady, one of the most esteemed heiresses of the Season, would choose him, but his heart could not help but long for such a glorious result.

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Miss Darcy was indeed, as Colonel Fitzwilliam had told her, shy.

Lieutenant George Wickham had claimed that the girl was proud and above her company, but she knew Mr. Wickham was indisputably a liar. Elizabeth had known not to trust his account of the only daughter of Pemberley, but given that Mr. Darcy was both acute and unembarrassed in company, Elizabeth had expected Miss Darcy to have at least some similar traits. Instead, the girl had trouble speaking even so much as a syllable, and spent a great deal of time staring at the floor.

Fortunately for the success of the visit, Lady Rachel Fitzwilliam, younger sister of the colonel, was a cheerful and exuberant soul. She chattered on at length about various parties and delights of Town, with occasional assistance from Lady Matlock, who apparently was disposed to look upon Elizabeth kindly. Moreover, when Lady Appleby rose to take leave, Lady Matlock insisted that they stay longer, declaring,

“My son will be along shortly, and I am certain wishes to see you all.”

This provoked Elizabeth to flush a little, and she found herself wondering if she had been too encouraging toward the colonel, whom she did not pretend to know well yet. It was peculiar to be in this situation, to be wealthy, to no longer have to hope for a good offer, but to be confident that if she wished to marry, she would have her pick of men.

Again, she thought of Mr. Darcy, who had been a prime prize on the Marriage Mart for nearly a decade. It was, perhaps, no great surprise that the gentleman viewed the world through a cynical lens. He still ought not to be rude, of course, but she understood his behavior in Hertfordshire far better than she had before.

The door opened at this juncture, and to her astonishment, Mr. Darcy appeared and entered the room with Colonel Fitzwilliam at his heels.

There was a soft cry of pleasure, and Georgiana Darcy leaped up and hurried over to her brother, her pretty face alight, and exclaimed, “Brother, I did not hope to see you today!”

Elizabeth, watching the interaction between brother and sister, was startled and moved at the obvious fondness on Darcy’s countenance. In their past interactions, the master of Pemberley had always spoken affectionately of his much younger sister, but words were not as powerful as actions where brotherly love was concerned. It was apparent in Miss Darcy’s expression that she adored her brother, and was confident of his devotion in return.

“Lady Appleby, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth,” Richard Fitzwilliam said, “I hope I find you well after a long night?”

“We are very well, thank you,” Jane said with a smile. “I confess I am relieved that we are not attending any parties tonight, however; I am not quite used to Town hours yet!”

“I much prefer country hours myself,” Darcy remarked, guiding Georgiana over to a settee where both siblings sat down.

“I find it very peculiar when I wake up late,” Elizabeth agreed, turning to face Darcy. “I felt as if I had wasted the entire day when I rose slightly before noon today, and yet the ball lasted until very late, and thus it was quite reasonable to break my fast at noon!”

“Oh, I adore staying up late,” Lady Rachel said with laughing glance at her mother. “I have always preferred to stay up late and get up later. My poor governess used to struggle to push me out of bed in the morning!”

“And well I remember that,” Lady Matlock remarked cheerfully.

“Miss Darcy, am I correct that you have not yet come out?” Elizabeth asked.

Georgiana, who was sitting very close to her brother, widened her blue eyes and shook her head. “No, I am only sixteen and do not wish to come out for at least two more years.”

“And I, in turn, am very willing to wait,” Darcy remarked, placing an affectionate arm around the girl. “I still struggle to believe that my sister is almost grown up now. It seems only last year that she was a child running around on Pemberley’s lawn chasing setter puppies!”

Georgiana blushed and looked down, smiling, and Elizabeth said, “Do you like dogs then, Miss Darcy?”

“Oh yes, and horses. I ride often at Pemberley,” the girl replied. Elizabeth noted that, now that her brother was here, she was more willing to speak entire sentences.

“Now I am not particularly fond of riding horses, I confess, though they are majestic animals,” Elizabeth said. “Jane is an excellent rider, but I prefer to march around on my own two feet.”

“My brother told me that you once walked three miles through the mud to bring comfort to your sister when she fell ill,” Georgiana remarked, which caused Elizabeth to lift surprised eyebrows and turn to regard Darcy with amusement.

“Your brother has given you a very pretty notion of me. Indeed, Mr. Darcy, it is very ungenerous of you to mention my windblown ways here in London, where I hoped to pass myself off with some degree of credit.”

“Oh, but my brother was greatly impressed with your kindness toward Miss Bennet!” Georgiana exclaimed in alarm, turning to gaze worriedly at Darcy.

Darcy smiled at her reassuringly and then turned to Elizabeth. “Indeed, I was delighted to observe your affection for your sister, which provoked you to walk such a long distance in poor weather.”

“I could do nothing less for my dear Jane,” Elizabeth replied, glancing over at her sister, who was speaking cheerfully with Richard and Lady Rachel Fitzwilliam. “But Miss Darcy, do tell me about Derbyshire and Pemberley. I expect the topography is very different than London and Hertfordshire?”

“Oh yes,” Georgiana said. “It is marvelous, truly, with peaks and lakes...”

The resulting discussion between Elizabeth and the Darcys was enjoyable to all three, and all were rather sorry when Lady Appleby signaled that it was time for them to leave.

It was not until they were in their carriage and on the way back to Half Moon Street that Elizabeth realized that she had not exchanged more than a few words with Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Chapter 24

The House at Half Moon Street

London

Two Mornings Later

Elizabeth was reading *Castle Rackrent* in the drawing room, and Jane was working on a piece of needlework, when the door opened and Mr. Bingley was announced. The sisters both rose to their feet and regarded the guest curiously. Mr. Bingley was dressed in traveling attire, and his usually genial face was dark with worry.

“Mr. Bingley, please do sit down,” Elizabeth said. “Is anything the matter?”

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth, though I can only stay a minute,” he replied, taking a seat near Jane as both ladies sat down again. “As for anything being the matter; well, I must apologize most profusely for my sister Caroline’s rude behavior at the Damaral ball. It was very poorly done of her.”

Elizabeth and Jane glanced at one another, and Jane said, “Thank you, sir, though it is not for you to apologize, but her.”

“I fear that is not true,” Bingley said glumly. “I am her elder brother and responsible for her behavior as my father has passed. I have consulted with my elder sister, and spoken to Caroline, who refuses to ... well, in any case, I wished to inform you that today I am escorting Caroline to Scarborough to settle her with an aunt who lives there. It seems that ... well, she is not ... what I mean is that I feel it is my responsibility to ensure that she is safe, but she cannot stay here in London.”

“Oh!” Jane said, “Will you be returning to London afterwards?”

“Most definitely,” Bingley said promptly. “I intend to take her there and settle her with my Aunt Susanna and return to London as soon as I possibly can.”

“I do wish you an excellent journey, then,” Jane said.

“Thank you, Miss Bennet,” the gentleman replied. “I will be counting the hours until I can return.”

He bowed to both, turned on his heel, and hurried out of the drawing room.

Elizabeth attempted to return to her book but had difficulty concentrating. When she looked up a few minutes later, she discovered that Jane was staring into the fire, a pensive look on her lovely face.

“Jane?”

“Yes?”

“Is something the matter?”

Jane blew out a breath and said, “I find myself rather uneasy about Mr. Bingley’s journey to Scarborough.”

“Why? He is, I believe, correct that Miss Bingley ought not to be staying here in London given that she is behaved in an outrageous manner at Damaral House.”

“Yes, but does *he* need to escort her to Scarborough, Lizzy? Could he not relegate that task to Mr. Hurst or to a trusted servant?”

Elizabeth frowned. “I suppose he could, but it seems he feels responsible to ensure that Miss Bingley is delivered to their aunt. Surely that is reasonable enough?”

“Is it, Lizzy? Given that Caroline Bingley has already kept Mr. Bingley and me apart for many months, ought she be permitted to take him away from London at this point in our recently resumed courtship? As I said, I am uneasy.”

“He said he would be back as soon as he can be?” Elizabeth said, rather helplessly.

“We will see, will we not?” Jane replied, and resumed her inspection of the fire.

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The Pig in the Poke

A Few Days Later

Several of the larger tables in the pub had been shoved together, with a cluster of red-coated officers seated around them talking and laughing and dining. Wickham sat in the very midst of them, contentedly mowing his way through a plate of very acceptably cured ham and mashed potatoes drowned in gravy. A mug of ale sat to his right hand, and he reached over to move it adroitly out the path of a gesturing arm.

Across the large room, the door opened, and a gust of wind jettisoned yet another officer inside as along with a spatter of rain. A goodly amount of mud dirtied the floor behind the militiaman, while the smell of spring and fresh air clung to his dripping greatcoat.

“Denny!” Pratt exclaimed, waving toward the captain. “Come and join us!”

The captain did so, and after ordering ale and a plate of beef stew, he said, “I have just spoken to Colonel Forster and have learned of our marching orders. The regiment is moving on from Meryton in May.”

This had the unsurprising effect of drawing the attention of all his fellow officers.

“Where to?” young lieutenant Smythe demanded.

Denny made a point of thanking the girl who had provided a glass of ale and then grinned and said, “Brighton!”

There were cheers all around at the news that the regiment would be journeying out of the interior of the country to the coastal town of Brighton in Sussex, where the Prince Regent himself spent much of his time.

Wickham grinned along with his fellow officers and resumed his meal with pleasure. The upcoming departure was serendipitous, as his affairs were becoming a bit ticklish here in Meryton. A few of the shopkeepers had started to send him polite bills and drop hints that he should pay up on his debts. He had no intention of doing so, of course, and at this early stage, he could continue to trade on his charm for a while. With any luck, he would leave the locale before the rustic shopkeepers had time to grow truly restive.

The cards had been against him for some time now, and those debts concerned him more pressingly. If the regiment were indeed moving on from Meryton, he could use his meager wage to placate his more aggressive colleagues. As for the others, the cards would turn soon enough, surely. His bad luck could not last forever!

No, there was nothing left for him in Meryton. With Elizabeth Bennet vanished to London and Mary King departed for Liverpool, there was no chance now of an advantageous marriage in this little backwater. He would miss Lydia Bennet's vivacious company and bright smiles and wholehearted adoration, but ever since those lookalike dragonesses had arrived at Longbourn, Lydia had been unavailable. The Adler twins were determined to turn the younger Bennet sisters into accomplished ladies and protected their charges fiercely.

No, Meryton had lost all luster. Wickham was very glad to be moving on to the more appealing Brighton.

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Conservatory

Lord Lanyon's House

London

Elizabeth, looking around her, was amazed and delighted at the beauty of the conservatory in Lord Lanyon's house. The air was heavy with the scent of expensive hothouse flowers, carefully cultivated and tended by a horde of skilled gardeners. Lanterns had been hung from tree limbs and decorative stands for the ball, and music filtered through the open door behind her. It was quite as magical as Vauxhall Gardens, she thought, as the alabaster gravel of the path crunched beneath her delicate dancing slipper.

"Father is very proud of his orange trees," her companion remarked, looking up at the boughs above them. The lantern light fell over his exquisite mustard coat and plum stockings, his miles of expensive lace and painfully intricate cravat. The massive ruby of his brooch caught the light and shone like fire, entirely overshadowing the diamonds and jet flakes set around it.

"Most understandably," Elizabeth said lightly, and Viscount Guisborough favored her with a charming smile as they passed on. She gazed around with pleasure, drinking in the sight of the magnificently colored flowers growing and thriving, while the fountain in the very middle of the room trickled pleasingly. The music behind them changed to indicate the beginning of a new dance.

"Miss Elizabeth," her companion said suddenly, drawing Elizabeth's attention away from the beauty surrounding her and onto the noble's face. She felt a lurch in her stomach and had to force herself to keep her face calm. Surely given their very short acquaintance, he would not...

"Miss Elizabeth, I know we have not known one another long," the noble said, smiling winsomely, "but I have already fallen in love with your beauty, your wit, and your grace. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

She checked a sigh and managed a slight smile, even as she slowly shook her head. “My apologies, my lord, but I fear I cannot, though I am greatly honored at your offer. We do not know one another well enough yet.”

To her relief, Lord Guisborough, while he looked disappointed, did not look at all angry.

“I have been too precipitate,” he said, guiding Elizabeth toward the ballroom door. “Perhaps with time I can hope for a better answer?”

“Perhaps,” Elizabeth said with an arch smile.

Perhaps he would, indeed. She did not know Viscount Guisborough well at all, but rumors and reputation were not unkind to him. He spent freely and often carried debts, but he had a reputation for being a kindly soul.

Mrs. Bennet would be in shrieking hysterics if she found out that Elizabeth had turned down the son of an earl. But Elizabeth remained firm in her decision to accept an offer only if she respected and loved her suitor, and would refuse any man whose sole interest was in her money. She could not count on any love or respect in a marriage like that, or even affection. What assurance did she have that her husband, once he had gained control of her wealth, would not treat her callously or even unkindly?

More and more she had grown to appreciate Darcy’s company. At least he, she knew, was not after her riches. When he sought her out, when the Fitzwilliams and Darcys and Bennets and Lady Appleby were together, she could rest comfortably in the knowledge that he was merely enjoying the presence of his companions, and was not seeking to woo her for his own greedy gain.

Chapter 25

Dear Mary,

I hope you are well and enjoying spring in Hertfordshire. Jane and I have had the pleasure of visiting a number of the parks and gardens here in London. They are undoubtedly lovely, but I do miss the familiar walks of Longbourn.

I am delighted to hear that you and the Misses Adler are enjoying one another's company. How wonderful that Miss Phoebe is so gifted on the pianoforte!

I wish to invite you to London to stay here at Half Moon Street, dear Mary. There are plenty of bedchambers, and we would relish your company. I do not press you, of course, but please know that you are very welcome.

We visited the British Museum in Montagu House yesterday, in company with Mr. and Miss Darcy, and Colonel Fitzwilliam. One could spend days there, and I hope to return again, but at Mr. Darcy's suggestion, we spent half of our time on the upper floor looking at manuscripts, minerals, shells, fossils, and the like, and the other half in the gallery, where I particularly enjoyed the coins, medals, and Egyptian antiquities.

This is a short letter because I must dress for a party. Tomorrow evening we are staying home, which pleases me. Dancing and gaiety are well enough, but attending them every day of the week is genuinely exhausting!

With much love,

Elizabeth

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Dear Elizabeth,

Many thanks for your kind invitation, but I am very satisfied at Longbourn. Indeed, I have never been so happy in my life! The house is remarkably peaceful without our mother fretting and worrying over the entail, and Kitty and I are both flowering under the guidance of the Adlers. Miss Phoebe is indeed a most remarkable pianist, but beyond that, she is also an excellent teacher.

Kitty definitely has a gift for sketching. She and Miss Adler often go outside to sketch trees and buildings and horses and the like.

Father and I are spending more time together as well. We play chess and backgammon, and yesterday, for the first time and to the surprise of us both, I beat him in chess! We are also talking about books together. Not Fordyce's sermons, as he is not the least interested in them, and I suppose I cannot blame him. For many years, I have looked down on novels and even Shakespeare in favor of philosophers and sermon makers. I still read sermons on occasion, but the Misses Adler have encouraged me that having a wider breadth of knowledge can only be an advantage, so long as I do not read anything dishonorable.

I have not mentioned Lydia thus far. She is the least satisfied with the situation here at Longbourn, as we are no longer permitted to wander freely and without oversight. I know you will be very pleased to know that! The Adlers do an excellent job of keeping us company in the presence of young men.

Lydia is quieter than usual, and rather sullen at times, but compared to her previous behavior, that is all to the good.

Father let slip that you are paying the Adlers' salaries. I am enormously grateful.

With love,

Mary

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Mrs. Susanna Houston's House

Scarborough

A gentle breeze wafted the lace curtains at the windows, slightly yellowed with age and neatly darned in several places but obviously clean and well-loved. The smell of the ocean drifted in a faint tang, almost subsumed by the delectable scents of the dishes spread across the polished old table. Sunlight poured through the open windows, rendering candles unnecessary.

The Bingleys' Aunt Susanna Houston was not well-off, as her clergyman husband had passed on to his reward some years ago, and she had no children to aid her in her advancing years. Bingley had generously helped her with rent and other basic necessities, but she took pains to live within her means, and thus the meal was modest if expertly cooked.

It was lovely and relaxing, and Bingley had always enjoyed his visits to his aunt. He enjoyed the ocean views and his aunt's kindness. He wished that he could enjoy it on this visit too! But now he felt trapped here in Scarborough, while Jane Bennet awaited him in London...

"I must say," Mrs. Houston said, drawing Bingley's wandering attention, "that this Miss Bennet does not seem an eligible bride, Nephew."

Bingley shot an angry look at Caroline, who was smugly chewing on a piece of buttered bread.

"She is absolutely charming, Aunt," he said irritably. "Caroline dislikes her, of course, but everyone is in agreement

that Jane Bennet is the most beautiful, charming, well-mannered lady in all of Hertfordshire.”

That was laying it on a little thickly, but he needed to battle his sister’s vitriol somehow.

“She may be all those things,” his aunt said patiently, “but she is also the granddaughter of a solicitor, is that correct?”

“Yes, but her father is a gentleman!”

“A country gentleman,” Caroline declared, “whose estate is entailed away to a cousin, and whose youngest daughters are reckless hoydens. Now Charles, you cannot deny the truth of that!”

“They are lively,” Bingley said weakly.

Caroline sniffed and cast a superior glance toward their aunt. “They are far more than lively, Aunt Houston, I assure you. They flirt outrageously with militia officers and run around without a chaperone. Nor is Jane’s next younger sister, Elizabeth, much better; she once walked all the way to Netherfield on a cold, windy day to visit her elder sister, who was staying over!”

“Jane was ill,” Bingley protested, “and the carriage was not available.”

“You are so naïve, brother! She was chasing Mr. Darcy, and you know it...”

Bingley glanced at his aunt, who was looking grim, and realized, with a sinking heart, that he had made a mistake in bringing Caroline to Scarborough. After his sister’s inebriated rant after the Damaral ball, he had thought only to remove her from London society as quickly as possible, and he knew that his aunt Houston would welcome them with open arms. Now he remembered that Caroline and Susanna Houston had always been very close, and that his aunt was nearly as eager to raise the family name in society as Caroline was.

“Nephew, as long as you are here, I hope that you are willing to assist me with some business matters,” Mrs. Houston said. “It is difficult, you know, as a widow, to speak to men of business...”

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Balcony

Baron Holpin’s Mansion

The musicians had paused for a few moments to re-tune their instruments before beginning the fourth dance. Chatter rose from inside the ballroom, plainly audible through the open glass doors. A cool breeze drifted across the balcony in welcome counterpoint to the stifling heat inside, tugging at fine lace and stray curls and elegant silk.

Elizabeth had happily accepted Baron Holpin’s invitation to step outside for a moment, relieved to be out of the oppressive warmth of the ballroom. He had agreed easily enough to her assertion that the doors must remain open; she was now thoroughly glad that he had, at least, conceded that. Indeed she wished she had never agreed to step outside with him at all, or at least not without Lady Appleby accompanying her.

“Thank you, Lord Holpin,” Elizabeth said, forcing herself to smile. “I am truly honored, but I am afraid I must decline your kind offer. I fear we do not know one another well enough yet.”

“What is there to know, Miss Elizabeth?” Lord Holpin replied, reaching out to try to take her hands in his own larger ones. “I love you, beyond anything I ever could have imagined...”

“Miss Elizabeth!” a voice called out from behind them both, and Holpin muttered a curse and took a step back as Mr.

Darcy marched onto the balcony and bowed slightly toward the baron, who was looking angry and embarrassed, and then more deeply toward Elizabeth. “I do believe the music is starting up for our dance.”

Elizabeth had deliberately chosen to sit out the following cotillion because she knew that by this time of the night, she would be a little tired, but now – oh, how grateful she was for this elegant way out of a most distressing encounter.

“Thank you for our dance, Lord Holpin,” she said with a slight smile and reached forward to take and grasp Darcy’s strong arm.

Darcy guided her out into the ballroom, which was very warm indeed thanks to the combined effects of a multitude of wax candles and dozens of elegantly clad ladies and gentlemen

He had, of course, been watching Elizabeth all evening, and when she had disappeared onto the balcony with Lord Holpin, he had immediately hurried to ensure she was safe.

Holpin was, thanks to a lavish lifestyle, in a great deal of debt, and would like nothing more than to claim beautiful, wealthy Elizabeth as his second wife after losing his first wife to consumption.

Darcy’s decision to watch over his beloved had proven wise, as after Elizabeth’s refusal of Holpin’s hand – and oh, how that sent a throb of relief through his soul – the baron had not shown any signs of accepting her decision without an argument.

Darcy hoped, very much, that the older man would not actually force himself upon her, but he was a cynic, and he was in love, and had thus had no hesitation in interrupting the twosome.

They were dancing now, his hand in hers, hers in his, as they twirled around in the steps, and while they did not speak, her expression was grateful.

He smiled at the lady, as he could ask for nothing more.

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*Mrs. Susanna Houston's House
Scarborough*

Darcy,

I have been here in Scarborough for two weeks now and feel no closer to leaving than I did the day we arrived. Caroline has been very ~~tiresome~~ upset with me over the move from London to our Aunt Houston's house. She has had frequent ~~fits of hysterics~~ periods of sickness and feeling faint and the like.

I do intend to come back to Town when I can, but given my sister's behavior, I fear it will take longer than I hoped to settle my business here. My poor aunt is not in the best of health and has said she is not entirely able to manage Caroline without my assistance. She also has requested my help with several business matters and has yet to fully explain what they are.

Scarborough is, at least, a charming place, with the pleasant view of the ocean, not to mention the waters of the spa, which are supposed to be healthful. I drank a glass of the famous waters and found ~~that they tasted like vile pig slop~~ them not to my liking. I am thankful my health is good, so I do not have any real necessity to avail myself of the medicinal value of the local streams.

I hope that you are well, and please give my regards to Miss Darcy.

Charles Bingley

Bingley glanced over the letter and decided that, while it was moderately blotted, it was legible enough to be sent to

his friend in Town. Since he disliked copying letters, that was pleasing to him.

What was less pleasing was the familiar, annoying sound of his younger sister's voice.

“Not an eligible man in the entire town,” Miss Bingley whined, loudly enough that Bingley could hear her clearly, even though the door was closed between the office, where he was dealing with correspondence, and the drawing room, where his sister was sitting.

There was a soft murmur that must be their aunt, and Caroline exclaimed loudly, “I would die rather than marry Lord Hudson! He is at least forty! Yes, he is a baron, but he is far too old for me. Moreover, his estate is quite small.”

Another murmur, and Caroline's voice, when she spoke again, was nearly at the level of a shriek. “I would have married the master of Pemberley, but then Charles humiliated me in front of Mr. Darcy and dragged me here, and I will never forgive him...”

Charles Bingley suddenly felt weary to the bone. What was he to do? He was responsible for his sister and could not abandon her after dragging her across much of Britain.

But Jane Bennet was waiting for him in London! He could not stay here!

But he could not leave either. Caroline would never forgive him if he abandoned her here, and his Aunt Houston would not, and Louisa would not, and he would not forgive himself. Caroline was his baby sister...

But what of his love in Town? He had, at least, bidden her farewell this time, but already he had been here in Scarborough for two weeks, and he had told Miss Bennet that he would return within days.

He could not write her, of course, that would be improper.

For a moment, he was tempted to write a post script to his letter, asking Darcy to give the Bennets his greetings, but no, that might make Darcy uncomfortable.

He sighed deeply, ran a hand across his forehead, and glanced at the clock. It was nearly time to dress for dinner.

Chapter 26

Church

Cheapside

Sunday Morning

The parson stood at the pulpit at the head of the church and looked around, gathering the attention of the murmuring congregation. For all that Mr. Simkin was close to sixty years of age, he had a penetrating eye and a certain presence, and within a minute, the congregants were as silent as a tomb.

Simkin nodded gravely in approval, turned his attention on the great Bible placed on the lectern in front of him and began to speak.

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

6 But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

7 For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.

8 A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.

9 Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted:

10 But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away.

11 For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways.

12 Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."

Elizabeth leaned back in her seat as the sermon began and found her gaze drifting to the handsome stained glass windows on either side of the pulpit. They were quite lovely, the tell-tale ripples of crown glass visible even at this distance. The painted scenes depicted several occurrences from the New Testament; the nativity of Jesus with the humble shepherds kneeling in awed worship, His baptism and the descending dove, His death upon the cruel cross, and then an empty tomb surrounded by a profusion of flowers in the next panel.

She listened rather absently to the sermon, her mind dwelling on the passage of Scripture that the parson had just read. It was slightly uncomfortable, now, hearing of the fate of a rich man. She herself was considerably wealthy; it still slightly astonished her every time she contemplated that fact.

Eventually, rich or poor, her life, too, would pass away. It would be entirely too easy to get caught up in the lifestyle led by the wealthy aristocrats of England, as her generous inheritance would allow her to live lavishly. But would such a life be pleasing unto God? After all, that was what was most important, not a meaningless life of luxury and ease, but one of servanthood to the Almighty, blessing those around her.

There was much good she could do with her wealth. Perhaps donations to the church or charities? Assisting her family, of course, that went without saying. Perhaps she should marry some kindly gentleman and bear many children, bringing them up well and in plenty, laying aside her money for their futures.

Regrettably, the thought of marriage currently filled Elizabeth with resignation tinted with sorrow. Though she desired a husband and children, she had realized some years ago that such an eventuality was unlikely. She was well aware, not only from her mother's comments, but those of her father and the townsfolk and her own reading, that she was an

unusual woman. She would not settle for anything less than true compatibility in marriage, and though her options were now greatly increased in number, she had not found much encouragement in the men who had proposed to her thus far.

Indeed, the only man whom she felt drawn to was richer than she was. Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, who was, according to Mr. Wickham, engaged to Miss Anne de Bourgh, mistress of the grand estate of Rosings. Not, of course, that Mr. Wickham could be trusted, not in the least! But Mr. Collins, serving as a clergyman under the haughty auspices of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, had said the same.

Why was she so drawn to Mr. Darcy? Was it merely that he was so wealthy that she did not need to worry about him chasing her merely for money?

But no, it was more than that. The man was intelligent, a generous and kindly brother, and a good master ... and she found his face to be quite easy on her eyes. No, he was quite the epitome of perfection, if one could set aside his occasional rude remark in country assemblies. It was a pity that he was neither interested nor available.

Further down the pew, her Aunt Madeline shifted slightly and smoothed a wrinkle out of her skirt, eyes still on the preacher. Elizabeth contemplated her aunt and uncle for a moment.

They were even richer than she, with Aunt Gardiner's inheritance of ninety thousand pounds and the house on Half Moon Street. They were fabulously wealthy, even. But because Mr. Gardiner was in trade, their new riches did not open the same doors to them that Elizabeth's status as daughter of a landed gentleman had. She had missed the Gardiners and was grateful she and Jane had chosen to attend church with them today. To be here, in fellowship with other congregants, was feeding her soul in a way that the lavish parties filled with superficial guests most decidedly had not.

Perhaps it was simpler for the Gardiners to determine how to use their money because they were already married and

had children. They could use the money to secure their children's future or expand Uncle Edward's business. Or they could even retire comfortably, if they so wished, but Elizabeth did not think they would take such a course of action; they were both very industrious people and seemed to enjoy their work.

She was thankful for her uncle's advice on what to do with her own funds. He was a godly, just, and sensible man. He always advised her well, and his assistance made the whole situation less overwhelming. She certainly did not want to be foolish with her blessings.

Again, the words echoed in her head. *For the sun no sooner rises, but it withers the grass and the flower ... so also shall the rich man fade away.*

It was a gift to be rich, but life would pass quickly for both the poor and the rich. She resolved to use her wealth, and live her very life, in an honorable and responsible way.

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In Lord Talbot's Curricie

Grosvenor Street

London

"I am very honored, my lord, but I fear I must say no," Elizabeth said kindly.

Lord Talbot sighed deeply, though he kept his eyes on his very handsome team of chestnuts who were trotting cheerfully down the cobbled street.

"I thought it was too much to hope for," he said a minute later. "You are certainly one of the most handsome, charming, intelligent ladies in all of London and worthy of the highest position. But I felt I must at least try."

Elizabeth genuinely liked Lord Talbot, but she was quite certain that if she were impoverished, he would no more offer for her than for a goldfish. Nonetheless, she was appreciative of his gracious acceptance of her refusal.

“I hope we can at least be friends, sir,” Elizabeth said.

“With pleasure,” the gentleman replied genially.

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Hyde Park

A Few Days Later

Elizabeth took a deep breath, relishing the crisp freshness of the air. The carriage had deposited its passengers at the entrance to the park before the driver had taken it to wait elsewhere. Beside her, Jane said with satisfaction, “Oh, the others are already here!”

Elizabeth turned her attention to where her sister was looking. Mr. Darcy, Miss Darcy on his arm, and Richard Fitzwilliam with his sister Lady Rachel on *his* arm, were approaching. “I believe we are only awaiting Lord Talbot now,” she remarked.

Darcy doffed his hat as he came up to the Bennet sisters. “Good morning, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth.”

His eyes dwelt a moment on Elizabeth’s radiant face as she smiled and said, “Good morning, Lady Rachel, Colonel, Mr. Darcy! It is a delightful day, is it not?”

“Very delightful,” Richard agreed, grinning in return to Elizabeth’s infectious bright smile, and Darcy’s breast tingled uncomfortably with longing and yes, jealousy.

Clopping hooves drew their attention, and they all turned just in time to see Lord Talbot dismount and hand his

horse off to a boy who ran forward to take the reins. His lordship approached with a smile. "Good morning, ladies. Gentlemen."

By silent, mutual consent, the group began strolling down the nearest trail at a leisurely pace, the two large footmen who had accompanied the Bennet sisters falling behind a few steps. It was not the brisk march Elizabeth usually so enjoyed, but as she buried her hands deeper into her sensible brown fur mitt, she found herself too grateful for the company to mind. There were few others out in the park at this early hour. Indeed much of society would still be abed at only ten in the morning, and thus the Bennets and their party were free to wander and laugh without myriad prying eyes on them.

Early flowers were peeking up through the mud in patches of white and purple, unfurling their petals to catch the sun and attract any intrepid bees braving the nip in the air. The trees were freshly green with the leaf-buds softening the harsh gray lines of the branches. Squirrels and birds skittered through fallen leaves and slush, or chattered and scolded from branches. A gray-feathered tit swooped down to perch in a bare bush, watching the walking party pass by with a bright beady eye and cocked head before darting off again on business of his own.

The group drew to a stop at a fork in the trail, each path wandering off a little ways away from the others, within seeing distance but not earshot, before converging again further along.

"Which way shall we go?" Darcy asked, looking at each path.

Jane stepped forward to peer down the right-most fork. "I should very much like to go this way; I see more flowers in that direction."

"I too like the look of this path," Richard agreed, offering his arm, and one of the Bennet footmen fell silently in behind them.

“I wish to see the river,” Elizabeth said, looking ahead. “That is the left-hand path, is it not?”

“It is,” Darcy agreed, “and I would enjoy seeing it as well. Georgiana?”

“I will come with you, brother,” she said, looping her gloved hand over the sleeve of his coat.

Lord Talbot and Lady Rachel, deep in conversation, lingered behind the rest of the group and slowly followed Darcy’s party.

The Darcys and Elizabeth, shadowed by the remaining footman, halted on the bank of the Serpentine, taking a few minutes to admire the play of the sunlight across the burbling water. A drift of snowdrops had grown up out of the muddy bank, nodding their shining white heads in the bright spring light.

“I have never been to Hyde Park at this hour,” Georgiana remarked. “It is so peaceful and quiet!”

“It is wonderful,” Elizabeth said rapturously, gazing around in wonder. “I have been driven around the Park several times for the Promenade, but there are so many people at that hour that one can hardly pay attention to the joys of nature!”

Darcy clenched his teeth at this remark as a surge of jealousy filled his breast, followed by a sinking feeling of despair. He knew, of course, that Elizabeth was being pursued by many a fine gentleman, and while he took some hope in the fact that she had not accepted an offer yet, there was no doubt that she had many options other than a stoic, sometimes rude gentleman from Derbyshire.

Nor, as far as he knew, did she have the slightest awareness of his adoration for her, and if she did, it appeared she did not return those feelings. She was friendly with him and on excellent terms with Georgiana, but she did not hang on his arm or bat her eyelashes at him.

“Oh,” Georgiana cried out, “there is the keeper’s lodge! Might we purchase some milk?”

There were dramatic moans from Elizabeth and Darcy, followed by a shared grin, and Elizabeth asked, with an expressive grimace, “Do they *only* have milk?”

“They have syllabub and cheesecake as well,” Darcy reassured her.

“Jane!” Elizabeth exclaimed, calling over to her sister, who was deep in conversation with the colonel. “Shall we enjoy a cheesecake?”

There was a chorus of agreement from the entire party, and they all moved towards the quaint little cottage with its open shutters, neatly trimmed bushes, and wooden sign above the door proclaiming *Milk*. The keeper, a cheerful woman of middling age and ample proportions, proved more than happy to serve cheesecakes and syllabubs and glasses of foamy milk to all who wanted it.

Darcy found himself, as usual, enchanted by Elizabeth, as she laughed aloud at some droll remark he had made, about sheep, he thought. She smiled at him brightly, and he smiled back instinctively and took a bite of syllabub. It occurred to him suddenly that he had no idea how Elizabeth would look or act if she *was* in love with him. He had never had someone fall *in love* with his person before; only his wealth and status. Many women had simpered at and flattered him, hoping to win his favor and his money. But Elizabeth would not act like that, would she?

No, he decided, he would not give up all hope just yet.

Chapter 27

“It really is lovely,” Jane remarked, looking around herself and taking a sip of fresh milk.

“It is,” Richard agreed, though his eyes were fixed, not on the trees and paths and flowers, but on the exquisite face of the lady seated next to him on the wooden bench, which had been placed under a gently waving elm tree. “It is also peaceful.”

Her lovely blue eyes turned on him now, and she quirked a blonde eyebrow. “Do you enjoy peace, Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

He stared back with uncertainty because it was an unusual question, and more than that, it seemed she truly wanted to know the answer.

She blushed under his steady regard and said, “I wondered if perhaps your time on the Continent, in an army at war, makes a life here in London rather dull.”

His first inclination was to return a light, complimentary answer about how her company would never allow him to be bored...

But she was gazing at him with such a sweet expression, with such gravity in her eyes, that he chose to respond truthfully. “I do find life a trifle dull at times, Miss Bennet. Not here, not now, while I am in the company of my relations and friends, but yes, there are times when I struggle with a certain sense of ennui. That sounds absurd, I know; far better to be here than battling through mud and musket fire.”

“It does not sound absurd,” Jane replied, “not at all. There is a pleasure – no, perhaps it is not a pleasure, exactly, but a sense of rightness in genuinely accomplishing something, in defending our country against war.”

There was a certain melancholy in the lady's words and expression, and the colonel bent a concerned look toward his companion. "Does that mean that you are bored at times as well, Miss Bennet?"

She tilted her head beguilingly, looked out at the glittering surface of the Serpentine, and said, "I do not bore easily, Colonel. I am not unintelligent, I think, but Lizzy is far brighter and quicker than I am. No, it is not boredom, precisely, it is more that..."

She trailed off, blushed, and looked away. "I do apologize, sir, for speaking so freely. I find you very easy to talk to."

Richard Fitzwilliam felt his heart turn over, and he felt a sudden temptation to take the lady's gloved hand in his own. He resisted, of course – was the lady not meant for Darcy's friend Bingley? – but he did say, "I find you very easy to speak to as well. I daresay I understand your feelings at least a little. I am a second son and thus have always been in the shadow of my elder brother, and your sister Miss Elizabeth, while younger, is the heiress in the family."

Jane turned back, smiling gratefully, and said, "I *am* in Lizzy's shadow now, not that I resent it in the least, but yes, that is what it is like. For many years, as the oldest daughter, I felt a responsibility to marry well for the sake of my family. Now that Lizzy has inherited so much, and I have inherited a little, that is no longer true. I feel rather peculiar about it, to be entirely truthful!"

"Surely it is a far preferable situation?" the colonel said.

"Ye ... es, yes, certainly. Longbourn is entailed away from the female line, as you probably know, and before the bequest, we would have been in a precarious position when our father died. Now, Elizabeth can and will support us all if needed. As I said, I am adjusting. But," and here Jane straightened and smiled brightly, "enough about me. Can you tell me about your family estate? Did I hear that it is in Leicestershire?"

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Half Moon Street

Later

Jane Bennet sat near the crackling fire, staring at the gyrating flames, clad in her nightclothes, with a white lace nightcap on her head and her blonde curls cascading freely down her shoulders.

A tap on the door interrupted her reverie, and she called out, "Come in!"

The door opened, and Elizabeth entered the room. Jane forced herself to smile and said, "How are you doing, my dear?"

Elizabeth looked happy, and after dropping onto a nearby seat, said, "Oh, very well indeed. I enjoyed our visit to Hyde Park this morning! It is far more pleasant a locale when there are not hundreds of people wandering to and fro and ruining the view!"

"I enjoyed it as well," Jane said, trying for her usual serene expression and tone.

A moment later, it was obvious that she had failed, because Elizabeth's expression shifted from joyful to suspicious.

"Jane, what is wrong?" she demanded, leaning forward to spear her with a worried glare.

"Nothing," Jane said feebly, and then, at the determination in Elizabeth's eyes, continued, "Everything."

Lizzy furrowed her brow in surprise at this dramatic statement and then leaned forward to pat her sister on the

knee. “Tell me, my dear. Tell me what is wrong.”

Jane turned slightly to stare at the fire again, and felt her eyes sting with unshed tears.

“Mr. Bingley has not returned,” she said and then, at the distress on Elizabeth’s face, continued quickly, “and I am not certain that I *want* him to return.”

“You do not want him to return?”

“No ... yes ... Elizabeth, I was in love with him back in Hertfordshire, and I was in love with him through this long winter while we were apart, and I still felt strongly attached to him when we were reunited but...” she pulled out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes of tears – angry tears – and said in a shaking tone, “but now he has disappeared again and not returned when he said he would, and I am sick of it, Lizzy! I am sick of being left behind and expected to wait, and I know he is probably tending to Caroline, but why should he? Why is he? If he truly loves me, he would not have left me behind in Hertfordshire, and he would not have left me behind in London without an offer or at least suggesting an official courtship!”

She finished her tirade and felt additional tears welling up to slide down her cheeks, but now her tears were those of sorrow, and yes, embarrassment, because she was known as the calm, collected Bennet daughter, and she ought not to lose control even with Elizabeth.

A smooth, gentle hand clutched her arm, and she turned toward Elizabeth, grateful and startled to see that her sister was looking at her with something that might have been admiration.

“You are angry, Jane, and you have every right to be. Indeed, I would be too under similar circumstances. You do not have to marry Mr. Bingley, even if he offers for you.”

“I ... know. Indeed, given that you are now rich, and I have a respectable competence, I do not need to marry at all. I was telling Colonel Fitzwilliam today that it is...”

Abruptly, she burst into tears and found herself covering her face with her hands as Elizabeth wrapped her arms around her and held her close.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was a large part of the problem, and she knew it. He was not as handsome as Mr. Bingley, not as tall, and certainly not as rich, but he was a man of action, who had fought against the Corsican tyrant and come home a hero. He would not be manipulated by conniving, jealous sisters or well-meaning, autocratic friends.

She still liked Mr. Bingley, still thought well of him, but he and she were too much alike. They both were too compliant, too easy, even too generous. A year ago, she would have thought that an impossibility, that one could be too generous, but was her former beau not too generous with Miss Bingley? The lady was as spoiled as Lydia because everyone, including her brother, allowed her to have her way.

She realized that she admired Colonel Fitzwilliam very much. She ... it was perhaps not yet love, but it was dangerously close. But he needed to wed an heiress, and Elizabeth was the heiress in the family.

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Billiard Room

Darcy House

That Evening

“You could ask her to marry you,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said baldly.

Darcy jerked at this statement, which caused the ball to carom oddly on the billiard table. He turned a reproachful look on his cousin. “No, I cannot, and please do not say such absurd things when I am about to hit the ball.”

Richard laughed at this and poured himself another finger of brandy, tossed it down, and lifted one dark eyebrow. “Why not?”

Darcy grimaced and carefully chalked his cue, then set it down on the table and turned to face his closest male relation.

“I am afraid she will refuse me,” Darcy said. “Moreover, she has every reason to refuse me. I was rude to her in Hertfordshire...”

“Which you apologized for, correct?”

“I did, but I know that I am not easy in my speech. I am not, I know, particularly likeable. I do not have the ability, which so many others do, of knowing how to please a lady. There are so many other men in London, some of them members of the nobility, who are able to charm a woman in a way that I cannot.”

“It appears to me that you and Miss Elizabeth have had a number of pleasant conversations of late.”

“We have,” Darcy said fervently. “Oh, we have had such wonderful conversations, Richard! But that does not mean she loves me. It does not even mean that she *likes* me. I thought back at Netherfield that she was flirting with me and later learned that I could not have been more wrong.”

“So you are giving up?” Richard asked in exasperation. “You are not even attempting to win the lady you adore because you feel there is no hope? Perhaps you are wrong this time as well. Perhaps she has learned to care for you in these last weeks.”

Darcy grimaced and said, “I ... I do hope, but I am afraid to ask for her hand when she may well still harbor some dislike toward me. I feel it is too soon to ask her to marry me when we have only overcome our adversarial relationship this spring. Maybe with more time I will know whether she cares for me in the least, and then I can ask her. That is, if you do not ask her first! Indeed, as much as I appreciate it, I do not

understand why you are pushing her toward me and not yourself. She is a lovely lady and a wealthy one. What more could you ask in a wife?"

Richard rolled his eyes and said, "Do you really imagine that I would attempt to win the lady that you adore? Besides," and here the colonel turned away, "I fear that I have started falling in love with another. Indeed, it may already be too late for me."

Darcy spun around in surprise and said, "You have? With whom?"

The other man kept his face toward the fire and his back to his cousin. "You truly do not know?"

Darcy stared at his cousin, his mind flitting back over the last weeks, and then he groaned. "Oh Richard!"

"What else did you think was going to happen?" his cousin said, rather truculently. "Miss Elizabeth is remarkable, of course, but too clever and quick for me. Miss Bennet is a fantastic beauty, but she is also kind and gentle. When I am with her, I feel as if I am home, and yet, I know there is no hope for me, not with Bingley waiting in the wings. And Miss Bennet deserves to marry a man with a fortune, and I have little money to speak of."

Darcy frowned and said, "Bingley has been in Scarborough for more than two weeks with his shrew of a sister, and I received a letter yesterday telling me that he is working to get her settled in and will not be arriving in Town in the near future."

"But surely it would be disingenuous of me to pursue Miss Bennet while her former suitor is not available?" Richard fretted.

Darcy shook his head. "Bingley is a good man, and I am very fond of him. But he consistently puts his sisters' needs and even wants over his own needs, and in this case, the needs of the lady he purports to love. I think you have as much a

right to pursue the lady as anyone, but what about her lack of fortune?”

“Miss Bennet remarked that she inherited a small amount from Mrs. Simpson, though I do not know how much,” Richard said, and then shook his head. “Two months ago, even a month ago, I would have said that I must marry a woman of fortune, but I feel differently about it now. Is it not worth a little self-sacrifice and economy to marry the perfect woman? And yet, is it fair to her? I do have my allowance from my father, and if I sold out, I would have the sum from my commission. I do not know, Darcy, I truly do not know. I only know that I think that for the first time in my life, I am genuinely in love.”

Chapter 28

Half Moon Street

Dear Charlotte,

I apologize that it has been so long since my last letter. I hope that you are doing well and finding spring pleasant. I am certain that the warmth must be welcome, though perhaps not the mud! Have the flower beds started to bloom yet?

Please convey my salutations to Mr. Collins and your sister Maria if she is still visiting. I wish that I could have accepted your invitation. I would enjoy being in the countryside of Kent at this glorious time of year!

Not that I mean to complain or to denigrate Town. It is very enjoyable for a visit, and there so many amusements. It is only that I do rather miss my walks. There are several parks, which are very well maintained indeed, but there are no wildernesses, and it is quite unacceptable for a lady to go walking alone – I must have a footman and a maid or companion at all times, and few of my acquaintances share my passion for outdoor exercise.

But I do not repine too much. At least once a week I am able to go out for a brisk stroll and am content.

We are also attending a great many balls and parties and routs and the like. We could be attending three or four parties an evening if we so desired, but none of us want that. The very thought exhausts me!

My dear Charlotte, I know you are too kind a friend to reprove me, which gives me the courage to write that you were entirely correct about Mr. Darcy. He is indeed a very respectable man in spite of his insult of my beauty on the day we first met. He has apologized for that, by the way.

Mr. Darcy has visited us often here at Half Moon Street, always in the company of his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and

sometimes his sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy. The master of Pemberley is, without a doubt, a very clever man, and we have a surprising amount in common. He is well read and intelligent, along with being hard-working and honorable. There is no doubt that he is a good master of Pemberley and a wonderful brother to his much younger sister.

Speaking of Miss Darcy, who is but sixteen years of age, I am very fond of her. She is utterly delightful, if rather shy. I do not find her at all proud. She considers it a great joy to play upon the pianoforte, which she does beautifully. She is not entirely at ease among company with whom she is not particularly acquainted, but she has warmed to both me and Jane of late.

Quite an entire group of us – myself, Jane, Mr. Darcy, Miss Darcy, and their cousins Colonel and Lady Rachel Fitzwilliam – attended a show at Astley’s Amphitheater last week. The entertainment there is, I understand, largely intended for a younger audience, but I found it entirely diverting. The skill shown by the acrobats, Charlotte! I can only imagine how they must train for it. And the animals too! It makes me laugh to think of Daisy and Buttercup, our horses on the farm, attempting such feats!

Yes, I am indeed enjoying my visit to London. Certainly I have never enjoyed such popularity before. My face and my person are considered endlessly charming, and my new wealth, of course. We have a limitless stream of visitors through our sitting room, arriving at the very beginning of visiting hours and continuing as late as is at all polite. Many of the gentlemen arrive burdened with gifts, some of them quite absurd! Usually they bring flowers, but one hopeful gentleman presented Lady Appleby with a small portrait of a tiger done in oils to beautify the house. Given that I am living here, I presume he thought I would enjoy it as well.

I like it best when our visitors are Mr. Darcy and Mr. Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I can be fully confident that the former is not pursuing me for my money, since he is extremely wealthy himself. Our discussions are lively and

thoroughly honest. There is no empty flattery there, and it is most refreshing. Colonel Fitzwilliam has openly confessed to seeking a rich wife, but he does not charm me endlessly or adjust his opinions or conversation to my presumed desires, which I greatly appreciate. Indeed, he spends most of his time speaking with Jane.

That is another peculiar thing; for the first time in my life, I am more popular than my elder sister. Jane, who is beautiful, kindly, and in my view quite the most wonderful woman in England, is cast into my shadow because I am rich and she is not.

You asked about offers. Yes, I have had several and have rejected them all. I care for none of the gentlemen in question, and they are all more interested in my money than my person.

You also asked about Mr. Bingley. He left for Scarborough more than two weeks ago and has not yet returned. He escorted Miss Bingley there, and I can only imagine that she is keeping him busy. At least, he said good-bye before departing.

I must prepare for a ball tonight at Lord Wycliffe's house. God's blessings on you, my dear friend.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Bennet

Elizabeth glanced over the letter. Deciding that it was well enough, she sanded it, folded it, sealed it, and set it aside to go out with the mail.

Her mind snagged on one section of her missive, namely the words regarding Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. In the weeks since she had inherited, Mr. Darcy was the only man apart from her Uncle Gardiner who had risen in her estimation.

Only a few months ago, she had despised and loathed Mr. Darcy, and now she liked and admired him very much.

He was a good man, though still a trifle stiff. But with his obvious love for his sister, and his friendship with Colonel Fitzwilliam, and his devotion to his estate; well, he was a truly excellent man, without a doubt.

She had, moreover, been noting his looks more often of late. That dark hair, which curled a little at its short ends, his aristocratic nose, his firm chin, his...

She blushed, though she was alone, and shook her head. He was, she thought, her friend now, and she could hardly hope for more. Unlike the men who courted and flattered her, he did not need to marry an heiress.

Chapter 29

Breakfast Parlor

Longbourn

Phoebe stepped into the breakfast parlor and hurried over to the sideboard to choose some food from the buffet. She was later than usual because she had spent a few minutes in the music room preparing for today's lesson with Mary. To her surprise, Mrs. Bennet, Mary and Kitty had already come down.

"What are you planning to do today, girls?" Mrs. Bennet asked as she slowly stirred sugar into her tea.

"Miss Adler and I are intending to go outside and sketch the roses," Kitty said enthusiastically. "They are so beautiful!"

"Yes, I do pride myself on my rose garden," Mrs. Bennet said smugly, "the large red ones especially. My dear Miss Adler, do you not think my roses are lovely?"

"They are," Phoebe replied. Mrs. Bennet still could not tell her governesses apart, and therefore called them both Miss Adler. "My sister informs me that Miss Kitty is quite gifted at sketching."

Kitty blushed happily at these words, and Mrs. Bennet cast a vague eye around the breakfast table. "Where is your sister, Miss Adler? Did she lie abed this morning?"

Phoebe shook her head and said, "No, Sophia is always an early riser, even more than I am. But she intended to speak with Lydia this morning, who has been a trifle under the weather of late."

"Oh yes, poor Lydia," the mistress of Longbourn said. "I daresay it is one of those dreadful spring colds that a person

may get at this time of year. I only hope she does not spread it throughout the house!”

“I hope so as well,” Phoebe agreed and turned her attention to Mary. “I took the liberty of setting up the new music we acquired yesterday in the music room, Miss Mary. I think it will be a delightful duet, if a challenging one.”

“I look forward to hearing it,” Mrs. Bennet said. “It is quite wonderful that Mr. Bennet hired you both, Miss Adler. My Mary was already the most accomplished lady in the neighborhood, but London society is more demanding. With your instruction, I am certain that my daughter will impress the high society ladies and gentlemen!”

Mary turned pink, and but Phoebe smiled and said, “Miss Mary is very diligent, which is most important when learning difficult skills.”

“I daresay I will have five daughters well married when all is said and done,” Mrs. Bennet said complacently. “Mary will win a gentleman due to her accomplishments, and Elizabeth will win a husband because of her money, and the other three will win husbands because of their beauty!”

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Lydia's Bedchamber

Sophia tapped at the door and peeked in. The room was dim, the curtains drawn and the fire died down low. The candles beside the bed were snuffed out. A foul smell hung in the chill air, and Sophia slipped inside, peering through the gloom. A large lump lay beneath the wadded blankets, unmoving.

“Miss Lydia?” Sophia asked softly.

The lump stirred and turned over, and Sophia glimpsed the pale face of Lydia Bennet, with her nightcap tied closely on her head. The room was cool but not cold. It was obvious that a maid had crept in earlier and started the fire, but it had burned down significantly.

“Shall I add a log to the fire?” Sophia asked.

Lydia moaned aloud and pulled a hand out of her blankets and held it out into the still air of the room.

“Yes,” she muttered.

Sophia picked up a log and threw it into the fireplace and stirred it vigorously. The flames leaped up happily, throwing welcome heat into the room, and she turned back toward the bed.

“Are you feeling unwell, Miss Lydia?”

Lydia whimpered and muttered, “I feel terrible.”

“Do you have a fever?”

“I ... I do not know. I feel cold...”

Sophia frowned and hurried over to place a soft hand on the girl’s forehead, and then sighed in relief. “I do not think you have a fever.”

“I feel ... feel so sick...”

Sophia found Lydia Bennet very tiresome, but she could not help but sympathize with the young lady, really hardly more than a child.

“Oh!” the girl cried out suddenly and struggled out of bed toward a basin sitting nearby. A moment later, she vomited into the basin, and Sophia’s nose wrinkled as the stinky miasma spread throughout the room.

“Oh!” the girl said again and began crying, and Sophia hurried forward to wrap her arm around the girl. She wiped her face off with a nearby handkerchief and guided her to the chair near the fire. She then hurried over to push the window

open, which allowed cooler, but far cleaner, air to spread through the room.

She hastened over to kneel on the floor and peer at her charge. Lydia was sweating, her pretty face twisted into an expression of disgust.

“Oh, how I hate being sick!” the girl whispered.

“I do as well,” Sophia replied quickly. “Shall I ask a maid to bring you some tea and toast? That might help you feel better.”

Lydia groaned again and shook her head. “Not ... not now, no. I ... I will feel better soon, but in the morning I feel ... feel like this and soon it will pass off and ... if I eat now, I will be sick again. I will be better soon. I always am.”

Sophia sank back on her haunches and stared at the girl.

“How long have you been sick in the mornings?” she asked softly.

“It started ... about two weeks ago, and it is getting worse. I only started vomiting in the last two days! Oh, it is so dreadful!”

Sophia felt her heart beating faster as her mind struggled to make sense of this information. Surely it could not be...?

“When did you last have your courses?” she asked gently. “That makes me sick sometimes.”

Lydia shook her head and wiped her mouth with the handkerchief again. “No, I have not had my courses in some time. It is not that.”

The thundering of heartbeats in Sophia’s chest was growing.

“How long has it been since you had your courses?” she inquired softly.

Lydia frowned and rubbed her sweaty forehead with one unquiet hand. “I do not know,” she said fretfully. “Oh, I do

though; it was the day after the assembly in February. I was so happy that I was not sick the night of the dancing...”

Sophia swallowed and felt a cowardly desire to flee. This conversation was a terrifying one, and Mrs. Bennet ought to be discussing the matter with the girl, but Mrs. Bennet was more or less useless in such a matter as this.

“It has been at least eight weeks since your courses, then,” Sophia said.

“I suppose so. Why?” Lydia demanded, crawling back into bed and laying her head against the pillow.

“Miss Lydia,” her governess said, “I do apologize for this question, but I must ask. Is there ... is there any chance that you ... er... could you be with child?”

Lydia’s eyes flared open in shock at these words and she exclaimed, “With child? Of course not!”

Sophia blew out a breath and could not help but smile in relief. “I am glad.”

“Everyone knows that to be entirely impossible, as I am only just sixteen years old this month. It is not possible to become pregnant until at least seventeen!”

Her companion sucked in a horrified breath and asked sharply, “Who told you that?”

“Why my dear Wick...” Lydia began and then scowled dreadfully. “Now you will tell Mamma, will you not? Though really, it is quite all right, as I will soon be married, and that is all she wants for me, and Papa too, to be well married.”

Sophia took a deep breath, let it out, gathered herself, and asked, “Miss Lydia, have you been ... intimate with Mr. Wickham?”

Lydia stared at her, a slight smirk forming on her pale countenance, and she sat up a little. “You and the other Miss Adler think I am such a child, and my sisters do as well, and yet I have experienced something that none of you have. I

have been in the arms of the most handsome man the world!
And we are to be married, so it is quite all right!”

“But where have you, erm, been meeting?” Sophia asked, struggling to stay calm.

“In a small cabin just over the border of our property, on Sir William Lucas’s land. It is a hunting cabin, but this time of year no one goes near it. It is quite all right that we used it, I assure you. Oh, I am so excited! I will be the first of my sisters to be married!”

Sophia felt like fainting at these brash words, and she said, “To Mr. Wickham.”

“Yes, I will soon be Lydia Wickham,” the girl replied, grinning proudly. “He is ... well, you are still a maiden, and it would not be appropriate for me to tell you what it is like!”

A moment later, the smile disappeared, and the girl lurched out of her bed again in search of a basin. Sophia helped her clean up again and then tucked her back into bed.

“Do try to get some more sleep, Miss Lydia,” she said gently. “I will arrange for the basin to be washed, and it will be placed at hand.”

“I am so tired,” Lydia murmured and then glanced out the window at the blue skies. “I will feel better soon, though. I always do.”

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The Drawing Room

The House on Half Moon Street

“Colonel Fitzwilliam,” Lady Appleby greeted their guest, “please do come in and sit down.”

“Thank you, Madame, Miss Bennet,” Richard replied, his heart beating madly.

Jane smiled at the colonel and said, “Lizzy is upstairs writing letters, but I can fetch her if you like?”

“No, no,” Richard replied, sinking into the chair and managing a nervous smile. “No. In truth, I am ... well, I am here to speak to you, Miss Bennet, if I might?”

Lady Appleby, who had been placidly working on needlework, paused and turned a surprised look on the colonel before shifting her gaze to Jane. “My dear, are you willing to speak to Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

Jane felt her own heart pounding. Could it be ... but perhaps the colonel was wishful of offering for Lizzy and merely desired her advice on how to go about it.

“Of course, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I would be honored,” she managed to say, though rather breathlessly.

Her patroness rose to her feet with surprising grace and walked over to the door before turning to face the couple, a mischievous grin on her aged face. “Colonel, I have great respect for you and know you will behave yourself.”

“I will, of course,” Richard replied with a returning smile and felt his chest ease a little.

When the door had closed behind his hostess, he turned to look at Jane, her blue eyes grave.

“Miss Bennet,” he began, and then paused. What could he say? How should he say this?

“Miss Bennet,” he repeated, “I have no idea in the world whether what I am saying is agreeable to you. Indeed, I ... well, I fear that it cannot possibly be, but I find that I cannot refrain from speaking...”

He trailed off, gazing at her hopefully, and she looked back and said, very reasonably, “I cannot know until you say what you need to say, sir.”

This was, he realized, an eminently rational response, and it was not fair for him to delay further, so he said bluntly, baldly, “Miss Bennet, I need to ask you a question. Are you and Mr. Bingley involved with one another? By that I mean, do you have an understanding, or do you wish to have an understanding in the near future? I...”

He stopped and forced himself to close his mouth and keep it closed. This was the moment upon which his entire future hinged.

She gazed at him for a moment and then slowly shook her head. “We do not have any sort of understanding, Colonel. There was a time when I thought that he would ... well, in any case, I have come to the conclusion that, as much as I admire Mr. Bingley, he and I will not suit.”

Richard Fitzwilliam could not help but grin joyfully at these words, and he leaned forward and said, “Miss Bennet, I must tell you how ardently I admire and love you.”

Jane stared in wonder and then, to her embarrassment, burst into tears. Based on the gentleman’s expression, he was dismayed, so she forced herself to beam through the drops, and she said, “Oh, I am so thankful. I was so afraid that you were pursuing Lizzy! I ... I care for you too, very much!”

Richard Fitzwilliam felt very much as if a mortar shell had burst nearby as stars danced in his vision. She cared for him! Thank God!

He was tempted to take her in his arms and kiss her, but he could not, partially because he had pledged to Lady Appleby that he would behave, and partly because...

“Before I officially request a formal courtship, and I wish to, I must tell you of my financial situation,” he said, his words tumbling out rapidly. “I am a second son, as you well know, and I have an allowance from my father of five hundred pounds a year, and I will sell my commission, which will bring in several more thousand, as I am a member of a respected

regiment. But even with that, I will not be able to support you in luxury and..."

Jane lifted a gloved hand, gently placed it across his mouth and said, "I do not need luxury, Colonel Fitzwilliam, as long as I am happy in my marriage. I also have a dowry of six thousand pounds. I am confident that together we will be well enough, if we indeed wed. I would very much welcome a courtship with you."

He grinned and gently pulled that slender hand down from his mouth. "Miss Bennet, would you do me the honor of entering into a courtship with me, with the hope that one day, in the not too distant future, we will marry and live happily ever after?"

"I will," Jane replied, her own eyes brimming with joyful tears. "I will."

Chapter 30

The Library

Longbourn

Midnight

The familiar leather of his favorite armchair wrapped around him like a hug, comforting and intimate. A leather-bound volume lay open on the desk before him, an old friend summoning his attention like a siren song, and behind it reared a stack of more books he wished to read. Shadows flickered against the wall behind him, the high-built fire filling the room with warm light. A glass with a measure of his favorite brandy sat at his right hand. Everything, in short, that usually made him perfectly happy. And yet...

Mr. Bennet felt, for the first time in his life, that he might actually faint. He heard the words, and his brain more or less recognized them, but the meaning was ... it simply ... it was...

“Impossible,” he muttered. “Impossible.”

The Adler twins exchanged glances, and Sophia said gently, “I fear that it is more than possible, it is likely. Miss Lydia has admitted to being intimate with Mr. Wickham, and she has not had her courses for eight weeks.”

Disbelief gave way to quick anger. “You were supposed to be looking after her, both of you!”

“Sir,” Phoebe said firmly, “if Miss Lydia is indeed with child, she was impregnated before we arrived at Longbourn.”

Bennet dropped his face into his hands and began muttering imprecations under his breath. Eight weeks meant that, yes, the timing for conception fell in those short weeks between his trip to London and the arrival of the governesses.

He remembered his frustration that the Adlers would not arrive until mid-March, but he had been such a lazy fool, as he always was! He could have restrained Lydia, he could have watched over her, but no, he had sat in his library and read his books and convinced himself that his younger daughters would come to no real harm in a few short weeks. And now Lydia had ruined them all.

“We are ruined,” he said bleakly. “My poor elder daughters, to be besmirched by their fool of a sister!”

Again, the twins looked at one another, and Phoebe said, “Mr. Bennet, that is not necessarily true. No one yet knows that Miss Lydia is pregnant, if indeed she is. Moreover, even *she* has no idea that she might be pregnant. If we can arrange to have her taken to London on some pretext, we can prevent the scandal here in Meryton, at least. Moreover, given Miss Elizabeth’s great wealth, perhaps someone could be, well, bribed to marry Miss Lydia and accept the baby as his own.”

“You say she does not even suspect she is with child?” Bennet demanded. Perhaps the governesses were merely starting at shadows, if even Lydia did not think it possible.

“Mr. Wickham told her, and she believed him, that it is impossible for a woman to conceive a child until she is at least seventeen years of age,” Phoebe explained.

Bennet closed his eyes in disbelief and then opened them to say, “How did I father such a dolt?”

“There is no simple answer to that, sir,” Sophia said, “but I beg you to turn your intellect toward saving the rest of your daughters from scandal and ruin.”

Mr. Bennet peered at them with a sliver of optimism. “Do you truly think there is a possible way out, or are you merely trying to bring some hope in a hopeless situation?”

“We spent the last hours discussing the situation at length,” Sophia said, “in the privacy of our bedchamber, of course, so no one could overhear us. Miss Mary has been

writing frequently to her older sisters, and it seems that both are being pursued by eligible young men. Would it be so astonishing if you decided to travel to London to see how they are doing? Or perhaps you could pretend that you received a letter from them that inspired you to visit? And given how quiet and sickly Miss Lydia has been of late, is it not reasonable that one of us convinced you to take Lydia to see a doctor in London?"

Mr. Bennet blew out a breath and turned away to gaze into the fire, and then turned back and asked, "You do not think she should marry Wickham?"

"Sir," Sophia said, "it is, of course, the common view that in such a situation the lady should marry the ... I will not call him a gentleman, because he is not. But given that he has seduced a very young lady, not yet seventeen, and convinced her that he would marry her, well, I fear that he will refuse unless you hand over a great deal of money to him. Moreover, he will not make your daughter a good husband."

"She is a stubborn girl," Bennet said gloomily. "She will doubtless insist on marrying the wretch."

"She is little more than a child," Sophia said sternly, "and her behavior is, frankly, on your head, sir."

"You are right, of course," Bennet said wearily. "I have been a lazy and foolish dimwit, and I deserve the scandal looming over us, but my girls do not. Very well, we will whisk Lydia off to London, though even that may prove difficult. She is bound to gloat over going to Town and upset Kitty. Worse yet, she may protest leaving Wickham. And my wife is quite unable to hold her tongue."

"Mrs. Bennet and your daughters are intending to visit Mrs. Phillips tomorrow morning," Sophia said. "Lydia will almost certainly be too ill to go, and we can carry her off then."

"We?" her employer asked.

“I think one of us ought to accompany you, sir,” Phoebe said. “We have not been enormously successfully in managing her, but I hope that Sophia or I can be helpful. But if you do not wish us to go...”

“I do,” Bennet interrupted fervently. “I do, very much.”

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The House at Half Moon Street

The Next Day

The carriage jolted only slightly as it stopped, as the Darcy coachman was adept at his job. A footman swung down to open the door, and Darcy stepped out first, adjusted his hat and glanced back as his cousin joined him. Richard was beaming with joy, and there was a noticeable spring in his step as he mounted the stairs. Darcy trailed a half-step behind, battling to suppress his own low spirits. He was glad for Richard, of course, but as Elizabeth Bennet’s face filled his mind, his heart sank yet again. Jane Bennet, while beautiful, charming, and kindly, was not wealthy. Any man would be blessed indeed to win her hand, but there were far fewer competitors. Elizabeth could have her pick of practically any man in London. There was no reason for her to choose him.

The door opened to Richard’s knock, with the butler standing aside to permit them entry. Footmen stepped forward to claim the brushed black hats and elegant canes. Darcy frowned a little as he handed over his accessories; through the butler’s blank mask, he could see stress; a certain tightness through the eyes.

A sound from down the corridor caught his attention; a woman’s voice, pitched with distress and displeasure. For a moment his heart hammered. It sounded like Elizabeth! But

no, no it did not. It was younger, a bit different in the timbre. One of the younger Bennet sisters, perhaps?

“Are the ladies in the drawing room?” Richard asked jovially, taking a step in that direction.

“Excuse me, sirs,” the butler said, “please allow me to consult with my mistress. There are already some guests present.”

Richard looked startled, and Darcy said, “Of course.”

The butler departed in haste. Richard cast a bemused look at his cousin, and Darcy merely shrugged in return. He had no idea what was wrong, but something was, and they would find out soon enough.

The butler returned three minutes later and said solemnly, “Please follow me, sirs.”

They did so and found themselves at the familiar oak door of the drawing room. The butler opened the door, passed through, and they followed him inside, where they discovered Jane Bennet sitting with a gentleman who was very familiar to Fitzwilliam Darcy.

“Mr. Bennet,” he said, stepping forward and bowing, “this is an unexpected pleasure.”

When he straightened, he observed that Mr. Bennet was pale, with his forehead furrowed in deep grooves. He turned his attention on Miss Bennet, who was now on her feet, and she too was pale, the pupils dilated in her deep blue eyes, and there was a look of disbelief and horror imprinted on her countenance.

“Jane!” Richard said, stepping forward, his initial joy now transformed into dismay. “Jane, whatever is the matter!”

She lifted her gloved hands in protest, as if to push him away, and turned her head away, though before she did so, Darcy saw tears spilling down her pale cheeks.

“Please do not,” she murmured, so softly that Darcy could barely hear her. “I fear that I will ... oh, Colonel

Fitzwilliam, as much as it pains me, I must withdraw from our courtship.”

Richard was now as pale as she, and he cried out, with more passion than courtesy, “Good God! What is the matter?”

Jane collapsed on a chair at this point and buried her face into a large handkerchief. Mr. Bennet, looking at least twenty years older than he had the last time Darcy laid eyes on him, stood up slowly and said, “Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Darcy, I fear that there is a potential of a great scandal in our family due to the idiocy of one of my younger daughters. I suggested to Jane that she continue your courtship until we determine whether the whole matter can be hushed up, but she refuses to take the chance of blackening your family’s name.”

Richard turned anguished eyes on Jane, who was still sobbing, and then said sternly, “I have no intention of giving up Miss Bennet because of a girl’s foolishness. How can I help you in this matter?”

Bennet shook his head wearily and said, “I fear there is nothing you can do, sir, though I appreciate your offer. My youngest daughter has ... well, she has been ruined by a member of the militia in Meryton, and our only hope is to ... well, we have not progressed that far in our thinking.”

“Is it Wickham?” Darcy blurted out, even as spots danced in his vision.

Bennet looked startled for a moment and then nodded. “Yes, it is.”

“George Wickham?” the colonel demanded, taking an impetuous step forward. “Is that who ruined your daughter?”

“Yes?” Bennet replied, looking back and forth between Darcy and the colonel.

The military man turned on his heel and glared at his cousin. “Did you know that Wickham was in Meryton?”

Darcy swallowed hard and said, “I did. I, erm...”

“How ... how could you leave Hertfordshire and not warn the local families that they harbored a snake in their midst? How *could* you?”

“I could not,” Darcy snapped back, his eyes fixed intently on Richard’s. “You know why I could not. The man holds the reputation of...”

He trailed off, and Richard clenched his fists and ground his teeth. “How long will that cursed man dog our steps, Darcy? How many lives will he ruin?”

Darcy felt abruptly sick. His poor, precious Elizabeth! It must have been Miss Lydia’s voice he heard upstairs, and no doubt Elizabeth was with her.

“It is my fault, gentlemen,” Bennet said, his eyelids heavy with anguish. “I suspected he was not a good man, but I was lazy and did not look after my daughters. We recently acquired two excellent governesses, but the damage was already done.”

“I assume Wickham is threatening to tell the world of his relationship with Miss Lydia, which would result in the ruin of the family?” Darcy asked.

Jane, who had finally lifted her head from her handkerchief, choked out, “It is worse than that, sir. It seems ... it seems...”

“We believe she is pregnant with his child,” Bennet said and closed his eyes.

The two cousins exchanged horrified glances, and Darcy said heavily, “I am so very sorry, and I do feel responsible. I should have warned you of the man’s predilections.”

“It is not your shame, but ours,” Jane said, suddenly hysterical. “We are ruined! We are ruined!!”

Richard stepped forward boldly and pulled her into his arms. “Jane, my love, we will overcome this, I promise. I promise.”

“We will,” Darcy agreed fervently. No matter what, he would protect the lady he adored, and her family, from vicious scandal and rumors.

Bennet sighed. “I appreciate your support, gentlemen. It is more than I hoped for, but I am not entirely certain what you can do. Lydia insists that they are in love and is bent on marrying Mr. Wickham, and I suppose we might buy him off, but he knows that Elizabeth is wealthy and will certainly demand a vast sum. It makes me almost physically ill that my poor Lizzy might be forced to pay off the scoundrel.”

Darcy opened his mouth, but Richard managed to speak first. “Wickham knows about the potential child, then?”

Bennet snorted and shook his head. “*Lydia* does not even know about the child. She has been sick for weeks and has all the symptoms of ... well, of pregnancy, but she is convinced it is impossible because Wickham ... erm ... misinformed her. It was Miss Adler, our governess, who only yesterday realized what was happening, and she and her sister made all the plans to whisk Lydia to London this morning. I left a letter for my wife, who had gone off to Meryton with our other daughters, indicating that Lydia’s illness was concerning me, and thus I was taking her to London to see Lady Appleby’s physician. It will cause some gossip, but I hope that no one will guess the truth.”

“So Wickham does not know that Miss Lydia could be pregnant,” Darcy remarked, his eyes narrowed and thoughtful.

“What are you thinking of, Cousin?” Richard demanded.

Darcy blew out a breath and nodded his head. “I have an idea.”

Chapter 31

Later that day

“It really is very kind of you of both,” Elizabeth said fervently, pouring tea for the two gentlemen and Jane. It took a great deal of effort to keep her hand from shaking, but she managed it. Her father was upstairs now with Lydia, as Lady Appleby’s physician, a most discreet individual, had arrived to examine the youngest Miss Bennet.

“It is not,” Darcy said bitterly, taking the cup from her hand. He took a sip and continued, “I fear he has done this sort of thing before, and I ought to have warned you, but I was too proud, and too...”

He broke off, full of self-loathing, and Richard, who was sitting next to Jane, with her hand in his, said, “There was more to it than that, and I believe we ought to tell the ladies the truth of the matter.”

“Yes, we should. Please explain, Richard.”

The two ladies turned anxious looks on the colonel, who said, “Last summer, my cousin Georgiana Darcy went to Ramsgate on the sea for a holiday, along with her companion, a Mrs. Younge. We did not know this, but Mrs. Younge was closely acquainted with George Wickham, who followed Georgiana there. With the help of Mrs. Younge, he met Georgiana ‘by chance’. Within two weeks, my young cousin was convinced by the pair that she was in love with Wickham.”

“Oh dear God,” Elizabeth cried out, turning a sympathetic gaze on Darcy, who was looking wretched.

“Did he and she...?” Jane asked in a trembling voice.

“No, he did not take her virtue,” Darcy said, struggling, and failing, to keep his voice steady. “But he did convince her

to hurry to Gretna Greene for a marriage over the anvil. By the grace of God, I arrived earlier than expected to visit Georgiana, and she told me of the planned elopement. Naturally, I removed my sister from Mrs. Younge's charge and sent an angry letter to Wickham, who left Ramsgate immediately. I feared any further retribution against the scoundrel because of my sister's reputation but ... I should have done more. I do apologize, profusely."

"It is not your fault, sir," Elizabeth said sadly. "Not in the least."

"Regardless of whose fault it is, it is time to deal with George Wickham, once and for all," Colonel Fitzwilliam told them, "and Darcy has a plan."

Darcy, in the midst of his sorrow and anguish over the situation, could not help but feel his heart lift as his beloved turned a hopeful gaze on him.

"How, Mr. Darcy?" she asked simply.

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Mary's Bedchamber

Longbourn

An Hour Before Midnight

The flames leapt and danced along the log with a mesmerizing flicker, wavering and growing and shrinking with delicate beauty. Mary watched it absently, brow wrinkled in pensive thought.

Something was wrong, terribly wrong. Her father's note, discovered upon her return from visiting Aunt Phillips, declaring that he had taken Lydia to London to see a physician, simply did not make sense. Lydia had not been so terribly ill, and why would he not summon the apothecary to

see her first? Her father detested going to Town and would usually do anything to avoid it! For that matter, what had changed to make him even notice, much less care about, Lydia's sickness? Had she become more severely ill? Had one of the servants approached their master with urgent concerns? But why leave without at least letting her bid farewell to her mother and sisters?

None of it made sense.

A light tap at her door broke through her thoughts, startling her slightly. She glanced over, unconsciously ran a hand over her dress, and called, "Come in."

The door opened, and Sophia Adler entered the room, her countenance composed.

"Good evening, Miss Mary," she said softly. "I do apologize for interrupting, but I must speak with you."

Mary huffed, irritated with herself. Somehow it had not occurred to her that Miss Adler doubtless knew what was truly happening with Lydia; after all, she was twin to Miss Phoebe!

"Please do come in," she said, gesturing toward the chair adjacent her own.

The governess did so, reaching out her hands to warm her fingers, and then she turned an intent look on the young lady. "Miss Mary, I am certain you are confused by your father's decision to whisk Miss Lydia to London this morning?"

"Very much so," Mary agreed promptly. "I am, in fact, completely baffled. I know she has been ill, but why not have Mr. Jones see her first? I am certain that something else is happening, something serious!"

Sophia glanced toward the door, which was reassuringly closed, leaned forward, and said softly, "Miss Mary, the situation is very serious indeed, and you must keep this entire affair a secret from your mother and younger sister. I would not ordinarily suggest keeping confidences in such circumstances, but I fear neither lady can be depended on to

keep silent, whereas you are an intelligent, level-headed young woman who can be trusted to keep her lips closed.”

Mary could not help but flush in surprise at these words of praise, though at the same time, she felt her stomach twist oddly.

“I will keep it a secret, I promise,” she murmured.

Sophia blew out a breath, glanced at the door once again for good measure, and said very quietly, “I grieve the necessity of telling you this, because you will find it most disturbing, but Miss Lydia has confessed to allowing Lieutenant Wickham to take ... liberties, and there is a good chance she is now carrying Wickham’s child.”

Mary had been prepared for something dreadful, but this was so horrendous, so shocking, so appalling, that she found herself suddenly faint, to the point that she swayed in her chair.

Sophia hastily left her own chair and knelt down to place reassuring hands on the girl’s arms.

“I do apologize for the necessity of telling you, but I have done so because I need your help to ward off queries and curiosity regarding Lydia’s sudden departure. The only hope for your family is to turn away questions with something at least moderately reasonable. It would be catastrophic if anyone suspected the true meaning of your sister’s sudden journey to Town. Can you help me?”

Mary gulped, drew in a deep breath, and forced herself to straighten her back as the mists fled from her vision. “Yes, Miss Adler, I will help.”

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Elizabeth’s Bedchamber

Midnight

Elizabeth snuggled down under the fresh sheets, let her head melt into the pillow, and finally loosened the tight bonds of her composure. She had held herself closely in check throughout the day, forcefully restraining every sign of her distress. But now there was none to see, and no need to hold herself together any longer.

The day had started so *promisingly*. She had an appointment set for an hour past noon to ride in the Hyde Park with the second son of Lord Wimbledon, one of her more engaging suitors. But a few minutes before noon, a post carriage had rolled up to the door and disgorged Mr. Bennet, Lydia, and Phoebe Adler. Elizabeth had greeted them with joy more than a little tinted with confusion, but her welcoming happiness had swiftly turned to horror.

Miss Phoebe had escorted Lydia to the sitting room, as Mr. Bennet, looking many years older, had stepped into the drawing room. "I am so sorry, Lizzy," he had said hoarsely.

She had shaken her head in bewilderment, but before she could query as to his meaning, he had continued heavily, "I fear that Lydia has fallen pregnant by Mr. Wickham."

Now Elizabeth ground her face into the pillow, reeling anew with shock and dismay. She had not allowed herself more than a few seconds of stunned disbelief upon first hearing the news, but she had rushed from the drawing room and down to the sitting room, bursting in the door in a most unladylike fashion to demand if it was true. Lydia had been distraught, furious and wet-eyed and damp-cheeked, angrily protesting that it was not, it was not!

But one look at Phoebe's tight lips and burning eyes had convinced Elizabeth. She trusted the sensible governess far more than her clodpoll of a little sister. Furious and working hard to contain herself, Elizabeth, with Phoebe assisting, had bundled Lydia hastily up the stairs, while the youngest Bennet shrieked outraged protests and disbelief of her own condition.

Elizabeth's face burned all over again. The butler, at least two footmen, and one maid had heard Lydia's outburst. After the fiasco with Gertrude at Longbourn, Elizabeth was well aware that servants were liable to talk. Mrs. Ripley, the housekeeper, had assured discretion on the part of the staff, but Lydia's foolishness was still shamefully embarrassing. Mr. Bennet had stood in the hall below and watched miserably as Elizabeth and Phoebe carried his youngest daughter away, not stirring himself to help.

Just as he had not stirred himself at Longbourn. He had agreed to engage governesses for his younger daughters – with Elizabeth paying – but he had not bothered to oversee Lydia and Kitty, as he waited for the Adler twins to arrive. He had not put himself out either to see to their well-being or to rein them in, and in those last few weeks of liberty, Lydia had given up her virtue to the scurrilous Wickham.

Idiot girl! She was not taught well, it was true, but she knew well the consequences for a ruined young lady! Miss Brampton, the daughter of a local merchant, had departed from town rather hastily some three years ago, returning only a year later as a listless shadow of her former cheerful self, and departed again quite shortly to live with some distant cousin. And everyone, *everyone* knew why; it had certainly been talked of in the Bennet sitting room, with many half-finished sentences and knowing looks between Mrs. Bennet and her cronies.

It was a terrible mess, all of it, and her father would be of little help cleaning it up. Elizabeth could, she thought reluctantly, pay Wickham off, but he would no doubt demand an exorbitant sum, and she found herself revolted at the idea of giving him so much as a penny. Perhaps, she thought with dim hope, perhaps Mr. Darcy's idea would work. It could save her family and fortune alike...

But the thought of Mr. Darcy squeezed painfully at her heart, and her eyes burned as they welled with tears. She had discovered, too late, that she was in love with that gentleman. Of all the men with whom she had spent time in London, she

had formed a genuine attachment to only one, Mr. Darcy. During their hours spent together, she had come to admire very much his firm principles, his unswerving devotion to his duty, and his quick intelligent mind and dry wit.

But he had never given any sign of regarding her as anything more than a friend, and now ... now it was hopeless. Lydia had ruined them all, and by Wickham no less, Darcy's sworn enemy. He would want nothing to do with their family after this, and Elizabeth could not blame him.

She buried her face in her pillow to muffle her hitching sobs, the damp spot widening across the cotton slipcover. Her body jerked with her sorrow, shoulders heaving with the force of her emotion.

But eventually she cried herself out, drawing up the edge of her sheet to wipe her face clean. Her heart and mind yearned towards God, an ever-present comfort.

"Please," she whispered into the silence of her room. "Oh Lord, please. You are great and can do anything. Please, guide everyone involved in this situation. Help us resolve it without total ruination of our family, *please*." She took a moment and another hitching breath. "And, come what may, please grant me – grant all of us – the grace and strength to live our new lives with bravery and equanimity. In your holy and precious name, amen."

She turned over onto a dry portion of the pillow and pulled the blankets up to her chin, suddenly utterly weary. Her eyes tracked over to the moonlight slanting across the floor before drifting shut, and she slipped off to sleep.

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Drawing Room

Longbourn

Mrs. Bennet lowered the teapot onto the tea tray and handed the cup over to Mrs. Phillips, while Lady Lucas took a sip from her own teacup. Kitty sat beside her mother on the couch, while Mary and Sophia Adler had taken their places near the large front window of the room, the better to enjoy the scenery outside. Branches tapped at the window, bobbing and blowing in a brisk breeze that likewise sent dust swirling across the ground and rabbit-tail clouds across the blue sky.

“My poor Lydia!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed. “I am so worried about her, and I cannot understand why Mr. Bennet rushed off with her while I was in Meryton, Sister! She needs a mother’s care during such a time!”

“Did Mr. Jones see her?” Mrs. Phillips demanded, taking a sip of well sweetened tea.

“No, and that is another thing! Why would Mr. Bennet put the poor girl on a carriage without having Mr. Jones see her first? I do not understand any of it!”

“Elizabeth wrote to me recently saying that she is being ardently courted by Lord Talbot,” Mary remarked in a nonchalant tone. “Perhaps Father decided that he had best speak to the young noble himself, and as long as he was journeying to Town, he should bring Lydia to be seen by a physician.”

This had the pleasant, desired, instant effect of turning Mrs. Bennet’s attention away from Lydia and onto Elizabeth.

“Lord Talbot? Who is he?” the matriarch of Longbourn demanded.

“Oh, I am not certain, Mamma,” Mary said casually and then turned her attention on Sophia Adler, who was knitting industriously. “Do you know about Lord Talbot, Miss Adler?”

“Oh yes,” Sophia said, casting an approving glance toward Mary before turning her attention on the visitors. “I do not know him personally, but my last family but one is a distant connection to the Earl of Alverstone. Lord Talbot,

Viscount Talbot, is heir to the family estate. Quite a charming and good looking young man, I understand.”

“Oh!” Mrs. Bennet shrieked. “Oh, my Lizzy might be a viscountess and then a countess! Oh, how absolutely delightful!”

“Indeed, it is marvelous,” Lady Lucas agreed, though her expression was a trifle sour. She had been very pleased when Charlotte, her eldest daughter, had married Mr. Collins, heir to the estate of Longbourn. Without a doubt, it was an excellent match, as Charlotte would one day be mistress of Longbourn. But that was nothing compared to a daughter marrying a Viscount!

“It makes me want to drive to London myself!” Mrs. Bennet declared, “but Mr. Bennet took the carriage, so it is quite impossible.”

“Jane and Elizabeth have been writing often,” Mary said reassuringly. “I am certain they will tell us of any progress in their courtships as soon as they possibly can.”

“I am certain they will,” Mrs. Bennet agreed, beaming. “Lady Talbot. How wonderful it sounds!”

“If Lizzy marries a Lord, will I perhaps be permitted to have a Season in London?” Kitty asked.

“Oh, of course my love, of course, and Lydia too! And Mary, so long as you keep working on your playing and the like, I daresay you have a reasonable chance of capturing a husband as well.”

“Speaking of music,” Sophia said, setting aside her work, “would you care to play a duet with me in the music room, Miss Mary?”

“I would,” the girl responded, rising along with her governess. “Lady Lucas, Aunt Phillips, it was wonderful seeing you today.”

There were a few muttered farewells from the older women as the two women departed, and as Mary closed the

door to the drawing room behind her, she heard her mother say, "Oh, I am so very proud of my Elizabeth. She was so wise not to marry Mr. Collins!"

Mary winced and turned an agitated look on her companion, who lifted a finger encouraging silence. Mary obeyed until the twosome had achieved the music room where, to Mary's great surprise, Sophia sat down on the bench in front of the pianoforte and began playing a Scottish aria.

"I did not know you played!" Mary said, taking a seat next to her companion.

"I do not play as well as Phoebe, and I am sadly out of practice, as the last family I served did not have an instrument. But yes, I do play. Miss Mary, you did a truly excellent job in there."

Mary flushed in pleasure, though her brow was wrinkled in worry. "I feel as if I am being dishonest, though. Do you think there is any chance that Lord Talbot will actually marry Lizzy?"

"I believe that depends on your sister's wants and desires. The Alverstone fortune has been waning for the last two generations thanks to the extravagance of the families, and thus Lord Talbot needs a wealthy bride. Based on my limited knowledge of your sister, I think it quite unlikely that she will accept an offer from a man largely desiring her riches. But perhaps she will become genuinely attached to the viscount."

"You are correct about Elizabeth. She turned down Mr. Collins, as you doubtless know. Mother was furious with her at the time, and now she is pleased. It does not make any sense."

"You are far more sensible than your mother which is a very good thing for the family."

Mary again felt her cheeks warm, but she could not but feel grateful for Miss Adler's reassuring words.

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The Pig in the Poke

Meryton

Noon

Two days later

The rains yesterday had washed clean the windows of the pub, and now Wickham sat in the middle of a group of officers, looking appreciatively out at the blue sky and cotton-puff clouds drifting across the heavens. The leaves of the trees were green and bright, though the ground beneath was churned-up mud that spattered beneath shoes and paws and hooves and cart wheels. Intrepid blossoms, lovely to the eye, were peeking up out of window boxes and gardens across the street from the pub.

A cup of coffee and a plate of ham and eggs and sausage steamed before Wickham. He was devouring his breakfast happily, the food a convenient excuse to avoid conversation. He was feeling a trifle anxious. His debts were continuing to mount, and he was eager to depart for Brighton. He was still managing to put off the shopkeepers with his charm and manner; the women were especially susceptible, he thought, derisive and unsurprised. But that left his debts of honor to his fellow-officers. He could abandon his debts in Meryton when the regiment moved on, but he was badly in need of a run of luck to clear away his gaming debts.

He glanced over idly as the door opened to reveal an unfamiliar man, and then took a deep draught from his coffee cup, ignoring the murmuring of the newcomer.

“He is over there, Mr. Nelson,” Captain Carter said helpfully, pointing in the direction of the table.

The man, dressed soberly in a black suit and gray topcoat, his boots liberally splashed with mud, walked up to

the group of officers and glanced around.

“Mr. Wickham?” he asked. “Mr. George Wickham?”

Wickham immediately felt his throat close up with anxiety. He had, after all, left many a debt in both villages and Town. Was some angry shopkeeper pursuing him with a writ? Worse yet, was an angry father chasing him for ruining his daughter?

His fellow officers were all looking at him, and Mr. Nelson was looking at him, so he forced himself to smile. “I am Mr. Wickham.”

“Thank God for that,” the man replied, wiping his brow with one weary hand. “It was quite a bit of trouble finding you, sir.”

The man handed over a sealed piece of paper and then turned on his heels and strode out of the pub, leaving Wickham to stare nervously at the document in his hands.

“Well, are you going to open it?” Pratt asked, and Carter said, “He probably would rather be back in his barracks room, hey Wickham? No doubt it is a letter from one of your conquests?”

Wickham laughed weakly at this, quickly broke the wax, and spread it open to read.

Seymour and Coxe, Solicitors

London

Mr. Wickham,

I am the solicitor responsible for disbursing monies from the estate of a certain lady who has remembered you in her will. If you will call upon my office during normal business hours, I will be pleased to arrange for you to receive your inheritance.

You will find our offices on 15 Lombard Street in the City.

Respectfully,

Aaron Seymour, Solicitor

Wickham smiled with relief and anticipation. A bequest in a will? It almost seemed too good to be true, but only almost. He was a very handsome man, after all, and had brought pleasure to more than one woman.

He wondered, briefly, if Mrs. Younge had died. She was the latest of his paramours, and while not particularly wealthy, she was not impoverished either. If she had died, he would not necessarily have heard of it. After the disaster at Ramsgate, when he had failed to run off to Gretna Greene with Georgiana Darcy, they had agreed to stay away from one another for at least some months.

In any case, he could not afford to look a gift horse in the mouth. It would be no trouble at all to hurry up to London on the morrow, as Colonel Forster was always generous with his leave. Perhaps it was a large sum! This thought made him smile broadly. Even if the bequest was as small as twenty pounds, it would be a great boon during this troubled financial time. It seemed his luck had indeed turned.

He threw down the last of his coffee, slapped the backs of a few of his fellow officers, and swaggered out of the pub and toward Colonel Forster's office in search of his requested leave.

He did not notice the two men, dressed like tenant farmers, standing in the street in front of the bookstore, their attention on him even as they spoke languidly of the weather.

Chapter 32

The House on Half Moon Street

“I merely have the influenza or something of the sort,” Lydia protested. She had, as usual, felt wretched all morning but was now feeling better.

“Lydia, my dear,” Madeline Gardiner said, striving to stay calm in the face of her niece’s utter stupidity. “You have been feeling sick in the morning for weeks now, and only in the morning. That is not common for influenza. Furthermore, your courses are weeks late. Doctor Nash is quite certain...”

“I cannot be with child because I am not yet seventeen,” Lydia said doggedly. “Wickham assured me that it is impossible, and he would not lie to me.”

Lady Appleby and Mrs. Gardiner exchanged frustrated looks, and Phoebe Adler, who had been sitting quietly near the fire, said, “King Henry the VII was born to Lady Margaret Beaufort when she was only thirteen years of age.”

The two older ladies and Lydia all turned in astonishment, and Mrs. Gardiner exclaimed, “That is far too young!”

“I entirely agree, and Lady Beaufort never had another child after her only son was born. But she was far younger than you are now, Miss Lydia.”

For the first time, Lydia looked a trifle uncertain. “Truly, Miss Adler?”

“Truly,” Phoebe replied. “You can read about it in the history books.”

Lydia turned startled eyes on her aunt and, after a full minute of cogitation, said, “You genuinely think that I might be with child, Aunt?”

Madeline Gardiner suppressed a groan. Given that Lydia was surrounded by tenant families, many of whom wed and bore children early, it was incredible that she was *stupid* enough to believe Wickham when he told her that she was incapable of falling pregnant at sixteen. And now the story of a long dead king was convincing her youngest niece when a reliable doctor had not?

“Yes, dear, I am quite certain that you are pregnant,” she said gravely. “The fatigue, the sickness, the lack of menses, and you have been intimate with Mr. Wickham.”

Lydia, for one brief, halcyon moment, actually looked appropriately shocked and distressed, but then, to the disbelief of the other women present, allowed a small smile to form on her lips.

“It is quite all right,” she remarked, appearing quite satisfied as she leaned against her cushioned chair. “Wickham loves me and has promised to marry me. Even if I am pregnant, I am certain he will be very pleased when I present him with a son.”

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The Office

A Few Hours Later

Bennet poured brandy for his two guests and himself, handed over the glasses to Richard and Darcy, and said grimly, “My youngest is a complete dunce. She insists that Wickham will welcome her and the pregnancy with enthusiasm.”

“In truth, he probably *would* be pleased, if we were playing by the rules,” Richard said with an unpleasant chuckle. “Wickham always has an eye for money, and he will see bank drafts when he learns of Miss Lydia’s ... condition. He will

assume that he can blackmail Miss Elizabeth for as much as he wishes in order to protect your family's reputation."

Bennet clenched his teeth and turned toward the fire, the glass in his hand shaking slightly. "If this does not work, Elizabeth may well..."

He trailed off and threw the brandy down his throat, which provoked a coughing fit.

"Do not worry, sir," Darcy said coldly. "I promise you that Wickham will not extract so much as a pound from your daughter."

Bennet stared at him for a full minute and then set his glass down with a thump. "Mr. Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, I cannot tell you how grateful I am for your assistance. You owe us nothing at all, and you have been incredibly generous and helpful in this matter."

"I love Miss Bennet," Richard said flatly. "I will do anything to protect her and her family from scandal."

Darcy was tempted to tell Mr. Bennet the truth – that he was in love with the second Miss Bennet, but that would not be fair to Elizabeth. He did not wish her to feel obligated toward him in any way, and he would not want her to be uncomfortable in his presence.

"As for me," he said instead, "in addition to my desire to do what is right, I am eager to deal with my father's godson once and for all. I have been far too lenient with him in the past, stayed by my father's affection for the man, but that grace ends now. It is time for retribution."

Mr. Bennet, thinking of the sword of Damocles hanging over his family's collective head, could not but agree.

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Seymour and Coxe, Solicitors

15 Lombard Street

The Next Afternoon

“This way, Mr. Wickham,” the clerk said. Wickham stood up from his chair and followed the young man eagerly. He could hardly wait to discover how much money he would be receiving from the unknown lady who had found him charming enough to remember him in her will.

Likely it was only fifty pounds, maybe even one hundred. But would it not be wonderful if it was a truly significant quantity? He had received one thousand pounds from the estate of his godfather, George Darcy, and then had managed to claim an additional three thousand pounds from Fitzwilliam Darcy in exchange for giving up the Kympton living. That had been a delightful two years, until bad luck and too much high living had wiped it all out.

“In here, sir,” the clerk said, and gestured toward an open door.

Wickham smiled, stepped into the room, and came to a sudden halt at the sight of the gentleman waiting for him.

“Mr. Bennet!” he exclaimed. “What are *you* doing here?”

“An excellent question, Mr. Wickham,” Bennet said stiffly. “May I please introduce Mr. Seymour, my solicitor?”

Wickham glowered at the solicitor, a stout, middle aged man dressed soberly in black, who was seated behind a large wooden desk, upon which were a pile of documents. The rest of the room was furnished with several comfortable chairs, another small desk in one corner, and a large, well-filled bookshelf. A side door, which was partially open, led into what was apparently some sort of storage room given the presence of boxes on the floor.

“What of my bequest, Mr. Seymour?” he demanded suspiciously.

“I fear that there is no bequest, Mr. Wickham,” Bennet said. “The letter was a stratagem to entice you here.”

Wickham swallowed hard and cast a nervous glance toward the door. “Why would you do such a thing? And how did you know when I would arrive here from Hertfordshire?”

Bennet sighed, suddenly looking older, and said, “We had someone following you, but please, let us sit down.”

Wickham chose the chair nearest the door and sat down, and Mr. Bennet lowered himself onto the chair across from him.

“Mr. Wickham, I believe the best approach is to be entirely honest with you. I am aware that you ... deflowered my youngest daughter some weeks ago. She is now pregnant with your child, and I expect you to marry her.”

Wickham blinked at Bennet in amazement, which, after a minute of cogitation, shifted into ardent satisfaction. Ordinarily, such a situation would be awkward, but given that Miss Elizabeth was rich, well, he would garner far more than one thousand pounds out of the upcoming negotiations.

And oh, how glorious it would be to demand a great deal of money from Elizabeth Bennet, who had brusquely refused his offer of marriage before hurrying to warn Miss Mary King!

“What a delightful surprise,” Wickham said with a bright smile. “Dear Lydia! Such a charming girl, and so handsome! I do hope she is well?”

“She is well enough,” Bennet grunted, “but the sooner you marry her, the better. There have been no rumors of her ... condition, as of yet, but the news will come out soon, and you must be married before then.”

“Of course we must,” Wickham said, leaning back and crossing his legs. “Now you must be aware that I have no income to support a wife.”

Bennet blew out a breath and said, “Yes, I am aware. Mr. Seymour, would you kindly give the lieutenant the document?”

Seymour stood up, plucked a paper from the gleaming surface of his desk, walked over to Wickham, handed it to him, and then returned to his chair, all without speaking so much as a word.

Wickham looked down at the paper with anticipation, which quickly transformed into irritation.

“Is this some kind of joke, Mr. Bennet?” he asked, lifting his face to scowl at the gentleman in question.

Bennet looked startled at this accusation and said, “Not at all, sir! I am not a wealthy man, and seven thousand pounds is very reasonable. It will provide you and Lydia nearly three hundred pounds a year to live on. Though that will not allow you to live lavishly, it will provide for a roof over your head and food on your table.”

Wickham shook his head, having regained his calm. “Three hundred pounds a year is far too little, sir. Now, while I am well aware that you do not have vast sums at your disposal, your second daughter does.”

Bennet clenched his teeth and ground out, “So that is what this is, eh? You are trying to blackmail Elizabeth into giving you a fortune?”

“Blackmail is such an ugly word,” Wickham replied, allowing himself to smile impudently at the man who would soon be his father-in-law. The Bennets had no other option, of course, but to pay him off. If Lydia did not marry him, and soon, the family would be ruined.

Bennet looked at the floor for a long minute and then lifted his head to gaze directly into Wickham’s eyes. “Please, I beg of you, do not do this! My Lydia is but a child, and I can only presume that you genuinely care for her. This is your baby she is carrying...”

“Let me interrupt you now,” Wickham interposed, leaning forward to glare into the older man’s eyes. “I do not care a whit either about Lydia or the brat. She was a pleasant companion in bed, if you could call the mattress in that old hunting lodge a bed, and I took great pleasure in relieving her of her virtue after Miss Elizabeth refused my offer so rudely. But I have no intention...”

“You monster!” screamed Lydia Bennet, suddenly erupting from the adjacent storage room. “You said you loved me! You said you wished for nothing more ... how *dare* you!”

Wickham was entirely taken aback by this sudden attack and was only partially on his feet when Lydia reached out and slashed her sharp fingernails down his cheek. He bellowed in pain and jerked away, only to fall backwards, prompting his chair to tip.

He hit the ground with a grunt and then watched in wonder as Elizabeth Bennet and an unfamiliar older woman hurried out of the same office and put their arms around Lydia, who was still screaming and shrieking at him.

“Come along, Lydia, come along,” Elizabeth said, dragging Lydia toward the exit door. “Come along, dear sister.”

Wickham rolled over awkwardly, struggled to his feet, and then dusted his pant legs, which were a trifle dirty from the floor. He pulled out a handkerchief a moment later and applied it to his face; to his disgust, the white cloth came back slightly stained red. Lydia Bennet’s fingernails had drawn blood.

He grimaced, carefully set his chair back up, sat down, and glowered at Mr. Bennet, who was watching him with narrowed eyes.

“I was merely going to insist on thirty thousand pounds, Mr. Bennet, but now it will be forty thousand pounds to marry your termagant of a daughter,” Wickham said angrily.

“On the contrary, Wickham,” an unpleasantly familiar voice said, “you will receive nothing.”

The steward’s son turned toward the door, and his mouth fell open unbecomingly. “Darcy, Fitzwilliam! What are you doing here?”

“We are dealing with you, as we should have long ago,” Darcy said icily, and gestured behind him. “Please come in, sirs.”

Wickham watched in alarm, which gave way to dread, as a tall, robust man stepped into the room, dressed severely in black, with two stout underlings at his heels.

Colonel Fitzwilliam took a step forward and said, “Bailiff, this is George Wickham. Please arrest him for indebtedness.”

The man took a long stride forward and reached out to take Wickham’s arm in his own strong hand.

“Come with me, sir,” he said stolidly.

Wickham tried, and failed, to pull away, and he turned a horrified look on Bennet, who was watching with grim satisfaction.

“Mr. Bennet, what are you doing? What about Lydia?”

“Lydia is no longer your concern, Mr. Wickham. Thank you for your outburst; you have confirmed our belief that you are a fool. As we intended, Lydia is now fully aware that you care nothing for her and were only wishful of satisfying your own desires and extracting money from Elizabeth.”

The bailiff gave Wickham a harsh tug toward the door, and the former steward’s son cried out, “I will ruin your family’s good name if you allow this, Bennet!”

“Please allow me a moment with the prisoner,” Darcy said to the law officer, who nodded. The master of Pemberley took a few steps closer to peer into Wickham’s face, which was now pale and sweaty.

“Wickham, I have paid hundreds of pounds of your debts here in Town and in Derbyshire in the last years, and I have the receipts for all those debts. The bailiff will conduct you to a nearby jail, and then, when it is obvious that you are unable to repay the debt, you will be confined at Marshalsea. If you...”

“For God’s sake, Darcy!” Wickham interrupted, reaching out to grasp his enemy’s coat with frantic fingers. “You cannot do this! Your father loved me! Do not throw me into that hellhole!”

“Do *not* speak to me of my father,” Darcy hissed, stepping closer to tower over the militia officer. “He never knew you for what you are – a thief, a liar, a debaucher, and a blackmailer! You showed by your very words that you care nothing for the girl you seduced, or for her innocent family, but only for your own greedy, wanton desires. It ends now! And Wickham, I will be paying a reasonable sum to the jailers of Marshalsea so that you are not cast into the common area. But if I ever so much as hear a whiff of scandal surrounding the Bennets, or the Darcys, that I can trace back to you, I will call on the jailers, and you will be thrown into the common cells, where the prisoners sleep on dirty straw, and the rats gnaw on men’s toes. Do I make myself entirely clear?”

Wickham, who had entered this room with hope, which had transformed into exultation, only to swiftly turn into absolute disaster, could only stare up into Darcy’s face. Surely this was but a nightmare? It could not truly be happening? “Take him away,” Darcy ordered and turned his back as the bailiff began tugging Wickham toward the door.

Bennet watched with vicious pleasure as Wickham was hauled out of the room, protesting, before saying, “Mr. Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, I am enormously grateful for your assistance. I still need to deal with my youngest daughter’s crisis, but at least Wickham is safely put away where his wagging tongue will not cause problems.”

“It was our genuine pleasure, Mr. Bennet,” the colonel stated. “We are both relieved to be finished with Wickham. And as for your youngest daughter, we have some ideas in that area as well.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes,” Darcy said. “One option is to send her north to Scotland, perhaps, where she can live in privacy until the baby is born. Another is to find her a husband among the Regulars. I understand that she is fond of military men, and there are several young officers who would be pleased to wed a handsome gentleman’s daughter with a dowry of seven thousand pounds.”

“Even with a child on the way?” Bennet asked skeptically.

“Even with a child on the way,” the colonel assured him.

Bennet sighed and, to his amazement, felt tears prick his eyes. He knew who he was; selfish, cynical, stubborn and apathetic. It was hard to fathom that two such fine men were willing to work hard to save his family’s reputation.

But then again, it was not *he* who inspired such devotion, but his two elder daughters. Colonel Fitzwilliam’s attraction to Jane was openly acknowledged, and Mr. Darcy was, unless Bennet was entirely mistaken, completely enamored with Elizabeth.

Chapter 33

Elizabeth helped guide her hysterical youngest sister to the furthestmost back room of Mr. Seymour's office. Their steps echoed across the bare wooden floor, audible over Lydia's sucking breaths and heaving noisy sobs. The gentle tapping of the rain on the window was entirely overpowered by her cries, though the water running down the glass would have been soothing had any of the ladies cared to watch.

Elizabeth and their aunt guided Lydia to one of the leather wingback chairs drawn close to the fire, which had been built up high and was now crackling merrily, filling the room with welcome warmth. Mrs. Gardiner knelt next to her youngest niece, as Elizabeth crossed back to the table in the middle of the room, where a pitcher of cold water sat on a serviceable tray alongside several glasses. Elizabeth poured a glass of water and turned back to the chair just as Lydia's sobs swelled to a crescendo again, half-comprehensible invectives against Wickham mangled through her tears.

Elizabeth's hand gripped the glass with the sudden urge to fling the water into her histrionic younger sister's face. A moment later she scolded herself for such an ungenerous impulse; Lydia was still young, and ignorant, and had just suffered a terrible disillusionment and heartbreak. She had been terribly and catastrophically foolish, but vituperation from Elizabeth would not do anything to mend matters.

"Lydia, my dear," Mrs. Gardiner coaxed, "do drink a little water."

"He ... he said he loved me," Lydia choked. "He said he wanted to ... oh, what am I to do? What am I to *do*??"

"Lydia, drink some water," Elizabeth commanded, and Lydia, worn out, shocked, and dazed by the events of the previous hour, obediently did so.

Elizabeth looked into her young sister's pretty, petulant, tear stained face then dropped to her knees and reached over to embrace the girl.

Lydia was trembling, and Mrs. Gardiner smoothed back her dark curls, which were escaping her bonnet, and Elizabeth kissed her on the cheek before leaning back.

"I am sorry," she said simply. "I am very sorry."

Lydia raised her handkerchief to mop her face and then looked down at her own abdomen.

"I am ruined," she said drearily. "I was so certain that he meant what he said, that he loved me and wished to marry me, and he was so handsome, and seemed so kind. Oh Lizzy, how could he treat me so cruelly? How could I have been such a fool?"

Elizabeth could not suppress her astonishment at this remark; Lydia had never owned up to her own idiocy in her life!

"My dear, I have every hope that we will be able to protect your name and the name of your family as well," Mrs. Gardiner said gently. "Now, come, dry your tears, and we will return to Half Moon Street. You need a rest."

It was another symptom of Lydia's oppression of spirits that she meekly followed her aunt and sister out of the room and to the carriage awaiting outside. Elizabeth longed to speak to Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam and thank them for their assistance, but Lydia needed to be in bed, away from prying eyes and curious ears, as quickly as possible.

She comforted herself that Colonel Fitzwilliam would doubtless call at Half Moon Street soon to speak to Jane, and perhaps, Mr. Darcy would come as well.

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Mr. Seymour's Office

“I will destroy the prospective marriage settlement, Mr. Bennet,” Seymour said.

“Thank you, sir, for your assistance,” Mr. Bennet answered, just as a tap on the door heralded a young clerk, who said, “Mr. Bennet, the ladies wish to inform you that they are ready to depart.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Darcy and I will put our heads together and will visit Half Moon Street within the next day or two,” the colonel said.

“Thank you again.”

The master of Longbourn hurried out of the room to join the ladies, and Richard grinned at Darcy and said, “That was a good day’s work.”

“It was. The man is an excrescence on the earth, and I am most thankful he will be locked up where he cannot harm anyone else.”

“Mr. Seymour,” Richard said, turning toward the solicitor. “You have my profound thanks.”

“It is always an honor to serve any member of the house of Matlock,” the man said. Then, after a brief pause, he continued, “May I ask what you would have done if Mr. Wickham had accepted the offer?”

The cousins exchanged amused looks, and Darcy said, “We knew he would not. Wickham is one of the greediest men in all of England, and with the awareness that Miss Elizabeth is now mistress of seventy thousand pounds, there was not a chance that he would accept a mere ten percent of that sum.”

“Then Mr. Wickham is a complete and utter fool,” Mr. Seymour said dispassionately.

“Indeed, he is,” Darcy agreed.

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The House on Half Moon Street

Three days later

Dear Mamma,

Pray do not worry about Lydia; she is, the doctor says, not terribly ill. However, she still feels quite poorly, and it is not wise for her to return to Hertfordshire.

I am aware that she has not been happy at Longbourn of late, and we are hopeful of introducing her to some of our new gentleman friends in the next week or so. That should cheer her up.

I must go as we are expecting visitors shortly.

With much love,

Elizabeth

Elizabeth read the letter carefully, sprinkled it to dry the ink, folded it, and sealed it. Everything she had written was entirely factual, though she had written very cautiously to keep Mrs. Bennet from learning the truth about Lydia’s “illness”.

It was a great pity that her mother was not a reliable person. Lydia could use some gentle mothering given that she was still sick every morning and was also battling oppressive and depressing thoughts. But no, Mrs. Bennet, if she were to learn the truth, would panic, and gossip, and scream, and all of Meryton would be aware of the Bennets’ shame within the week, if not the day!

Thankfully, Miss Phoebe Adler was proving a treasure. The woman spent long hours at Lydia's side every morning, helping her when she was sick, wiping her face, reading books to her, and generally assisting in every way possible. Elizabeth made a note to double the salaries of both of the Adlers; they most definitely deserved it!

There was a tap on the door, and Jane entered a moment later, her face flushed with excitement. "Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy have arrived and are speaking with Father in the study, but they will join us in the drawing room as soon as they can. Would you care to come down?"

Elizabeth's heart sped up at the news that Mr. Darcy was in the house, but she merely said, "Yes, of course."

Jane spun around and departed, and Elizabeth leaped to her feet and hurried toward a large mirror hanging on the wall. Her garment, an old one she had brought from Longbourn, was well enough for writing letters, but she decided to change into one of the dresses she had purchased from Madame Fanchon, an aqua overdress over a white underlay, with lace at neck and wrists. She would also need her maid to dress her hair, as it looked rather untidy.

She had decided, in the last few days, to allow herself hope regarding Mr. Darcy. Yes, Lydia was pregnant by George Wickham. But Darcy was a good man, and a generous and forgiving one. Perhaps...

In any case, she had every intention of looking her best in the presence of the master of Pemberley.

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The Study

"I believe I have found just the man for Miss Lydia," Colonel Fitzwilliam enthused.

Mr. Bennet poured glasses of Madeira for his guests and handed them out, and then he said, "Please do sit down, gentlemen, and tell me about this individual."

"Josiah Russell is currently a half pay captain in the Regulars," Richard explained, taking a seat by the window, while Darcy sank down into a chair nearby. "He is a distant connection of my mother's; a very distant connection, a third cousin's wife's nephew or something of the sort. He is a good man, and I met him personally when we were both serving in Portugal. Sadly, he was injured sufficiently at the Battle of Talavera that he has been unable to return to the Peninsula and has been lingering on half pay, which is a discouraging life for a man who is only a little more than thirty years of age."

Bennet grimaced at these words and said hesitantly, "Is he, erm, disfigured, Colonel?"

"Not at all," Richard replied promptly and grinned in understanding. "I take your meaning very well, Mr. Bennet; Miss Lydia would not be pleased with an unsightly husband. In truth, Captain Russell is a fine looking gentleman, not as handsome as Darcy, but better looking than I am. He has a fine figure except for his left arm, which is permanently damaged, not that his handicap is obvious when his arm is inserted in a sleeve. He also limps a trifle from damage to his ankle when he was shot and fell off his horse. He is a good man who wishes to leave the army, but thanks to some poor decisions on the part of his father and older brother, he has very little money to make that possible. He understands the situation and will take care of Miss Lydia and the child, and he will be kind to them both. Alternatively, if Miss Lydia wishes for the child to be raised by another, he is amenable to living quietly until the birth and then moving with Miss Lydia elsewhere."

"It sounds excellent," Bennet said with relief. "Lydia will need to decide, of course, but she seems chastened, so I have high hopes of convincing her."

"Perhaps Captain Russell can call here tomorrow and meet Miss Lydia?"

“Yes,” Bennet agreed, and noting the eagerness on both men’s faces, said, “now shall we join the ladies in the drawing room?”

Chapter 34

The Drawing Room

Elizabeth, who had been trying, and failing, to read a book for some minutes, stood up in relief and anticipation as her father, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Mr. Darcy entered the room. Lady Appleby, who was sitting happily by the fire, put her book down and regarded the men with interest.

“Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam have found a man who might well suit Lydia,” Mr. Bennet announced. “Captain Russell will call on us tomorrow.”

Jane and Elizabeth exchanged glances, and Elizabeth said, “He is an officer in the militia?”

“In the Regulars,” Richard corrected, his eyes fixed on Jane, who was smiling adoringly at him.

“Bennet, come over here, and we will discuss the details of Lydia’s wedding, assuming it comes to pass,” Lady Appleby ordered, her eyes twinkling.

Bennet did so obediently enough, and Darcy promptly walked toward Elizabeth in one corner of the room, and Richard toward Jane in another.

Darcy came to a halt before the lady he loved and felt his heart leap within him. He gazed at her, drinking her appearance in. Her dark hair was piled in a simple bun on the back of her head, curls hanging winsomely around her ears. Ornamental pins peeked from the chestnut coiffure, sparkling a little in the light. Her dress was blue, simple and tasteful and exquisitely made, flattering to her charming figure and with hints of lace peeking at throat and sleeves. A pearl necklace sat at her throat, drawing the eye to her creamy skin.

Her face was a little pale, no doubt from the stress of the last few days – his Elizabeth, he thought rather breathlessly,

need not cover her face with cosmetics. She looked a bit tired, a bit sad, but her eyes – those beautiful eyes – were as bright and alive as ever. He felt, gazing into them, that he could be lost in their shining chocolate depths forever.

Realizing he was staring, he blinked and glanced around. She had been reading when they had entered, he remembered, and the book still lay on the small table beside her chair, the spine turned towards him. Gilt engraving proclaimed it a copy of Shakespeare's sonnets; yes, his love *would* be reading those.

Elizabeth watched as Mr. Darcy stared at her in silence for a minute before glancing at her book. He looked very fine today, with a single unruly lock of hair falling over his forehead, an attractive counter point to his thoughtful dark eyes and aristocratic brow. His cravat was neatly and simply tied, and his tawny coat well-brushed. His boots did not shine as the dandies' did, but bore a respectable polish; overall he cut quite a fine figure.

"Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said, recovering first. "Will you not please sit down?"

He pulled his attention away from his love long enough to sink down onto an elegant Sheraton chair nearby, while Elizabeth took her own place in the chair's twin next to it.

The two gazed at one another for a long moment, and then Elizabeth said, softly but fervently, "Mr. Darcy, please allow me to thank you, most sincerely, for your kind offices toward my poor sister. You have been so generous, so honorable, in managing Mr. Wickham; our reputations would have been ruined without you. I cannot imagine why you have been so gracious to us, when you owe us nothing..."

"I love you," Darcy blurted out, and then, at the astonishment on her face, repeated fervently, "I love you. I adore you. When I think of how it was my fault that Wickham was able to deceive Miss Lydia, well – I would do anything for you, anything at all, to bring you peace and joy and safety and security."

Elizabeth felt her cheeks flush, and she lifted her eyes to gaze directly into his.

“You love me?” she asked in wonder.

“I do, with all my heart.”

For a few seconds, she felt like she was floating, and she was suddenly aware that she was beaming as tears rose into her eyes, but these tears were, unlike those of the previous nights, ones of absolute joy.

“I love you too, Mr. Darcy, so very much, but oh . . . I truly had no idea that my feelings were returned in any way. I thought you disliked me! You *did* dislike me! How can you love me?”

Darcy felt equally lightheaded, but he managed to say, “My dear Elizabeth, when I first met you at the Meryton assembly, I was in a terrible, prideful mood, and I uttered my infamous insult. By the time we had met three times in company, I was drawn to your fine eyes and your wit. By the time you had marched three miles to Netherfield through mud and wind to help your sister, I was entranced. By the time you returned to Longbourn a few days later, I was hopelessly and inescapably in love, though I did not acknowledge it.”

“I had no idea, none at all,” Elizabeth returned, and then her eyes widened in confusion. “Why did you leave for London if you truly loved me?”

“It is quite simple; I am a fool,” Darcy said, looking down on the delicately patterned rug with shame written large across his countenance. “I thought that I owed it to my name to marry a woman with excellent connections. I only recognized the folly of my view when I discovered that you disliked me and that I adored you. I thought I had lost you forever.”

She reached out a gloved hand to take his own, and he looked up, awed at the sympathetic expression on that lovely face. “I fear that I was a fool myself, Mr. Darcy. I harbored

such antipathy towards you because you hurt my pride the day we first met..."

"I was incredibly rude," Darcy interrupted. "I cannot imagine how I, who pretended to be a gentleman, could say such a thing about any lady, not to mention you, the most beautiful of women."

Elizabeth chuckled and looked at Jane, who was deep in conversation with her admirer, and turned back to say, "I am not as handsome as Jane, but ... oh, pray do not speak yet, sir. I have more to confess; I was idiot enough to listen to George Wickham when he gossiped about you and claimed that you had denied him a church living in Derbyshire. Given his immorality, he obviously should not be a clergyman. I was such a dolt to accept his charming speeches at face value!"

"He is very charming," Darcy agreed, looking disgusted. "My own father could never see his faults, as Wickham was always on his best behavior in my father's presence. But I knew him for what he was, and while I would have given him the living in honor of my father's desire, I was enormously thankful when Wickham accepted three thousand pounds to give up all rights to it."

Elizabeth gasped. "Three thousand pounds?"

"Quite, and he spent it all within two years. He has always been a spendthrift and all too willing to take advantage of others."

"I am sorry," his companion said, her eyes now filled with tears. "Oh, I ... I championed him and spoke poorly of you to my family and friends. I do apologize and hope that you will forgive me."

"Think nothing more of it. I am confident you said nothing that I did not deserve. I have been a selfish being all my life, in practice, though not in principle. As a child I was taught what was *right*, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles but left to follow them in pride and conceit. Unfortunately an only son, and for many

years an *only child*, I was spoiled by my parents, who, though good themselves and my father particularly was all that was benevolent and amiable, allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to *wish* at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. Such I was, from eight to eight-and-twenty; and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! What do I not owe you? When Bingley and I came here some weeks ago, I still could not believe that you genuinely disliked me, though my friend assured me that it was so. The scales fell from my eyes that day, that not only had I won your enmity by my manners, but that I was passionately in love. I came to the horrifying conclusion that I had no hope, none at all, in winning your hand. It was a dreadful realization, but also a most salutatory one. I concluded that the best thing I could do was to reform my character. Even if I had lost you forever, I would still strive to be a better man.”

A soft touch on his hand caused him to lift his head, and he observed his darling Elizabeth, her expression solemn.

“I am honored, so very honored, by your words, and delighted as well but sir, are you ... I was led to believe ... I understood that you are engaged to your cousin, Miss de Bourgh of Rosings?”

“I am not,” Darcy said, shaking his head with violence. “I am not. My aunt is desirous of the match because my cousin is heiress of Rosings, but I assure you, no, we are not engaged, we have never been engaged, and regardless of what happens, I will never marry Anne. I care for her as a cousin, but we are not well matched.”

She was smiling now, her bright eyes sparkling. “Dear sir, I do think there is something you have not asked me?”

He glanced briefly over to the other occupants of the room and was relieved to see Jane and Richard deeply in conversation, and Mr. Bennet and Lady Appleby faced toward

the fire and away from the couples, as if on purpose. To an extent he was buying time to consider what she had asked. Could she truly be prompting him to ... to ... ask for her hand? His courage, driven ahead by his heart bursting within, prompted him to speak. In fact, he could not resist ... he did not wish to resist.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” he said, reaching out his hands to take her gloved ones in his own. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

She gulped away the lump in her throat as her greatest wish suddenly was coming true. Could this be just a dream? But no, it was not; it was a dream come to life. She whispered, “Yes, Mr. Darcy. Yes, I will.”

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“Colonel Fitzwilliam,” Jane murmured, “I cannot tell you how very grateful we are to you and Mr. Darcy for...”

Richard reached forward and took Jane’s hands in his own, which caused the lady to halt in her speech and stare up at him in wonder.

“Pray do not thank me, Miss Bennet,” he said passionately. “Pray do not. None of this was your fault – Darcy is correct; we should have done something about Mr. Wickham long ago.”

“Mr. Wickham was godson to the elder Mr. Darcy,” Jane said sadly. “I have no doubt that it was difficult throwing him into jail for debt given the reality of those ties.”

“Truthfully, it was not difficult in the least,” Richard said, his jaw clenched in fury. “He ... well, you know what he did to my little cousin, and his behavior toward your sister was horrific. Moreover, he has long been a rake and a scoundrel, accustomed to cheating those around him and leaving debts wherever he lived. I know some in the upper classes are

accustomed to living in debt, but I truly do not think it right at all.”

“Indeed it is not,” Jane agreed with a shake of her head. “The shopkeepers and milliners and dressmakers often have very little reserve to fall back on. They genuinely suffer when their customers do not pay what they owe.”

“I entirely agree,” Richard said, “but enough about Wickham. I know the last days have been difficult ones, and if you do not wish to speak of a prospective future for us, I beg you to say the word, but I love and adore you, and I wish to be your husband, but if now is...”

“Yes, Colonel,” Jane interrupted and tightened her fingers on his. “Yes.”

“Yes?” he repeated, grinning madly.

“Yes, I would very much like to be your wife, if you ask me, that is.”

He was, suddenly, dizzyingly, uncertain what to do. Should he stand? Kneel? No, not kneel, surely, that would be odd. But should he sit...?

She was waiting expectantly, and he realized he was being a dimwit.

“Miss Jane Bennet, I love and I adore you. I would be greatly honored if you would become my wife.”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam ... dear Richard. There is nothing I want more.”

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Mrs. Houston's House

Scarborough

Yorkshire

Charles Bingley glared at the white soup in his plain porcelain bowl and rapidly spooned up another mouthful. He was not sure how much longer he could keep from screaming given Caroline's ceaseless whining. Their aunt, Mrs. Houston, sat at the end of the table, impervious to the tension between her nephew and niece. Charles bitterly envied her unflappable calm; he did not think anything could set his mind into such placidity.

Another spoonful. Sunshine shone across the bone-white porcelain, the curtains pushed back from the windows to let in light and air. He glared at his bowl, his sister's voice grating across his nerves.

"You cannot leave me, Charles!" Caroline Bingley complained. "You dragged me here into the back end of nowhere. How am I to find a good husband when there are no eligible gentlemen hereabouts?"

Bingley turned a hopeful eye on his aunt, who leisurely took a bite of buttered bread, chewed it, and swallowed before saying, "My dear nephew, as much as I have greatly enjoyed your company, and Caroline's too, it is true that there are no eligible men here for my lovely niece. I think it is time to escort her back to Town."

"I cannot!" Bingley snapped, tempted to tear out his hair. "Did you not hear that Caroline brought scandal upon us all by publicly insulting Miss Elizabeth Bennet?"

Caroline and Mrs. Houston exchanged long suffering looks, and Caroline said, "I am certain that is all forgotten about by now; either that, or the more discerning members of the haut ton have realized that Miss Eliza Bennet is merely the grasping niece of a merchant. In spite of her wealth, she has no beauty and few accomplishments. I daresay many of my friends will be grateful that I pointed out that she is nothing more than an impostor!"

Bingley took a deep breath, wiped off his mouth, and stood up abruptly. "My apologies, but I remembered that I must, erm, I have a letter ... erm..."

Rapid steps carried him from the dining room, through the hallway, out the door, down the front steps and into the street. He was halfway to the corner before he became aware of leaving the house, his boots almost leaving footprints in the cobbles with the force of his footfalls. He dodged a carriage and paused, taking a deep breath of ocean-scented air.

Slowly his anger and irritation calmed, and he began walking again; not quite purposeless but no longer in the same rush in which he had left the house. The street was crowded with boys and carriages and older ladies with their companions and maids and older gentlemen alone or in small groups. The houses on this side of town were small and squat; nicely maintained, with flowers before them and neat curtains in the windows, but not indicative of any great wealth.

Charles paused at the corner and glanced back at his aunt's house. It was time, he thought, to return to London. He would have to take Caroline back with him, of course. Neither propriety nor his own conscience would permit him to do otherwise. Indeed, the very thought of his mother's reaction to such a decision was enough to make him quail. Of course she was long dead, but he still tried to live according to the principles he had learned from her, and she had made it very clear that she wanted him to care for his sisters appropriately.

He would simply have to hope that the talk about Caroline's drunken outburst had died down. Some several weeks had passed; London society almost certainly had new juicy tidbits to chew over. Yes, he could return to Town and to Jane, and he would bring his harridan of a younger sister with him, and with any luck, he could move back in with Darcy and leave Louisa to look after Caroline.

Chapter 35

Elizabeth's Bedchamber

The House on Half Moon Street

London

Midnight

Elizabeth tapped an absent finger on the desk, gazing down at her own neat handwriting on a scrap of paper. She was busying herself with making a list of tasks she would need to complete and the order in which she would need to complete them. She would have to purchase wedding clothes, of course. It was also imperative that she spoke with her solicitor soon; the wedding settlements would doubtless be complicated, between her wealth and Mr. Darcy's ... that was, *Fitzwilliam's*, she remembered with a little leap of joy in her heart.

She looked back down at her list. She had already made up her mind that she would give Jane a little extra money, so that her beloved older sister would bring a full ten thousand into marriage. Elizabeth was also considering matching that sum for Lydia; the youngest Bennet was already entering her own marriage at a disadvantage, and a sufficient sum to live on would help ease the new couple's burdens.

If she gave Lydia that much, she would settle similar sums on Mary and Kitty. It would be unfair to slight her middle sisters by leaving them out of her beneficence, and a reasonable dowry would provide them an advantage in seeking husbands. But of course she first had to discuss it all with her fiancé, for doubtless he would have his own opinions.

Elizabeth glanced aside at another sheet of blank paper lying nearby. When she finished with her list, she intended to

write to Charlotte Collins; how pleased her dear friend would be to hear of Elizabeth's engagement to Darcy!

Indeed, given that she was still wide awake, there was no time like the present. She reached for the blank paper and pulled it closer to her. After she had mended her pen, which was a trifle dull, she began writing. But scarcely had she finished her salutation when there was a cursory scratch on her door, and it opened. Jane slipped inside, wrapped in a pale blue dressing gown over her night gown, curls peeking demurely from beneath her cap and her celestial eyes filled with tears.

"Jane!" Elizabeth exclaimed, setting her letter aside and leaping to her feet. "Whatever is the matter? Do you ... are you uncertain about your engagement?"

Jane's blue eyes widened, and she shook her head quickly. "No, no, not at all! I love Richard and am entirely confident that he is the right man for me. No, it is merely that I was visiting Lydia a few minutes ago, and she is so very distressed. It is hard enough that Wickham turned out to be an utter beast, but to learn that you and I are both happily engaged now was too much for her fortitude."

Elizabeth was privately of the opinion that Lydia had no fortitude at all, but there was little point in saying it, so she merely stood up and pulled her taller sister into a warm embrace. "I understand her unhappiness, Jane, of course I do, but our engagements will, without a shadow of a doubt, be helpful in concealing her situation. There will be a great deal of talk in society, and we will be going to many parties and balls, and the focus will be on us, not Lydia."

Jane had returned Elizabeth's clasp with fervor, but now she stepped back, and after pulling a handkerchief out of one pocket, applied it to her own eyes. "You are correct, of course, and Richard tells me that Captain Russell is a very good man. I merely hope that Lydia will accept his offer..."

"If she does not, she will be shipped off to Scotland," Elizabeth said coldly.

Jane opened her mouth as if in protest, but Elizabeth spoke more quickly, “Jane, I wished to speak to you about, well, about Richard and, erm, Mr. Bingley. It has not been that long since he departed for Scarborough, and I hope that...”

She stopped, and felt her face flush with discomfort, but Jane merely nodded and gestured toward the two chairs next to the pleasantly built up fire.

The two sisters took their seats, and Jane sat up straight, her hands clasped together, her brow smooth. “I thought I was genuinely in love with Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth, and if he had offered for me last autumn, I would have accepted without hesitation. I am now thankful he did not.”

“Truly?” Elizabeth replied in wonder. She well remembered Jane’s heartache and sorrow, which had lasted for months on end.

“Truly,” Jane said with absolute certainty. “He is a good man, an honorable man, and a kind one as well. But when Caroline Bingley began insulting you after the Damaral Ball, it was Richard who spoke up immediately, not Mr. Bingley. Do you not remember?”

Elizabeth frowned and shook her head. “I do not remember that, no. Mr. Bingley pushed her into the carriage...”

“Yes, he did, after Richard urged him to deal with her, but then Mr. Bingley decided to escort his younger sister to Scarborough and assured me that he would merely accompany her there and then return immediately. Obviously that did not happen.”

“That is true,” Elizabeth mused. “You think that Miss Bingley convinced him to stay longer?”

Jane allowed herself a rather unladylike scoff. “Of course she did! I think it was the very day of his departure that I concluded we likely did not suit. I need a strong man who is willing to fight for me over the desires of irritable relations,

and Mr. Bingley needs a wife who does not crumble and weep when faced with adversity.”

Elizabeth shook her head reprovingly. “That does not describe you, dear sister, not at all.”

“In truth, it does,” Jane returned wryly and then, at the indignation on Elizabeth’s face, lifted a staying hand. “Dear sister, I may have displayed a serene countenance to the world, but I cried myself to sleep many times after Mr. Bingley abandoned me last December and then again when Caroline Bingley showed she was a false friend. Richard is a soldier and a fighter, and he will be my safe harbor during times of trouble. We have not known one another long, but this time I am entirely certain that he is my perfect husband. Indeed, when I think of all his attributes, I cannot imagine why he is at all interested in *me!*”

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East Sitting Room

Darcy House

“Jane is such a wonderful woman,” Richard exclaimed, pacing up and down with such vigor that the Madeira sloshed out of his glass onto the thick blue carpet. “I never imagined I would be so fortunate as to win a lady like her – so kind, so gentle, but intelligent, too! She knows far more about the war in the Peninsula than many a London gentleman.”

Ordinarily, Darcy would be distressed about wine on the carpet but not today. It would require a tree crashing through the ceiling to upset him unduly today.

“I am exceedingly pleased for you, Cousin,” he said, hurrying over to the bottle so that he could prepare his cousin’s cup for more excited sloshing.

“To Jane,” he said a moment later, and the two men raised their glasses and drank with fervor.

Richard immediately hastened to the bottle and refilled both glasses and lifted his own again. “To Elizabeth!”

Again, they drank, and Darcy, floating in the mists of joy and slight inebriation, felt as if he could fly. After so many weeks of sorrow and anxiety, when he had berated himself for losing the only woman in all of Britain whom he genuinely loved, he was now engaged to his beloved, adored Elizabeth.

Engaged!

“Darcy,” Richard said, drawing his attention, “as much as I would like to enjoy a few more bottles to properly celebrate our joy, we have a busy day tomorrow. It would be unwise for us to show up at Half Moon Street with headaches.”

Darcy, rudely brought down to earth by such a prosaic statement, could only nod reluctantly in agreement. Yes, they did have a busy day ahead of them. Now that he and Elizabeth were engaged, his own reputation was tied up with the fate of Lydia Bennet.

He and Elizabeth were engaged. She would be his wife. He had never, in all his life, been so happy.

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Longbourn

The Next Morning

Silence reigned in the drawing room at Longbourn. Mrs. Bennet stared distractedly into the fire, dull and listless without her favorite daughter in the house, while Mary sat near the window reading the book of James in the Bible. On the other side of the room, Kitty bent over a bit of penmanship at

the writing desk, and Sophia Adler sewed, keeping an eye on both her charges.

The sound of the door opening drew the attention of both the governess and the mistress of the house. The butler entered, bowed slightly and presented the salver. “An express has arrived from the master, Madame.”

Mrs. Bennet started, eyes widening, then shrank back, gazing in dismay at the letter reposing innocently enough on its tray, as though she expected it to leap up and attack her.

“Oh, oh, oh! I cannot read it! I cannot! Something dreadful must have happened! Read it, Mary, read it this very minute!”

Mary, who was also concerned, quickly stood up and took the letter, broke the seal, and began to read it rapidly. Within a few seconds, she was smiling broadly, and started reading aloud.

“My dear Mrs. Bennet, I know that an express is generally the hallmark of tragedy, but in this case it is to convey wonderful tidings. Both Jane and Elizabeth are engaged to be married as of yesterday – Jane to Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, second son of the Earl of Matlock, and Elizabeth to Mr. Darcy of Pemberley. I daresay both of these matches are a surprise to you; I was rather surprised myself! But I have had the pleasure of spending time with both young men, and they are very fine, very fine indeed. I have no doubt that our daughters will be genuinely happy.

I cannot quite leave London yet, as there are settlements to be written and the like. The girls are not certain where they will wed, and of course they need to purchase wedding clothes. I do not promise to keep you well informed on the goings on here in London, but I am certain your daughters will!”

With much satisfaction,

Thomas Bennet

P.S. Elizabeth asks that you have Mrs. Thompson make up new gowns for you and Kitty and Mary so that you ladies can wear them to the weddings. I realize that our carriage is here in London; I will send it home by tomorrow.

Mrs. Bennet's countenance had transformed from fearful to bewildered to shocked to surprised to ecstatic, and as soon as Mary had finished reading, she screeched with such enthusiasm that Kitty jumped.

“Jane engaged to an earl's son, Elizabeth to Mr. Darcy! Oh, oh, Heaven be praised! Two daughters well engaged. I will die from happiness! Hill, Hill, do come – oh, there you are! Have you heard the good news? My two eldest girls are both going to be married to fine men, and you shall have a bowl of punch to make merry at their weddings!”

Mrs. Hill immediately began congratulating the matron, and Mary and Sophia Adler exchanged pleased glances. The news of the engagements was wonderful, but even better was that there had been no mention of Lydia's condition. They knew that Jane and Elizabeth would not enter engagements under false pretenses. Given the position of the Matlock and Darcy families in society, it seemed certain that Wickham had been defanged and that Lydia's situation was well in hand.

Chapter 36

Lord Matlock's Study

Matlock House

Lord Matlock's steps echoed across the polished wooden floor of his office. A large fire leapt and crackled in the fireplace, and Richard leaned toward it gratefully as he was a trifle chilled. His eyes drifted toward the oak desk across the room, which was covered with neat stacks of correspondence, candles, a pen box, all organized across its highly polished surface, and on to the window, the dark blue velvet curtains of which were drawn back to show the small rose garden directly outside.

Since the earl still did not seem inclined to speak, Richard sat back, took a sip of excellent brandy, set his cut crystal glass on the oaken side table, and waited patiently.

The master of the house was currently pacing up and down, his face twisted into a ferocious frown, his Adam's apple bobbing in frustration. Richard waited patiently, without speaking, until his father finally halted in place, spun around, and pointed toward him accusingly. "You have gone entirely mad, it seems!"

Richard reminded himself that he had faced French cannon fire without undue panic, and he answered with his voice calm. "On the contrary, Father, I am entirely sane. Jane Bennet is lovely, charming, refined, and intelligent. She is the perfect woman for me."

"She is not!" the earl snapped, waving his finger again. "Your mother mentioned Miss Bennet some days ago, and while I understand she is an exquisite beauty, she has close ties to trade, and she is not even an heiress! If you had chosen her sister, the one with seventy thousand pounds, that would be at least reasonable. I am not entirely pleased that you would

choose a woman from a lower sphere of society, but her fortune would be most advantageous for the family coffers. But to marry a woman who has nothing to recommend her except her lovely face? It is insupportable.”

“Miss Elizabeth is a charming lady,” Richard agreed, rising and wandering over to refill his glass, “but I could not offer for her, of course, with Darcy already entirely enamored.”

Matlock froze at these insouciant words, and after a moment to recover, demanded, “Darcy is in love with the heiress?”

“In love and engaged,” Richard said cheerfully. “Elizabeth accepted Darcy’s offer about one minute before Jane accepted mine.”

The earl’s throat worked convulsively, and he whispered, “Darcy is engaged to Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

“Quite.”

Again, the earl gulped, and he said softly, “What of ... what of Darcy’s engagement to Anne de Bourgh?”

“Oh, come now, Father,” Richard remarked, drifting over to look out the window which faced the small, well-kept flower garden behind Matlock House. “You know that proposed engagement was Lady Catherine’s passion, not Anne’s *or* Darcy’s.”

Matlock seemed to shrink in on himself a little. “My sister is going to be furious when she hears.”

“I do not care,” Richard said bluntly, “and neither does Darcy, I assure you. We are both grown men, Father, and will marry whom we choose to marry. There is no point in suggesting that we should bend to the fantasies of others.”

Matlock straightened himself in an attempt to make himself look a little taller – a rather feeble attempt, as Richard was at least three inches taller than his sire.

“Do your mother and I have no input at all in your choice of wife, Son?”

“No, you do not, sir, especially now, when I am already committed to my beloved Jane. Sir, with all due respect, I suggest that you come to terms, and quickly, with my choice of wife, and Darcy’s as well. Neither of us wish for a breach in the family, but we are entirely, completely, devoted to our fiancées, and we will defend them against all comers, family or not!”

Not for the first time, Lord Matlock wished that Richard had inherited a little of his tact, his subtlety, his sense of place in the world. The earl and his lady, both highly born, both proud of their position in the highest ranks of society, had done their best to inculcate such beliefs in their offspring. They had succeeded with their son and heir, Viscount Waverly, and their eldest daughter, Rebekah, but Richard and Rachel had always had an odd skip to their gallop, so to speak.

Looking up into his son’s grim, determined face, he decided there was no point in arguing any further. Perhaps his wife would have more luck.

“I understand that you are committed,” he said heavily, though inwardly he was quietly confident he could buy the girl off, if necessary. “Now, your mother should have come downstairs, and Rachel as well. Will you not share your wonderful news with them?”

Richard’s eyes glinted in a rather unnerving way, but he merely bowed and said, “Of course, sir.”

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Darcy’s Carriage

On the Way to Half Moon Street

A Few Hours Later

“So what did my aunt think of your engagement?”
Darcy asked.

Richard sighed and said, “Let us begin with the good news. Rachel was absolutely delighted. She is very fond of Jane already and looks forward to becoming her sister.”

“But the countess...”

“Is rather displeased and my father is unremittingly negative. I know my mother would have been happy if I were engaged to Elizabeth because of the money, which is annoying but not surprising. Not too long ago, I intended to marry for fortune. But meeting Jane has changed my views. I love her, and I know she loves me, and we will be happy together.”

These words, said with such simplicity, warmed Darcy’s heart. Even six months ago, he too had been fool enough to think that wealth and rank and connections and position were more important than respect, love, and compatibility. Now he knew better, but it was encouraging to hear the same from Richard, a man he deeply respected.

“I look forward very much to the day when we are not just cousins, but brothers by marriage,” he said enthusiastically and turned his attention on the other occupant in the vehicle, who had thus far been silent.

Captain Russell was a sturdy, handsome man, with a square jaw and a stern nose and kind brown eyes beneath militarily neat hair. His red military coat showed off both his figure – nothing out of the ordinary, but not displeasing either – and his darker coloring to advantage. His right hand rested lightly on one knee, his left arm straight at his side. It was a natural enough position, not showing the partial paralysis that plagued the captain’s left arm, courtesy of a French bullet some time back.

“Captain Russell,” Darcy began, “while I hope that you are willing to marry Miss Lydia, who will soon be my sister by marriage, I hope you also do not feel unduly pressured. It must

be obvious that her behavior has not been the best, and if you feel you must withdraw, please know that Richard and I will understand.”

“Of course,” Richard agreed, though his expression was untroubled.

“I will marry her if she will have me,” Russell replied. “You know my situation, Mr. Darcy. I am lingering on half pay in rather seedy lodgings in Cheapside. I will gladly marry a gentleman’s daughter in exchange for seven thousand pounds, and I will be acquiring you both as brothers by marriage in doing so. I can hardly refuse.”

“At least two thousand pounds will be tied up in a settlement for your wife,” Darcy warned.

Josiah smiled and said, “That is entirely acceptable; indeed, I would insist on it if you had not already done so. But I will not force her into marriage. I do not wish for an unwilling bride.”

“We would not do that to you,” Darcy said drily. “Life with Lydia will probably be difficult enough with her willing!”

He was, indeed, of the view that Captain Russell deserved at least ten thousand pounds for saving the Darcys and Bennets from scandal, and intended to augment the dowry to that degree so long as Elizabeth was in agreement.

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The House at Half Moon Street

Jane sat at the desk beneath the window in the drawing room, her pen moving rapidly across the paper spread before her. Sunlight poured in through the window, illuminating her delicate blue dress and simply styled hair and smiling eyes as she wrote. Lady Appleby sat nearby, conversing quietly with

Elizabeth with an occasional gracious comment to Phoebe Adler, who was slightly apart from the rest of the group at a small table, where she was toiling over a piece of needlework.

Lydia had separated herself from the group as much as possible, feeling entirely unequal to pleasant conversation. Instead she curled up on the chair nearest the fire, feeling very small and miserable and deeply anxious. Once again, her eyes stung, and she furiously swallowed down the lump that rose into her throat. She would not cry again, she would *not*. Her head already ached fiercely from the storm of her sorrow, as she had been unable to cease her weeping until late last night.

She still could not entirely grasp the horrifying events of the previous days. George Wickham, whom she had thought to be the love of her life, had proven to be so cruel, so...

Her vocabulary failed her. She had truly believed him when he said he loved her. She had been certain, absolutely certain, that he would be thrilled with the news of his baby, that he would be delighted to marry her and care for her and their child. And she had every intention of being a good and loyal wife to him.

She had never dreamed that he had been just ... *using* her. She would never have believed the truth had she not heard his cruel damning words for herself. He had *promised* her that he loved her, that he would marry her. He had said that it did not matter if she gave up her virtue to him, that no one would know once they married. He had whispered honey-sweet promises in her ear, that he cherished her and only her, that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, that she was precious to him and he had such grand plans for their lives together...

How he must have laughed up his sleeve at her! What cruel amusement he had derived from his sugary lies! To string her along, to see the devotion in her eyes, to promise marriage – and all along, to be *deceiving* her despicably, for his own pleasure, for revenge on Elizabeth for wisely refusing his avaricious proposal.

It made her want to scream and rage and howl and claw his eyes out and curl up into a ball and whimper silently for eternity.

How *smug* she had been, how pleased, at the thought of being the first Bennet sister married. She had jeered inside her own mind, at her staid, cautious elder sisters, as she anticipated her upcoming nuptials. And now ... now, Jane and Elizabeth were both engaged to upstanding gentlemen, while she sat ruined and pregnant and disgraced and abandoned, dependent entirely on the mercy of an unknown man.

Fear gripped her heart. What if this Captain Russell was unkind? Cruel or faithless, or inclined to drunkenness? What if he ... *hit* her? She had heard of such things. She had not given credence to them before, but now, if Wickham could claim to love her so ardently and be lying, what else might be possible? She did not think her family would intentionally choose a cruel man for her to marry, but there was no time to get to know him, and most people would never believe that Wickham was cruel, either.

But she had no choice. There was no time for Lydia to become well acquainted with Captain Russell. Refusing to marry her unknown suitor was out of the question. Her father had told her, quite sternly, the previous night that she had only two options, accept Captain Russell's offer or be shipped off to Scotland to have the baby in seclusion. She would not be permitted to tarnish the Bennet name and ruin her sisters' chances of good marriages. The idea of spending the next year in Scotland, entirely alone, for there was no distant family member with whom she could dwell, was horrific. She would be dependent entirely on the inhabitants of whatever village she was left in, perhaps with a maid or two and a hired manservant to help with heavier tasks. The very thought filled her with unspeakable horror.

No, she would have to accept Captain Russell's offer and hope desperately that he would be kind to her or, at the worst, disinterested.

She was broken from these dreadful thoughts by the loud echo of a knock on the front door. She twisted her handkerchief between her fingers, straining her ears with a knot of anxiety in her chest as the butler admitted the visitors. She listened to the low murmur of voices in the hall before several sets of footsteps approached.

Lydia swallowed, the knot moving up into her throat, as the drawing room door opened. The butler stepped inside, announcing ponderously, “Mr. Fitzwilliam, Mr. Darcy, Captain Russell.”

Lydia did not even notice the butler’s withdrawal, her gaze pinned on the man who would soon be her husband. He glanced around the room, affording her a moment to observe him; medium height, dark hair, military posture and neatness of attire. His eyes landed on her, and she crumpled her handkerchief in her hand, looking up at him timidly.

He smiled at her, neither ardent and charming like Wickham, nor coldly haughty and disapproving like Darcy had always been, but gently and kindly. Lydia took a deep breath, a spark of hope kindling in her breast, and she tentatively smiled back.

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“He seems very pleasant,” Elizabeth murmured, watching the captain and Lydia, who were seated next to one another on a small settee near the largest window.

“Richard said he is a very fine man,” Darcy replied, restraining himself with difficulty from reaching out to tuck one of Elizabeth’s curls behind her ear.

A moment later, he decided that he had no reason to restrain himself. He and Elizabeth were engaged, and in any case, everyone in the room was watching Lydia and Josiah Russell. He reached out a finger to tuck one ringlet behind his lady’s ear, which provoked a look of surprise, followed by a

chuckle. “Mr. Darcy, I had no idea that you would be so forward in company!”

“You should be thankful that my self-control is sufficient that I do not kiss you right here.”

Elizabeth blushed, her gaze drifting down to her fiancé’s lips, and she leaned forward a little. “Fitzwilliam?”

“Yes, my love?”

“I think we should marry as soon as we can manage it.”

Darcy grinned broadly. “I entirely agree, Elizabeth.”

Chapter 37

Green's Gentlemen's Club

London

Benedict Hurst, cozily perched on a chair at the corner of the bar, took a bite of his ham sandwich and glanced around at the crowded room. It was mid morning, and the club was filled with various gentlemen coming and going, eating and drinking, chatting and, yes, gossiping.

He used to spend a great deal of time at Green's, where he could be certain of a good meal, followed by as many glasses of wine as he wished – the Green was famous for her cellars. Moreover, he had, if not friends, at least acquaintances here; his brother-in-law Bingley, Lord Talbot, Mr. Sinclair, and a host of others. He had often felt more at home in his club than in his actual house.

But now Louisa was pregnant with their first child, and Hurst was far less inclined to wander the streets of London during the day. Some days, she felt so poorly that she could not even manage to order dinner, and he was glad to take that minor burden off of her shoulders.

He smiled to himself and took a mouthful of wine. He had longed for a son or daughter for so long, and given that five years had passed without a pregnancy, he had been on the verge of losing hope. But now he thanked God that his wife, his Louisa, was pregnant.

She had felt better than usual today and was currently calling on a friend. He did not wish to be in an empty house, so had made his way to Green's to spend a few convivial hours with any cronies who might appear. He was actually quite skilled at whist and piquet, and might be fortunate enough to win a few pounds.

The door into the bar swung open, and Lord Talbot marched in, strode over to the bar, and said to the liveried servant behind it, “Give me your best brandy, Gallagher. No, give me two brandies!”

Hurst eyed the young noble as Talbot poured one drink down his throat, and then the other, before saying, “Another two, my good fellow, please!”

Hurst cocked a curious eyebrow. Talbot liked his alcohol as much as any man, but four brandies in quick succession was bizarre.

“Whatever are you doing, Talbot?” Sinclair asked lazily, lounging up to the bar to eye the other man with confusion. “Trying to drink yourself under the table?”

“I am,” the young lord said with a roll of his eyes, “and you will be as well in short order. I have just heard the most dreadful thing!”

This, naturally enough, attracted the attention of everyone within earshot.

“Whatever has happened?” Sinclair demanded, sidling closer to his friend.

Lord Talbot paused, glanced around dramatically, and intoned, “Elizabeth Bennet is engaged.”

There were multiple groans and sighs from the assembled gentlemen and nobles, and Lord Carlyle, an impoverished baron who had been one of the lady’s more enthusiastic suitors, demanded, “Who is the lucky man?”

“That it the worst part of it,” Talbot moaned and poured another finger of brandy down his throat before saying, “she is engaged to Fitzwilliam Darcy!”

Hurst’s vision wobbled for a moment, and he leaned against the bar to reorient himself. The air was thick with men complaining vigorously. It was, everyone considered, quite absurd that an already wealthy man would snatch up the most beautiful, charming heiress of the Season.

“I cannot imagine why she chose him!” Carlyle whined, and Talbot said gloomily, “It appears that Darcy had a head start on us all, as they met in Hertfordshire last autumn. I believe ... oh, Hurst! I did not see you there before! You doubtless know more about this than any of us!”

“I do not,” Hurst said quickly, “though I am aware that Mr. Darcy and Miss Elizabeth met last year at Netherfield Park, my brother Bingley’s estate.”

“Well, dash it,” Sinclair grumbled. “Some gentlemen have all the luck. I confess to some surprise that Richard Fitzwilliam did not cut his cousin out. He is, in my humble opinion, far more charming than Darcy, along with being an earl’s son.”

“Oh, Mr. Fitzwilliam is engaged as well, to Miss Elizabeth’s elder sister Jane,” Talbot remarked, and now Hurst felt like he might fall over. Jane Bennet was engaged to Richard Fitzwilliam? It had only been a few weeks since Bingley had gone north with Caroline to Scarborough, and ... had not returned. Hurst appreciated Charles Bingley very much; his ductility of temper, his generous nature, and his general bonhomie made him a most valuable relation, but it was true that Caroline generally led her brother around by the nose. It was no surprise that Jane Bennet had decided to find another man for a husband.

Bingley would be immensely upset, of course, and Hurst, though he could not spare much emotion apart from Louisa’s pregnancy, felt a genuine throb of sorrow for his friend and brother.

Caroline would ... oh, she would be ... she would be absolutely outraged at the news of Darcy’s engagement to Miss Elizabeth. She would be furious. She would likely scream and shout and carry on. She might even faint!

Hurst had long disliked Caroline Bingley, though he had rarely said anything to his wife, but he felt no regret that he would miss the fireworks when the news arrived in Scarborough. It would, perhaps, be amusing to hear her

whining and wailing, but Bingley would be sorrowful over the loss of Jane Bennet. He would write a letter when he had time bearing the ill tidings north.

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Mary's Bedchamber

Longbourn

Rain rapped hard against the window, the drops racing down the length of the pane to plash against the sill. The view outside was wavering and obscured by the downpour, but Mary could see, across the lawn, the old oak tree tossing in the gusty wind like a horse shaking out its mane. Rivulets ran through the grass, the carriage drive one long rushing stream of tiny rapids.

Mary unlocked the window and pushed it open, leaning on the sill. She loved the smell of the spring rain; the clean water and the green leaves and grass and the earth sodden through, and something else that came with the thunderstorms. A sudden bluster slapped water across her face, skimming white across the grass, and she retreated, closing the window again and wiping her face off on her sleeve.

She was just as glad that the weather did not permit a walk to Meryton. The carriage would be returning from London any minute, and as soon as it did, Mrs. Bennet would want to share her transports of joy with everyone else. She would dash into town as quickly as possible, telling the news of Jane's and Elizabeth's engagements with her sister Mrs. Phillips, with Lady Lucas and Mrs. Long and all of her cronies. And she would, of course, take her girls with her, to listen as she regaled all her friends with the news over and over again.

Mary sighed. She was happy for her sisters; very happy, even, and more than greatly relieved that the family no longer needed to fear the hedgerows when their father died, but she was a little . . . wistful, as well. It was painful to sit and listen with a smile to excited chatter about her sisters' weddings, when it seemed so dreadfully unlikely that she would ever have one of her own. She was not rich like Lizzy or lively like Lydia or pretty like all of her sisters. It seemed improbable that her accomplishments would ever win her a husband. She worked so very hard on them, but they were only mediocre in comparison to what could be found in Town. What man would want a plain, poor woman with nothing to recommend her except some dubious accomplishments?

Mary took a breath and straightened. At least, she would not be required to earn her bread, as the poor Adler twins had been. She had long thought that she would make an adequate governess for some moderately well-to-do country family. Indeed, she had intended to do exactly that after her father died, or perhaps even before. She had made such plans with dread, but had feared that none of her sisters would make sufficiently advantageous marriages to support all of them, and she was fully, if quietly, aware that their father had made no provision for them.

But now she could relinquish that plan, she reflected gratefully as she leaned once more on the sill of the window. Elizabeth was wealthy and Jane, while not rich, would be quite comfortable. Neither of them would leave their remaining sisters to starve or work for unkind mistresses. Even if Mary never became anything more than a spinster aunt to her sisters' children, they would ensure she would be comfortable, and she could make herself useful around their households.

A soft knock on the door caused her to turn around. She called out a welcome and was pleased when Miss Adler entered the room. A moment later, she frowned in some confusion, as the governess had her arms full of scarves and shawls.

“Miss Mary,” Sophia said, and pushed the door shut behind her with her foot, “I know that you will be having Mrs. Thompson make up a dress for you, and thought you and I could test these garments against your coloring to see what would suit you best.”

Mary looked at the clothing, then at Miss Adler, and felt herself shrink a little. “Oh, that is not necessary,” she said a little breathlessly. “I am certain that my mother will be pleased to choose the appropriate fabrics and colors for a gown for me.”

Sophia carefully laid the various items on a convenient chair, straightened, and planted her fists on her hips.

“With all due respect to your mother, she has no idea how to dress you properly. Miss Bennet and Miss Lydia are blondes, and Miss Elizabeth and Miss Kitty are brunettes with a tint of auburn in their hair. You are the only black haired daughter, and that, combined with your pale skin, means that pastels and olive and browns make you look sallow. There are far better colors for you, I assure you.”

“It hardly matters,” Mary said, pivoting on her heel to stare out the window, willing herself not to cry. “I am plain, and nothing can change that.”

A gentle touch on her arm caused her to turn toward her companion, and Sophia said, “Your sisters are very handsome, yes, but that does not mean you are plain. Forgive me for moving beyond the bounds of propriety, but I believe I understand you very well. You have given up any thought of being attractive because not only are you surrounded by handsome sisters, but your mother has indicated, from your earliest days, that a beautiful face is the most valuable of assets for a woman, and she has made it clear that she finds you wanting. But surely you do not imagine that Mr. Darcy, master of Pemberley, or Colonel Fitzwilliam, second son of an earl, offered for your sisters based on looks alone? I am confident that it was the characters of your elder sisters which won them good husbands.”

Mary sighed and said, "I agree, but why should I try to look more attractive? Does the Good Book not say, '*Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the LORD, she shall be praised.*'?"

Sophia stepped forward and looked out of the window at the rain, which had slackened substantially. "My dear Miss Mary, do look out at the world which God has given us. Are the flowers not beautiful? Are the twilights not glorious when the clouds shine pink and orange as the sun disappears behind the horizon? Was the tabernacle, with its gold and silver and richly dyed curtains not a lovely place? We should not think that personal appearance is of the highest priority, of course! But neither should we think that there is anything inherently wrong in looking pretty. God made us to appreciate beautiful things."

Mary considered and then turned a shy smile on her companion and friend. "You are very wise, Miss Adler."

"Thank you," Sophia said and sighed. "When Phoebe and I were still girls, we were greatly blessed by our rector's wife, who gave us godly advice. We were quite striking back then, you know; not that we were ever as handsome as your elder sisters, but given that we are identical twins, we drew many a stare! Mrs. Robinson encouraged us not to be vain or overly forward, but she also encouraged us to choose colors and styles that suited our looks. Our mother died when we were but three years old, you know."

"I did not," Mary said. "I am sorry, though I am thankful that your rector's wife was so kind and helpful."

"We are as well. Later, when our father died and left us penniless, she helped us face our suddenly uncertain future with at least moderate courage."

"I cannot imagine," Mary said, her throat suddenly constricted. "It must have been very hard to give up the life you anticipated."

“It was, but truly it was not the clothes and the parties that we missed, but one another. It was difficult to be separated. My daily prayer was that Phoebe and I would live near one another again, and God answered.”

“And now Miss Phoebe has been torn away from you due to Lydia’s idiocy!”

“She will be back in time,” Sophia said confidently. “Now, let us see which colors look best on you, shall we?”

Chapter 38

Matlock House

A Day Later

Jane's hand rested lightly on her fiancé's arm, as they climbed the broad shallow stairs to the front door of Matlock House, her heels clicking faintly against the marble steps. Her hand trembled slightly as they attained the top, and she looked up at the imposing door, carved with intricate patterns.

Richard glanced down at her and reached across to pat the delicate gloved hand on his forearm. "Fret not, my dear," he assured her, "I will not permit my parents to bully you. I am certain that with time, you will win them over, but in the meantime, I will not tolerate them slighting you."

"They may well try," Darcy pointed out, a step behind. "They are not pleased with our engagements."

He looked a bit worriedly to the woman on his arm and added, "I do not wish them to upset you, Elizabeth."

She smiled up at him, bright-eyed and unafraid. "You have no need to be concerned on my account, Fitzwilliam. There is a stubbornness about me that cannot bear to be subdued by the will of others; my courage only rises with every attempt to intimidate me."

Darcy cast her an admiring look, as Richard lifted the ponderous knocker and let it fall. He had no chance to reply to her, as the door opened; the butler, it appeared, had been awaiting their knock and admitted their entry with a hint of joy on his grave features. Elizabeth reached up to untie her flowered bonnet, passing it over to a maid while Jane did the same with her Villager hat, while a footman took Darcy's and Richard's canes and top hats.

The sound of pattering feet made the foursome look up, and Lady Rachel Fitzwilliam hurried into the foyer and quickly, enthusiastically, ecstatically embraced Jane.

“Jane, my dear!” she exclaimed, stepping back and beaming into the woman’s handsome face. “I am so very happy to hear that you and Richard are engaged. You are perfect for one another!”

“Thank you, Rachel,” Jane said gratefully. “I know that there are those who would say that Richard could do far better...”

“If anyone says that today, we will march out of the house,” Richard interpolated in a forbidding tone, and Jane could not help but smile up at him with gratitude, confident that come what may, he would watch out for her.

“I will escort my brother and his party to the drawing room, Stokes,” Lady Rachel said, and the butler bowed and withdrew a few paces.

Lady Rachel inserted herself between her brother and his fiancée and began marching them toward the drawing room. “Mother has spent the last hours convincing Father that the best thing to do is welcome you both into the family without hesitation, so I do believe this evening should be pleasant enough.”

Jane, who had been feeling anxious, could not help but relax at these reassuring words.

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Drawing Room

Matlock House

“Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth,” Lady Matlock said, rising to her feet as the party entered the room. “Many

congratulations, and welcome to the family!”

“Thank you,” Jane and Elizabeth replied in unison, as they both curtsied.

Lord Matlock, who was standing near the window, took a few steps forward, and after a harried look at his wife, bowed deeply and said, “Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, please accept my congratulations as well.”

“Thank you, Lord Matlock,” Elizabeth replied, keeping her hand firmly tucked into Darcy’s arm. She knew that her fiancé was as willing as Richard to go to battle if necessary. So far, it seemed that the Matlocks were prepared to be courteous, and she was thus eager to prevent an argument from breaking out, if possible.

“I do apologize for our being a trifle late,” Richard said, kissing his mother gently on the cheek, “but I spent part of the day at Headquarters.”

The countess, who had been smiling determinedly, now smiled genuinely. “Oh, my dear son, are you selling out?”

“I am,” Richard replied, turning a warm look on the lady at his side. “While I am proud that I served my country in the past, now I owe it to my dear Jane to live a safer life.”

“Where will you settle after your marriage, Son?” the earl asked suspiciously. Given that his son and new wife would be relatively poor, he feared that the newly married Fitzwilliams might wish to live at Matlock House, and however much he admired and loved his son, he did not look forward to sharing quarters with a descendant who would argue with him relentlessly.

“Well, as to that, Darcy and Elizabeth have kindly offered to host us for as long as we like, sir, and we will all be traveling north to Derbyshire after the weddings.”

“I am quite confident that Mrs. Reynolds can find some small room in Pemberley for Richard and Jane,” Darcy replied, chuckling.

Elizabeth, while she had never seen Pemberley, had heard it was enormous, and was not surprised at the amusement on Lady Matlock's face.

The door opened at this juncture, and the butler entered, not to announce dinner, but to announce an older woman, a tall, large woman dressed ostentatiously in fine traveling clothes, a lady with a deep scowl on her face and a look of fury in her eyes.

"Lady Catherine de Bourgh," the butler announced.

Silence held for a full thirty seconds, and Elizabeth felt Darcy's hand tighten, not painfully, but protectively, on her arm.

"Catherine!" Lord Matlock abruptly cried out, surging forward with a confused look on his face. "Whatever are you doing here?"

Lady Matlock quickly added, "Stokes, you may go, and be certain to close the door behind you."

The butler backed out of the room, his face impassive, and shut the door, and Lady Catherine, who had been balefully eyeing Elizabeth, demanded, "Are you Miss Elizabeth Bennet?"

Elizabeth glanced at Darcy, who stepped forward and said, "Allow me to introduce you. Lady Catherine, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, my fiancée. Elizabeth, my aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

"She is not your fiancée!" the woman bellowed, taking an angry step forward.

"Catherine, pray keep your voice down!" Matlock exclaimed, looking exceptionally harassed, and Darcy, unwilling to leave Elizabeth's defense in the hands of his uncle, took a few steps forward and glared down into his aunt's eyes.

"I *am* engaged to Elizabeth, and she will soon be my wife, Lady Catherine," he said coldly.

“You are engaged to Anne!” Lady Catherine shrieked, her face turning bright pink with outrage. “This betrothal is immoral and illegal and...”

“Richard,” Darcy interrupted, turning toward his cousin, “would you be so kind as to escort the ladies to dinner?”

Elizabeth, who had maintained her position near his side, said softly, “Are you certain you do not wish for me to stay, Fitzwilliam? I am not afraid of your aunt.”

Darcy looked down on her lovingly and very proudly. “I know you are not, but I will find it easier to speak openly and honestly with Lady Catherine if you are not present.”

She considered this for a moment and then rose on her tiptoes to plant a firm kiss on Darcy’s cheek, which provoked their noble intruder to make gobbling noises like an outraged turkey.

“Do join us when you are able, my love,” she said, taking Richard’s available arm and striding out of the room with nary a glance at Lady Catherine, who was now plum with fury.

Darcy watched his aunt, cousins, and the Bennets leave, and felt his fury subside. Lady Catherine would doubtless be abusive towards Elizabeth, and tiresome in the extreme, but that mattered very little. The mistress of Rosings had no power over any of them.

“Would you care for some wine, Catherine?” Matlock asked, lifting an unquiet hand to rub his forehead in the rather forlorn hope that his burgeoning headache would go away.

“No, I need no refreshment; indeed, Brother, I can only suggest that you avoid imbibing any alcohol yourself, as the only excuse for allowing this travesty is that you have been constantly inebriated for the last weeks!”

Matlock, who had been pouring himself another glass of wine, halted in place and then turned around to face his only living sister.

“Really, Catherine!” he expostulated. “That is entirely uncalled for!”

“Is it?” the woman snapped as she began pacing up and down the oriental carpet, with its elegantly woven mix of reds, blues, and gold thread. “It is the only possible explanation for this disaster coming down upon us. How could you betray me in such a way? And if not me, what about Anne, who I left weeping at the news that the man to whom she is engaged would be so brutal as to leave her for another, and not just any other woman, but the daughter of an impoverished country gentleman, whose estate is entailed away to my clergyman! You are head of the family, Matlock! You must insist that Darcy send this woman away and marry Anne!”

Darcy had listened to this recital with mounting anger but managed to maintain a tight rein over his temper. It occurred to him to wonder what Elizabeth would say when faced with such discourtesy? She was, unlike himself, a wordsmith, and would doubtless fend Lady Catherine off with clarity, not unmixed with charm.

But he was not Elizabeth. He was Fitzwilliam Darcy, master of Pemberley, and very much in love, passionately in love, with Elizabeth Bennet.

“I am not a Matlock, but a Darcy,” he remarked, deliberately sauntering over to pour wine into his uncle’s cup and then his own. “Thus, my uncle has no power over my marriage plans, nor do you. Besides, I do not believe that Anne should plan to marry at all. Given that her health is poor, I think it unlikely that she could successfully carry a child to term.”

Matlock gaped at these blunt words and then hastily threw down his glass of wine, as Lady Catherine goggled in shock.

“How dare you ... how dare you say such a thing, Darcy? It seems that this Miss Bennet has...”

“How dare *you*, Madame?” Darcy interrupted, taking a menacing step toward his aunt, who froze in amazement. “You marched into my uncle’s house breathing incriminations against me and insulting the woman I love, acting as if you have some control over me and my life. Anne and I were never engaged. I am my own man, and I have chosen Miss Elizabeth Bennet to be my wife. Now given that there is nothing more to be said, I intend to join the others at dinner. Lord Matlock, I beg you will do what you will with Lady Catherine, but my suggestion would be to have your servants turn her out of the house.”

Lady Catherine squeaked in shocked disbelief and turned her brown eyes on her brother, who could not help but stare at his nephew with surprise, not unmixed with respect. He had long known Darcy to be a strong willed individual, but he had always at least been courteous to his elders. In the face of such vitriol toward Miss Elizabeth Bennet, though, it was not unreasonable for Darcy to speak boldly, even ferociously in defense of the woman he obviously adored.

It was just as well that Lady Matlock had insisted on welcoming the Bennet ladies with enthusiasm. The earl had no desire for a schism in the family, and for all that Catherine was noisy and irritating, she had no power over either Darcy or Matlock, nor did she bother to visit Town often.

The door shut behind Darcy, leaving brother and sister alone, and Lady Catherine recovered sufficiently to squeal, “Brother! You must do something!”

“There is nothing to be done, Catherine,” he said sternly. “Richard and Darcy did not consult me before they made offers to their fiancées, and I am not entirely pleased, especially for Richard, as the eldest Miss Bennet is not an heiress like her sister. But they are betrothed, and the notices of the engagements have appeared in the Gazette. Nothing can be done – indeed, I would be quite distressed if either gentleman broke his engagement, as that would be a breach of honor.”

Catherine, who had been listening to this in confusion, said, “What are you speaking of? Elizabeth Bennet is no heiress; the family’s estate is entailed away to my parson, as I said earlier.”

“How is it possible you did not know of Elizabeth Bennet’s inheritance, Sister? She received seventy thousand pounds from a Mrs. Annabelle Simpson, a distant connection.”

“*Seventy thousand pounds?*”

“Quite.”

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The Dining Room

A Few Minutes Later

The door opened, and Lady Matlock looked up from the table apprehensively and then smiled in relief as her husband entered the room alone.

“My apologies for my late arrival,” he said to the occupants of the room. He took his seat at the head of the table, and nodded at a footman who was waiting to pour his dinner wine. Once the servants had withdrawn from the room, he said, “Lady Catherine is feeling unwell after her journey and is having dinner in her room.”

Lady Rachel finished chewing and swallowing her bite of syllabub, and then asked nervously, “Is she intending to stay in Town long, Father?”

“No, no, she has business at Rosings, my dear,” Matlock replied with obvious satisfaction. “She will be journeying back to Kent on the morrow.”

“Thank you, sir,” Richard said quietly. “Thank you very much.”

Chapter 39

Mrs. Hurst's Dressing Room

Hurst House

Two Days Later

Louisa Hurst took a dainty nibble of scone, washed it down with a sip of tea, and waited anxiously. A full two minutes passed and she felt well enough for more, so she took another bite and another sip, and within fifteen minutes she had finished her small repast.

She had longed to conceive a child for several years now and was ecstatic to be pregnant. By the end of the year, if all went well, she and Hurst would be proud parents to a baby, and at this point, she did not particularly care whether the child was a boy or a girl.

She had, however, been startled at how badly she felt in the evenings. She had heard that most women felt a bit off in the mornings, so why did she feel so nauseous, so fatigued, so *vile*, before bedtime? Moreover, she wanted to cry more or less all the time, which was dreadful. Her poor husband, to be married to a watering pot!

Of course, it was worth it all for the child growing in her womb.

The door to her dressing room opened suddenly, and Amelia, her personal maid, appeared, a faint look of distress on her usually stoic face.

“Madame, Mr. and Miss Bingley have just arrived from Scarborough.”

Louisa grunted in surprise and dismay and turned to look out the window, through which puffy evening clouds reflected the pink rays of the setting sun. “Both of them?”

“Yes, Madame.”

Louisa groaned and started to lever herself up, which provoked Amelia to hurry forward. “Mr. and Miss Bingley said that they needed to refresh themselves, so you need not hurry downstairs. I can assist you if you need...”

She trailed off, and Louisa grimaced and nodded. One of the surprises of early pregnancy was that she needed to use the water closet with monotonous regularity.

“Ought I to change into evening attire, do you think?” she asked weakly.

“Of course not, Madame,” Amelia said reassuringly. “I am certain that Mr. Hurst would wish you to be as comfortable as possible.”

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Rear Sitting Room

Hurst House

Caroline was poring over a pile of invitations on the desk when Louisa stepped into the room, clad comfortably in a pink silk dressing gown, with a warm, if rather unfashionable, cap on her head. Her husband, still dressed in his evening attire, followed close on her heels, with a protective hand on her back.

“Good evening, Louisa, Hurst,” Bingley said from his place near the fire. “I hope you both are well?”

“Yes, thank you,” Louisa replied, casting a bemused look at Caroline. “I confess to great surprise at your sudden arrival.”

“Why ever are you here, Louisa, and why are you dressed in that ridiculous dressing gown?” Miss Bingley

demanded, looking up to glare at her sister. “You and Hurst should be at the Sinclair ball tonight!”

“Louisa is expecting a child,” Hurst said promptly, “and thus is not well enough to be cavorting around Town at this hour.”

This provoked a look of surprise from both Bingleys, and Louisa shifted a little closer to her husband. She had married Hurst because he was a gentleman. He had married her because of her twenty thousand pound dowry. They had never had much in common, and Hurst generally spent his days napping and eating, and his evenings playing cards. He had never previously bothered to speak up when Caroline was being tiresome. But now, Louisa thought admiringly, Mr. Hurst had taken on the protective mien of a male eagle protecting its mate.

“I do think you might force yourself to go,” Caroline complained, recovering her poise. “How am I to find a husband if you do not even bother to go out during the Season?”

“I do not care a whit whether you marry or remain single,” Hurst replied coldly. “Moreover, you ought not to be in London at all, Caroline, not after you embarrassed yourself so thoroughly at Damaral House.”

Caroline’s eyes flared wide in astonishment, and she exclaimed, “How dare you, Brother? Charles, do something!”

“Bingley will not do anything,” Hurst replied, guiding Louisa over to the most comfortable chair by the fire and taking a protective position next to her. “This is my house, and if you do not care for my words, feel free to leave!”

Bingley, who was battling a headache, rose from his chair and strode over to a tray on a small table. He poured himself some port wine, threw it down, and grimaced. He had hoped that after several days of traveling with his obnoxious younger sister that he would be able to turn her over to Louisa

who had, in the past, generally been able to calm Caroline down.

But Hurst was being entirely reasonable, though Bingley had not foreseen, not in the least, the man's reaction to their sudden arrival. The Hursts had been waiting and praying for this baby for a very long time, and Louisa ought not to be forced to cope with stressful situations.

Caroline Bingley's middle name might be Frederica, after her paternal grandmother, but a more appropriate middle name would be 'obnoxious', and as such, she was hardly a welcome companion to a woman struggling with pregnancy induced sickness.

"I do apologize for arriving unexpectedly," Bingley said in a weary tone. "I hope you will permit us to stay tonight at least, and then we can make other arrangements?"

He had no idea where he and Caroline would go if the Hursts did not welcome them in, though. They could stay in a hotel for a few days – Fenton's, perhaps, or the Clarendon, but not forever. Perhaps they could hire a house, though at this time in the Season, the suitable options would be few and far between.

"You cannot be serious!" Caroline cried out, her brow furrowed with outrage. "You cannot tell us to leave! Louisa, say something!"

Louisa cringed at the sight of her sister's fury and turned pleading eyes on her husband. She felt too sick and too worn out, and too blue, to do battle with Caroline, when the younger woman was engaging in a fit of pique.

"Louisa, my dear, I know you are fatigued," Hurst said and held out his hand. "Do let Amelia put you to bed. I will speak to your siblings about the future."

Louisa glanced nervously at Caroline, who was bright pink with anger, and then back at her husband, who was smiling down at her reassuringly.

“I do feel very unwell,” she acknowledged and took her husband’s hand and allowed him to pull her to a standing position. He put a gentle arm around her and guided her to the door, where he released her into the care of Amelia, who was hovering nearby.

“Amelia, put Mrs. Hurst to bed,” he ordered, “and sleep in her dressing room so that you are easily available. You should also lock both doors behind you. I do not wish for Miss Bingley to bother my wife this evening.”

Amelia changed in an instant from humble handmaid to guardian. “Yes, sir, I will.”

Louisa felt her eyes fill with tears and cast a misty, appreciative look on her husband. “Thank you.”

“It is my honor to serve you, my dear,” the gentleman answered with a small bow, and then he turned around and marched back into the sitting room, where the Bingleys were standing by the fire arguing with one another. Caroline was insisting that it was absurd to think of living elsewhere than the Hursts’ house while they were in Town, and Charles was equally firm that they ought not to force Louisa to host them when she was obviously so unwell.

“But this time of year, there will be nothing to hire even remotely satisfactory!” Caroline snapped, and Hurst said, “That may or may not be true, Caroline, but let me make myself completely clear to you. I will permit you and Charles to spend the night here, but tomorrow you must depart this house. Moreover, I have a suggestion. Netherfield Park is but five and twenty miles away, and you could be there by nightfall.”

Bingley turned a hopeful look on his brother by marriage. “Is Miss Bennet back at Longbourn, then?”

“You cannot seriously be considering pursuing Miss Bennet!” Caroline cried out, leaping to her feet and planting her hands on her hips.

“I most certainly am!” her brother returned. “I love her!”

Hurst, for the first time this evening, felt himself waver a little inwardly. He liked Bingley, and was even beholden for the man’s undeniable generosity over the years. It was Caroline who was entirely impossible. But there was no legitimate reason for keeping silent at this juncture.

“Bingley,” Hurst said and took a few steps forward to look at the man in the eyes. “I am sorry to be the bearer of difficult tidings, but Miss Jane Bennet is engaged to Richard Fitzwilliam, second son of the earl of Matlock.”

Bingley jerked, his face turned white, and he released a cry of horror even as he dropped into a nearby chair.

“No!” he blurted out a minute later. “No!”

“I fear so,” Hurst said sympathetically.

“Well, that is truly excellent news,” Caroline said smugly. “I did not imagine that an earl’s son would marry a solicitor’s granddaughter, but men are often fools when confronted by a pretty face. Now Charles, you know that Georgiana Darcy is well connected, wealthy, and you are Darcy’s closest friend. Perhaps...”

“As for you, Sister,” Hurst interrupted, much less sympathetically, “I have vital news for you as well. Mr. Darcy is engaged to Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Caroline froze, paled, reddened, collapsed onto a chair, and last, but definitely not least, screamed aloud.

Chapter 40

On the London Streets

The Next Morning

The sky was an unremitting gray, and the clouds occasionally released a brief shower to wet the stones beneath the carriage rolling its way toward Hertfordshire.

Caroline Bingley, seated rigidly next to her brother in their carriage, glared out at the gloom, which reflected her mood with remarkable precision.

How had it come to this? Only six months previously, she has been the well dowered single sister of a congenial and well-liked brother. Said brother had, at the time, also been the closest friend of one of the best connected and most wealthy gentlemen in the land, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley.

She had been certain that Mr. Darcy would make her an offer. Why should he not? Why had he not? She was beautiful, moderately rich, and had been educated in one of the finest finishing schools in all of England! She knew how to keep a gentleman's house. She knew how to speak to high born men and women.

What had gone wrong?

She groaned aloud and felt her brother shift beside her in the seat, though she resolutely kept her head turned away.

She knew what had gone wrong. Charles, famed for his hasty decisions, had toured Netherfield Park one fine morning, when his sisters had not been available, and had promptly taken it.

That in itself would not have been a terrible crisis if it were not for the Bennet family, composed of an indolent father, a vulgar and noisy mother, and five – five! – daughters.

She had, she admitted, been foolish in taking up Jane Bennet as a friend. The woman was charming and kind, but her sisters, especially Miss Elizabeth, were so pushing, so obnoxious, so desirous of making their way into more stratified society that Caroline had been an idiot to let Jane *near* her brother. Charles had always had an eye for pretty blondes, and Jane was very pretty indeed, though she had no other remarkable attributes.

And as for Miss Elizabeth, with her wind tossed curls, arch smiles, and impertinent remarks, well, Mr. Darcy must be mad, entirely mad! She had bewitched him, but how?

Perhaps if Caroline had walked three miles in the mud...?

She moaned again and clenched her teeth. There was no point in self recrimination, and indeed, it was largely bad luck which had resulted in her own personal and societal downfall. Elizabeth's inheritance had been entirely unexpected. Indeed, Caroline still had a vague feeling the whole thing must be nonsense, that the woman had managed to fool the world. And now Eliza Bennet had Fitzwilliam Darcy in her coils.

It was enough to make Caroline cry, or scream, but she had done enough of that the previous night, especially after she discovered Louisa's door locked to her. It was insupportable and unbelievable as both her elder sister and only brother had always given way to her needs and desires. And now Louisa, merely because she was expecting a brat, was selfishly hiding in her room and leaving Caroline at the mercy of Hurst and Charles, both of whom insisted that she leave Town again.

So she was going to Hertfordshire, which was, in terms of society, as rustic as Scarborough. It was undeniably discouraging, but she would regroup, and she would find another man to marry. A well connected man. A wealthy man.

The carriage came to a halt, and Caroline, who had been too busy thinking to pay attention to her surroundings, looked around and jerked in surprise.

“What are we doing here?” she demanded, staring out at the familiar façade of Darcy House.

“I need to speak to Darcy,” Bingley said grimly. “I ... I need to know whether he will ... we have been friends for a long time, but I need to...”

“I will come with you,” Caroline said eagerly and then quailed as her brother turned a furious look on her.

“Come with me, Caroline? Are you mad? The last time you saw Darcy, you were drunkenly insulting the woman he is now engaged to! It would be best if my friend never laid eyes on you again, but at the very least, I will not force my way into his house with *you* on my arm. You will stay *here* until I return.”

“What, stay here on the dusty street, in a hired carriage?” Caroline demanded angrily. It was merely another indication of her bad fortune that her brother’s carriage had developed a problem with one wheel during the trip back from Yorkshire and was currently awaiting repairs, and thus they were forced to journey in a smaller vehicle with bad springs.

“This street is one of the best kept in all of London, and the carriage is well enough,” Bingley said, reaching over to open the door. He stepped out and turned a glacial look on his sister. “Stay here, Caroline, or you will not like the consequences.”

Caroline gritted her teeth as the door shut behind Charles but remained in her seat. With the Hursts no longer willing to give her shelter, she had best not infuriate her idiot of a brother any further.

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Library

Darcy House

“Bingley,” Darcy said politely, gesturing for his friend to enter his favorite room in the house. It was also, not surprisingly, Elizabeth’s favorite room as well, as his bride to be was a great lover of books. He had cheerful plans to spend hours in adjacent chairs by the fire reading some of their favorite books.

He had more scintillating thoughts of carrying his bride to bed after they were married...

He realized he had missed the first part of Bingley’s speech and shook himself a little. The sooner he was wed, the better, as he kept drifting off at inopportune times.

“...kind of you to allow me to visit, Darcy,” his old friend said, his usually cheerful face creased with sorrow. “I returned yesterday to Town and learned from Hurst that you and, erm, that you and Miss Elizabeth Bennet are engaged to be married. Many congratulations.”

Darcy swallowed hard and held out a hand. The two men shook firmly, and Darcy said, “Please do sit down, Bingley.”

The man did so and said, “I cannot stay long, I fear, as I am on my way to Netherfield Park, and Caroline is going with me.”

Darcy felt as if he had sustained an electric shock, and turned a horrified look on his friend. “Miss Bingley is here?”

“She is in the carriage outside,” Bingley replied. “I forbade her to come inside, as I know you will not want her here.”

“Bluntly, I do not, since the last time we met, she loudly insulted Elizabeth.”

“I apologize for that, Darcy.”

“I accept your apology,” his friend replied, as he walked over to pour wine for himself and his friend. “But enough of that. I presume you are also here because you heard the news

of Miss Bennet's engagement to my cousin Richard Fitzwilliam?"

Bingley looked down at the carpet, his Adam's apple working in his throat, and then nodded. "Yes, I ... that is, it was quite a shock, though of course Miss Bennet has every right to marry whomever she wants. But I thought..."

"That she cared for you?" Darcy asked. "I think she did, but you left her again, you know, and while you were away, Richard captured her heart."

"I suppose I cannot blame her," Bingley said disconsolately. "Your cousin is a very fine man."

"Bingley."

The younger man looked up and accepted the glass from his friend, who said compassionately, "Last autumn I was fool enough to advise you not to marry Miss Bennet because I was running away from my attraction to Miss Elizabeth, whom I already loved, though I did not admit it to myself. I also had a stupid view of the importance of connections in one's mate. Now I think that you and Miss Bennet are not well suited because you are too much alike, and I say that with the utmost admiration for your respective characters. You are kind, honorable, gracious, unselfish, and generous; the sort of man whom everyone likes as a friend. My cousin Richard is also pleasant in company, but he is also a warrior. He is ready and willing to take on anyone who would cause trouble for Miss Bennet. You are more of a..."

"Weakling?" Bingley demanded and gulped again. "You are correct."

"Not a weakling, not at all. You are extremely tactful and congenial, and you know how often I give offense. No, you are a very good man, Bingley, and I have confidence that someday you will find happiness with a fine woman."

"Thank you," his friend said, setting his glass down and reaching out to shake the older man's hand again. "Your words are very kind, but I have, I realize, been acting more like a

puppy than a man. I need to make some changes in my life. I value your friendship very much as well and hope we will have the pleasure of spending time in company again. Now I had best depart so that we make Netherfield Hall by dusk.”

“I value your friendship as well, and I am certain that we will see one another in time,” his friend replied, shaking the other man’s hand with fervor. “Bingley, Elizabeth and Jane will be arriving shortly, and Georgiana and I will be riding with them to Hyde Park. Would you mind going out the servant’s entrance? I think Miss Bennet might be distressed at coming face to face with you.”

Bingley could only acquiesce with this reasonable suggestion.

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Outside Darcy House

“I am a little nervous about going to Almack’s tomorrow evening. I know it is terribly exclusive.”

Caroline, who had been moodily plaiting and unplaiting the fringe of her shawl, slewed her head around to stare out the window at the woman who had just spoken. A second later, she leaned back against the squabs and slouched a little, fearful of being seen by the ladies currently walking toward the front steps of Darcy House with two stout footmen at their heels. Their carriage, a very fine barouche, was waiting near the base of the stairs.

“My dear Jane,” Elizabeth Bennet said, and yes it was, without a doubt, the infuriating woman who had captured Fitzwilliam Darcy and damaged Caroline’s societal hopes, “I am certain that they are very much like other ladies and gentlemen. In any case, we are not seeking husbands, so there

is no pressure to be charming, though you are always charming, dear one.”

“It was kind of Lady Matlock to obtain vouchers for us.”

“Indeed it was. Oh, Mr. Birks, would you inform Mr. and Miss Darcy that we have arrived?”

The butler muttered in return, and the ladies disappeared inside the great house.

Caroline surprised herself by suddenly bursting into tears. The Misses Bennet were going to Almack’s? It was the most exclusive of all the clubs, and certainly Miss Bingley would never be permitted to cross the threshold of its hallowed halls. It was horrible. It was devastating. It was unfair.

And there was nothing she could do about it, nothing at all.

Chapter 41

Almack's

A Wednesday Night

Elizabeth straightened her spine and lifted her chin as liveried servants swung open the doors to the exclusive club. The party members were all dressed in their very best, Elizabeth in a brand new gown of deep amber and soft candlelight yellow, with Darcy's gift of pearls wrapped about her neck and topazes and pearl pins in her hair. Beside her, Darcy looked very elegant and dapper in his dark coat and brushed hat, creamy breeches tucked into highly polished boots, chapeau bras on his head, and an ebony cane under his arm.

Beyond him, Jane was a vision from heaven in soft periwinkle covered with white net. Her ears and throat and hair all glittered and flashed with a matched diamond set. Lady Matlock had, as Richard had predicted, not taken long to warm up to her future daughter-in-law, and had promptly started outfitting her as became a daughter-in-law of an earl. At her arm, Richard was dressed in gold-embroidered beiges and browns that flattered his deeply tanned skin and provided a warm counterpoint to Jane's ethereal cool beauty.

Mr. Willis stepped forward with a small deferential bow. "My lord, my lady," he murmured to the Matlocks and made a small gesture towards Elizabeth and Jane. "You are, of course, always welcome at Almack's, but," an apologetic little cough, "I must see vouchers for the ladies, please."

"Of course." Lady Matlock retrieved the vouchers from her reticule, passing them over to Mr. Willis, who bowed them through the inner doors. Elizabeth glanced around the ballroom curiously, taking in the high ceilings and understated,

refined wallpaper, the balconies on the second floor, and the milling crowd of the ton.

How gaily dressed everyone was! The ladies wore dresses in pinks and purples and yellows and blues and reds and greens in every shade and hue imaginable, while the men's waistcoats ranged in color from bright mulberry to elegant brown to black and blue and glass green. Jewels glittered in the light of the lamps, while feathers bobbed above elaborate and fantastical coiffures. Lace and silk and feather fans unfurled, as women muttered together while they peeked over fans at the newcomers, and gentlemen craned their heads over exquisite cravats to catch sight of the heiress and her sister.

Elizabeth smiled to herself, amused. Despite being surrounded by the very cream of society, she was reminded of nothing so much as her mother with her head bent near Aunt Phillips, Lady Lucas, and Mrs. Long in the assembly rooms at Meryton, as the ladies murmured to one another anytime someone new arrived.

The wooden-faced musicians at the end of the ballroom began playing the music for a cotillion, and Darcy turned towards his fiancée with a properly detached expression and warmth in his eyes. He bowed over her white gloved hand and asked formally, "May I have this dance?"

Elizabeth dimpled, suppressing a smile at his extreme propriety, and replied graciously, and with a slight tilt of her head, "You may, kind sir."

They spoke little over the following half-hour, exchanging glances and smiles as their eyes met over the course of the dance. More than once, Elizabeth chuckled a little, thinking of other, much less successful dances in the past. Her eyes twinkled at Darcy as he spun her carefully, and received a glimmer of laughter in return. His mind, too, dwelt on unsuccessful balls and parties in Hertfordshire, she thought. How far they had come!

After their dance, they made their way to the supper room for refreshments. The food, Elizabeth mused, was

remarkably simple given that Almack's was considered the most exclusive club in Town. But she supposed that was one of its claims to fame. The six patronesses managed to wield such influence over the haut ton that the nobles and gentry would flock to the Wednesday balls even without the attraction of an elaborate meal or copious quantities of fine alcohol.

In any case, she did not care in the least that she was eating thin slices of bread and butter and drinking lemonade. She was with her love, and in three short days, they would be married at St. George's, and they would be together.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Elizabeth?" Darcy asked softly.

"I am with you, so yes, very much."

"But you are not particularly enjoying Almack's?" her fiancé speculated.

"I am enjoying it tremendously," his lady replied, though softly. "I have heard of Lady Jersey, of course, and Princess Esterhazy, but to see them in person is quite an experience. And the gowns, and the jewels! I have always taken pleasure in observing new people, and the ladies and gentlemen here are so colorful and, indeed, brilliant!"

Darcy grinned and felt himself relaxing. He had been a little worried that Almack's would prove intimidating to his Elizabeth, but of course that was absurd. His darling did not cow easily!

"My dears," Lady Matlock remarked, drawing the attention of both Bennet ladies, "I have spoken to Lady Sefton, and she will personally give you permission to dance the waltz this evening, if you like."

Darcy felt his face flush at the very thought. The waltz was the most intimate of dances, and the image of his arm around his darling's slim waist...

Based on Elizabeth's rosy countenance, he was quite confident that her thoughts had flown in the same direction.

“That would be delightful, would it not?” Darcy asked aloud, and Elizabeth murmured her agreement along with Jane.

“I can barely wait until Saturday,” she whispered as they rose from the table, and he could only chuckle in agreement.

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On the Road to London

The road glowed bright under the light of the sun, shining brilliantly in a pale blue sky. Buds and leaves alike had unfurled on all the trees, and green hedges lined the road, the fields across the low stone walls and stiles a vast swathe of peridot green. The verge was awash in color, all the wildflowers throwing wide their petals, tilting their faces up to drink in the sun and lure in the bees and butterflies. Rabbits peeped through the greenery, birds hopping and scolding and flitting from tree to bush to grassy sward and back again.

The Bennet horses were trotting with good will down the road, drawing the carriage along behind them at a rapid clip. Inside it, four ladies swayed on the plush seats. Sophia suppressed a faint sigh as she looked across at Kitty, who was sitting beside Mrs. Bennet in the forward-facing seat. It was a governess’s lot, of course, to ride backwards, when permitted to travel with the family. But Mary was her constant companion going backwards, and Sophia disliked Mrs. Bennet’s constant prioritization of her prettier daughters’ comfort above Mary’s. As the eldest Bennet daughter remaining at Longbourn, it should have been her privilege to ride facing forward, a favor that now, always was conferred on Kitty.

“Three daughters well married!” Mrs. Bennet shrieked for the fourth time, which was astonishing given that they had only left Longbourn two hours previously. “Oh, I could die for

happiness, though I do wish that the girls were not required to journey north so quickly. I want them all at Longbourn! What use is it to have three married daughters if I cannot take them to parties!”

Sophia opened her mouth to say something soothing, but Kitty, who was looking noticeably irritated, said, “Mamma, does not Mary look nice today?”

Mrs. Bennet turned a startled look on her third daughter, which shifted into genuine surprise.

“You do look very nice, my dear!” she remarked, leaning forward and narrowing her eyes. “You have added red ribbon to your hat and pelisse, I see!”

“Kitty and Miss Alder helped me,” Mary said breathlessly.

“You look quite pretty,” her mother replied in a startled tone. “Not as handsome as your sisters, of course, but...”

“I think she looks *very* pretty,” Kitty interrupted indignantly. “That hat frames your face nicely, and the red is a charming contrast to your black hair. Mary, I know we did not have time to make over any of your dresses, but when we return to Longbourn, we will work on your second best ball gown by adding some colorful ribbons. With your black hair, you would do far better with brighter colors. Do you not think, Miss Adler?”

“I do,” Sophia agreed, smiling warmly on the second youngest Miss Bennet, who had improved a great deal in these last weeks as she moved out of Lydia’s shadow. Sophia was very pleased that Mary and Kitty were spending more time together and that Kitty was willing to use her artistic gifts to improve Mary’s appearance.

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St. George’s Church

Hanover Square

Darcy suppressed the urge to once again straighten his cravat and glanced around the church to distract himself from the butterflies churning in his stomach. Flowers sat in the nave and in ribbon-tied vases at the altar, with swags on the ends of the nearly-empty pews. Only the few pews at the very front of the church were filled with family and friends attending the weddings. To his right, Mrs. Annesley was squished in beside a brilliantly smiling Georgiana, who was herself seated beside her cousin Lady Rachel, with Lord and Lady Matlock at the end of the pew. Behind them sat Miss Russell, who had quietly introduced herself as Captain Russell's sister before taking her lonely spot. Lady Appleby, smiling broadly, sat in the very first row, obviously pleased with her successful matchmaking.

Across the aisle, a beaming Mrs. Bennet sat dabbing her eyes with a generous linen handkerchief, while beside her sat Mary and Kitty, both silent and solemn. At Mary's other side sat Phoebe and Sophia Adler, in pretty, simple dresses with matching elegant buns. At the far end, beside Phoebe Adler, Mrs. Gardiner sat erect and serene, hands folded.

She caught Darcy's eye and smiled, and he inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment. He had found himself very pleasantly surprised by the Gardiners, who, while not members of the gentry, had proven sensible and refined. Mr. Gardiner was as genteel as his sister was not, despite her having married a landed gentleman. Mrs. Gardiner was no less charming than her husband, and their children visibly thrived from their parents' loving attention.

The family was now also incredibly rich thanks to Mrs. Simpson's bequest. However, since Mr. Gardiner was a man of trade, the Gardiners would not find it possible to enter high society, though in time, their children might.

Darcy found the family most enjoyable company, and Elizabeth adored them. The Gardiners would be visiting Pemberley in a few months, and the grand old house would

ring with laughter and good cheer, with Elizabeth installed as mistress and four young children running through the halls. Darcy grinned to himself at the thought.

The great bell in the clock tower tolled ten times, and Darcy straightened in unison with his cousin Richard and Captain Josiah Russell. The three gentlemen, dressed in their finest evening attire, looked eagerly toward the back doors as they were pulled open by two of Darcy's servants.

Mr. Bennet stepped into the sanctuary of the church, dressed in his Sunday best, his hair neatly combed. On one arm, Jane was resplendent in golden silk and ivory lace, with diamonds at neck and wrists almost as bright as her eyes. Behind them came Mr. Gardiner, escorting Lydia, remarkably subdued for her wedding day, wearing a russet gown heavily embroidered with lace across the bodice to conceal any slight physical signs of the baby she carried.

But Darcy had eyes only for his own bride, on her father's left arm. Her gown was a deep glowing forest green, trimmed with gold lace. An exquisite emerald sat at her throat, matching the ones dripping from her ears, while golden ribbons glimmered in her hair. And yet none of the trappings about her were nearly as beautiful as her enchanting face.

And soon – in but a few minutes – she would be his wife, and he would be her husband. They would be joined together as the two became one.

Elizabeth, her heart racing, gazed down the aisle toward her beloved Fitzwilliam, who was standing in the nave, with Richard Fitzwilliam on one side and Josiah Russell on the other.

She tightened her hand on her father's arm, as he guided his eldest daughters down the wide aisle where he would give up three of his daughters in marriage on one incredible day.

Elizabeth had wondered if she would weep at her wedding – brides often did, she knew – but all she felt was a deep, enduring, passionate joy that her wedding day had come

at last, when she and her beloved Darcy would be joined together before God and man.

Her mother and remaining sisters were seated on a pew near the front, facing them with shining eyes, and Mrs. Bennet was beaming so heartily that her cheeks were probably hurting. It had required some careful exposition to explain to Mrs. Bennet and Kitty how it came to be that Lydia was engaged so suddenly, but Richard and Darcy had managed it by representing it as a love at first sight situation. Mrs. Bennet, once she knew that Captain Russell was a distant relative to the Matlocks, had been overjoyed that her youngest child was marrying a man in a red coat. Moreover, it had seemed logical enough that Russell wished to carry his bride to meet extended relations in Scotland, where Lydia would be able to bear her child away from the gossip of London or Hertfordshire.

The Adler twins were seated beside Mary and Kitty, and Elizabeth bestowed a grateful look on both women. Thanks to their intelligence, delicacy, and observation, they had saved the Bennets from disaster and disgrace. Elizabeth and Darcy had agreed that both women would be given four thousand pounds each so that they no longer had to earn their daily bread as governesses. Given that they were fine young women, it was even possible that one or the other would find a good husband if she so desired. And if they preferred to stay single – well, they would have enough to live comfortably.

They had arrived at the front of the sanctuary, and Mr. Bennet, his lip trembling a little, guided Jane's hand to Richard Fitzwilliam's, and Elizabeth's to Darcy's, even as Mr. Gardiner delivered Lydia's hand to Josiah Russell.

All three couples turned toward the elderly rector, who beamed down on them all and began the well known, much beloved words from the Book of Common Prayer.

“Dearly beloved, we have come together in the presence of God...”

Epilogue 1

Nursery

Pemberley

May, 1813

Longbourn

Dearest Lizzy,

I have such incredible, wonderful news! I am engaged to Charles Bingley! I am certain that comes as a great surprise, as I have been careful not to hint at such a thing in previous letters. Indeed, I was too cross to do so; while I was strongly drawn to him, I did not truly believe that he was equally interested in me. I am not a blue-eyed, handsome blonde, but have brown eyes and black hair. I am, as Charles confesses, not at all his usual type.

So why are we engaged? Because we love each other, Lizzy. I daresay you are chuckling to yourself, that I, pragmatic Mary Bennet, am speaking of love. But I love him, yes, and he loves me.

When he returned to Netherfield a year ago, it was with a determination to leave off pursuing ladies and devote himself to the estate. He still attended parties and assemblies and still danced, but he behaved with moderation and did not single out any of the women as he did Jane.

He and I began speaking of the tenants. Mamma has given over her duties regarding Longbourn's tenants to me and Kitty, and since Caroline Bingley refused to have anything to do with the Netherfield farmers, Charles came to us for advice. Our very odd courtship flowered from there. We will be married next month.

I wish you and Jane and Lydia could be here, but I know that is impossible. I am certain you will be thinking of us fondly.

The Hursts are currently settled here at Netherfield, and both have been very welcoming. Louisa has softened considerably since birthing her little son. She is a devoted mother to the little one. I daresay it also helps that when Charles marries me, he and his relations will be connected by marriage to the Darcys and the Matlocks.

Caroline Bingley is away in Brighton, visiting an old school friend. I was not willing to put up with her snide comments about our family, and Charles sent her away. I hope she finds a husband and settles down instead of bouncing around England like a billiard ball!

Oh, you asked about the Adlers. Yes, we miss them very much, but I am happy that you blessed them with sufficient funds that they can live independent lives. They are staying with Lady Appleby in Bath at the moment.

With much love,

Mary

“Lizzy, is something wrong?” a familiar voice inquired.

Elizabeth looked up in surprise and realized that she was crying. She hastily found her handkerchief with her left hand and wiped her eyes, while she held out her letter to Jane Fitzwilliam with her right hand.

“Everything is wonderful,” she said. “Pray read this.”

Jane took the letter and then carefully, ponderously lowered herself onto a seat near the open window, puffing a little. Elizabeth wrinkled her nose with sympathy as her hand ran over her stomach, which was as bulbous as her elder sister’s.

It had been a delight when Mrs. Darcy and Mrs. Fitzwilliam had conceived a child within a few weeks of one another. The two cousins would be very close in age, and both were due to arrive within the next week or two.

“Oh! How wonderful!” Jane exclaimed, having finished reading the letter. “I am certain they will be happy together!”

“Who will be happy?” Lydia Russell asked, walking into the room with her infant child in her arms.

“Mary and Mr. Bingley. He has asked her to marry him,” Elizabeth explained, reaching out yearning hands towards her niece. “May I hold her?”

“She is hungry,” Lydia said, lowering herself into a chair with its back to the door. “You can have her when I have finished feeding her, though I warn you that she may spit on you.”

Elizabeth chuckled and lowered her hands. “That is quite all right. I suppose I should get used to having babies spitting on me.”

Baby Esther, who had been squirming and whimpering, was very pleased to be eating and immediately focused her infantile attention on the most important task of her young life. Lydia, after being certain that the child was properly positioned, looked up and asked, “Are you happy about that, Jane, considering that Mr. Bingley courted you once?”

Elizabeth, regarding her youngest sister fondly, could not help but smile at this question. It was direct and not entirely tactful, as was still common for Lydia, but now there was genuine care and concern behind young Mrs. Russell’s inquiries. Lydia had grown up a great deal in the last year, from a flighty, egotistical, selfish child to a wife and mother. Mr. Russell, thankfully, had proven a kind but firm husband to his young wife, and Lydia had proven surprisingly devoted to her husband and her baby daughter, who had been born in Scotland the previous autumn. The Russells had stayed in Scotland until the baby was a few months old and presently

were residing at Pemberley while Mr. Russell sought an appropriate domicile for his wife and the child he claimed as his own.

“I *am* happy,” Jane said simply. “Mr. Bingley and I did not suit, but Mary has a very different character than I do, and I think they will be happy together. Moreover, Mary has flourished this last year and is far more able to hold her own against tiresome sisters-in-law than I ever was.”

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Bath

Lady Appleby set down the teapot and lifted her cup of tea. It was a very fine teacup, made from alabaster china so thin it was nearly translucent, rimmed with gold leaf, with pink roses painted skillfully on the side and in the bottom. The tea glowed in the morning sun, a russet brown, steam rising in ghostly wisps to dissipate into the breeze sifting in the open windows. The sound of children laughing and adults chattering and horses clopping and carriages rolling across cobbles carried inside easily with the glass panes pushed wide.

The white lace curtains at the windows fluttered in another gust, a sage green cushion frill flapping in a languid sort of way. Sunlight striped across the wallpaper on the opposite side of the room, strips of bright sky blue and of more subdued shade. Lady Appleby serenely helped herself to a ratafia biscuit.

Across from her, the Adler twins sat side by side on the dusty-green love seat, each clutching her own cup of tea. They were dressed alike in the blue frocks left over from their governess days, hair pinned up neatly but simply. Their knees and elbows nudged together, each subconsciously seeking the grounding of her sister's presence.

“My dear Lady Appleby,” Phoebe Adler said weakly, “It is very kind of you, but truly, you have no obligation to assist us in such a way.”

“Well, of course there is no obligation, my dears,” Lady Appleby replied, her wrinkled face lighting with enthusiasm, “but with my own children elsewhere and engaged in their own pursuits and my remarkable success last year in marrying off the Bennet girls, I am most eager to try my matchmaking skills here in Bath!”

Phoebe and Sophia Adler exchanged glances, and Phoebe said, “But we are not great heiresses, Madame, and have been governesses only recently.”

“Governesses to the *Bennets*, who are now tied by marriage to the *Darcys* and the *Matlocks*, who are distinguished families. Moreover, those families are extremely grateful to you to the point that they gave you each four thousand pounds, and thus you are no longer penniless. Ladies, given your birth and beauty, you both could have made fine matches if your father had not been, bluntly, very foolish with his inheritance.”

“He was foolish,” Sophia agreed and smiled at the older woman. “If you wish to launch us into Bath society, we will hardly protest, Madame. You have already done us so much good in recommending us to the *Bennets*.”

“It was my pleasure! Now no more of that, we must think about gowns and the like. I know that for the last few years you have worn very similar, drab clothing, but that changes now! Moreover, I am determined you will not wear identical clothing anymore. You are different people and have different tastes. We will visit my dressmaker tomorrow. I have some ideas that I believe you will favor.”

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Pemberley

A Week Later

Moonlight shone in through the open curtains, giving the dark wood floor an unaccustomed silver sheen. Shadows flickered over it again and again, as Darcy paced back and forth across the library's length, staring at the bookcases at either end of his circuit before spinning on his heel to retrace his steps.

Richard passed him going the other way, hands knotted behind his back and shoulders militarily squared, down and back and tense as a fiddle-string. His steps were neat and precise in an ordered march and just a little too forceful due to his anxiety.

Josiah Russell moved his chair a little closer to the welcome warmth of the large fire behind him, and settled back down, watching his brothers-in-law sympathetically. His gaze flitted to the window behind them, the moon like a large silver coin hung in a black velvet sky amidst a sea of diamond stars. He opened his mouth to suggest shutting the curtains and stopped himself short.

A tap at the door drew his attention, and both Darcy and Richard spun to pin it with identical expectant gazes. Darcy's shoulders dropped as a pair of maids entered, bearing tea and a tray of sandwiches, and Richard turned away with a huff to resume his march.

Josiah rose a bit stiffly to direct the maids to a table, thanking them both quietly and sending them on their way before filling two of the cups, mindful of his weak arm. He set the teapot down and looked up at the other two men in the library, now paying him no heed as they passed each other once more.

"Have some tea," he ordered, gesturing at the tray.

Darcy and Richard stopped and stared at him in bewilderment, and Darcy shook his head. "I am not thirsty."

“Neither am I,” Richard said, his hands clenched into fists.

“I do not care in the least whether you feel hungry *or* thirsty,” Josiah replied, pouring himself his own cup of tea. “It will do Jane and Elizabeth no good at all if you are fainting with hunger or thirst when the babies arrive. Come, drink some tea and eat a sandwich!”

The cousins glanced at one another and shrugged in unison.

“I suppose there is some truth to that,” Darcy admitted, walking over to take the cup of tea. Now that he was paying attention, he actually was both hungry and thirsty, but that was no real surprise, since he had skipped dinner.

Richard was obviously feeling the same, and both men fell on their improvised meal with enthusiasm.

“I wish someone would come and tell us what is happening,” Richard remarked thickly before swallowing his bite. Ordinarily he would not dream of talking while food was in his mouth, but he was incredibly nervous, and it was the middle of the night, and he knew his companions would not look down on him.

“It is quite common for first labors to be long,” Josiah said soothingly. “Lydia was in labor for almost two full days before delivering Esther.”

Darcy cringed at this remark and turned a horrified look on Richard, who looked equally distressed.

“Two *days*?” the master of Pemberley asked weakly, and shakily poured himself another cup of tea.

“Yes, and she also birthed during a full moon,” Josiah remarked, glancing out the window. “One of my aunts insisted that babies often do arrive during full moons.”

Darcy tried to think how and why a full moon might trigger labor, but his brain was too fuzzy to even tackle such a concept.

“Perhaps that is why both of our wives are in labor at the same time,” Richard muttered.

The door opened at this juncture, and the men turned anxiously toward it. Two smiling midwives entered, each with a well wrapped bundle in her arms.

“Mr. Darcy, your daughter,” one of them said.

“And Mr. Fitzwilliam, your son,” said the other.

Epilogue 2

Darcy House

London

March, 1816

Two women stood together in the small room. There was only one window, and thick curtains, made up from midnight blue fabric, were drawn across it to keep out the nighttime chill. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, filling the room with warmth and flickering light. A thick carpet covered nearly the entire floor, padding and warming the wood beneath, and a shelf stood nearby with folded blankets and cloths and pilchers piled across the smooth wooden surface. A well-padded rocking chair sat by the fire, a matching footstool before it, and a print of a lamb in a meadow was hung on the wall over the cradle.

“He is beautiful, Anne,” Elizabeth said to her cousin by marriage, staring down at Lady Anne Talbot’s firstborn son as he lay in his cradle.

“He really is,” Anne agreed, gazing adoringly down at her tightly wrapped baby sleeping soundly, his little eyelids fluttering from infantile dreams.

“I am very happy for you and Lord Talbot,” Elizabeth said, looking around her. “When the baby wakes up, we will have a cot made up here for the wet nurse if that is convenient to you.”

“Thank you,” Anne said, retreating out of the room and into her own guest bedchamber. “I am so grateful to you and Darcy, Elizabeth; I really did not want to risk exposing the baby to chickenpox, even though Lady Alverstone insists that all children get chickenpox and are none the worse for it.”

“Oh, but little Matthew is so small!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “I would not care to expose my baby to the illness when he is yet tiny.”

“Thank you,” Anne said and gestured toward the fire. “Do you have a few minutes to talk, or do your duties take you elsewhere?”

“Certainly I have a few minutes,” Elizabeth assured her, sitting down by the fire and wrapping her shawl around her bulbous form. She was in her ninth month with her third child, and both she and Darcy were hoping that this child would be the longed for son, though of course they would both adore a third daughter.

“I hope you are well?” Anne asked, looking at her cousin’s abdomen.

“I have only observed whales in books, but I believe I know how one feels!” Elizabeth laughed before continuing, “I am well enough, though eager to birth this child. Our girls are very excited that a new baby will be arriving soon.”

“I am a little surprised that you did not stay in Derbyshire for the birth, though I am thankful, since Talbot needs to be here to deal with our man of business.”

“We considered it but thought it best to be in London for the season for Georgiana’s sake. She is not as shy as she was even a year ago, but she still needs her brother at her back, especially with so many enthusiastic suitors buzzing around her.”

“Large dowry, a Darcy, a niece to the Matlocks, charming, pretty, very accomplished; yes, I am surprised you were not beating the gentlemen away with sticks!”

Elizabeth’s eyes danced, and she said, “It was somewhat like that last year during her first Season, and I daresay the gentlemen will be equally eager this year. But enough about us; how is Lady Catherine?”

Anne wrinkled her nose. “She is doing surprisingly well, largely because my husband manages her wonderfully.

He has settled her quite happily in the Dower House, and Anthony is adept at seeming to agree with her without actually carrying out her ridiculous suggestions. I think that Lady Alverstone has quite a bit in common with Lady Catherine, so my dear Anthony has long practice in coping with strong willed ladies of a certain age.”

“That is truly a remarkable ability!”

“It is. I do not think I have ever told you this before, but I am truly thankful that you declined Talbot’s offer. He was seeking an heiress, of course, and when you rejected him, he looked around and found me. And he is the perfect husband for me.”

“And Fitzwilliam is my perfect husband,” Elizabeth said with a smile. “We are both very fortunate.”

“We are. Oh, I am enjoying Mrs. Collins’s visits very much too. She is a very sensible woman. Now that my mother is no longer speaking incessantly, I have drawn closer to Mrs. Collins, and we are good friends. She has encouraged me to exercise regularly, and often we walk outside when the weather is fine. My health definitely improved when I began walking regularly.”

“I am so very glad, Anne. Charlotte is a marvelous woman and...”

The door swung open abruptly to reveal Sally, who was looking anxious. “Mrs. Darcy, Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam have arrived and wish to speak to you in the drawing room.”

Elizabeth rose to her feet instantly. “I will be down in a moment. Anne, I will need to leave. I hope that is all right?”

“Of course,” Anne said instantly. “Can you arrange to have Matthew’s nurse come soon?”

“Yes, Sally will manage that.”

Elizabeth smiled, though quickly, and hurried out of the door, down the paneled hall, down the stairs, and into the drawing room.

Darcy was present along with Jane and Richard, and Elizabeth released a deep sigh of relief. She could tell, based on her beloved husband's expression, that something was amiss, and she felt much better that he would be at her side.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly, both from fear and from hurrying down the stairs. "Is it one of my sisters?"

"No," Jane said, her eyes welling with tears, "It is Richard's brother, Vincent. He is ... oh, Elizabeth..."

"He has passed on," Darcy said, pulling Elizabeth closer to him, even as she gasped in horror.

"Oh Richard," she said, looking at her brother by marriage. "I am so very sorry!"

"Thank you, Elizabeth," the former colonel replied, his face set hard like flint. "I knew he was not well, but I had no idea..."

"He was sick?" Elizabeth asked in surprise.

The gentlemen exchanged glances, and Darcy said, very gently, "He has not been entirely well for some time, and he was not living a particularly healthy life."

Elizabeth gulped and decided that she did not need to know any more. She had only met Viscount Waverley a few times and had heard whispers that he did not live a sober or godly lifestyle.

"I am sorry," she repeated again to Richard.

"I am as well," Richard said and then looked at Jane. "Besides the grief of losing my brother too soon, there are more practical considerations. Our sister by marriage, the former viscountess, bore only one daughter and thus..."

"You are now the heir to the Matlock earldom!" Elizabeth cried out.

"Precisely, yes," Jane said, and tears spilled down her cheeks. "Oh, Lizzy, it is such a responsibility, and I truly did not imagine that I would ever be ... oh Lizzy!"

Richard quickly pulled his wife into a warm embrace and said firmly, “Jane, my dear, this has been a shock, but I know that when the time comes, you will be a marvelous countess of Matlock.”

“Indeed you will,” Elizabeth said fervently, though inwardly her mind was reeling a little. Jane Bennet would be the Countess of Matlock someday. It was incredible.

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Longbourn

It still felt odd to be announced by the Longbourn butler, and Kitty Harrison felt more surreal yet as she stepped into a very different drawing room than the one she had last seen some nine months ago. Gone were the soothing, familiar oceanic colors, replaced now with a blazing glory of peach and pink. Some of the furniture was new, and the rest had been provided with new chair or couch covers to fit in with the current color scheme, doubtless at considerable expense. Only the knickknacks from her childhood proclaimed this the same room in which she had sat so many times.

She felt a rush of gratitude to no longer be living unmarried at Longbourn. She had never been particularly sensible about money, rushing to spend her allowance as soon as she received it on ribbons and bonnets and furbelows. But now that she was a bit older and a good deal wiser, it was easy to see where she had gotten her spendthrift inclinations. Mrs. Bennet had never been particularly sensible, far too interested in her own comfort to be prudent, even as she dreaded a future in the hedgerows.

Kitty was enormously beholden to her older two sisters, both of whom had proven wise, level-headed guides. Even before the magnificent inheritance that had brought Elizabeth – and through her generosity, her sisters – such great

prosperity, neither had been willing to enter a marriage solely for financial gain, instead waiting and watching for genuine respect and affection. It had been their example, rather than their flighty mother's, that Kitty had eventually followed. Colonel Harrison's military income would never make them wealthy, but it was quite sufficient for himself and his wife, provided Kitty did not redecorate the drawing room every year to keep up with the latest fashions. Moreover, thanks to Elizabeth and Darcy's generosity, Kitty had brought a full ten thousand pounds into marriage, which provided a full four hundred pounds income per year.

"Kitty!" Lydia cried out from her position by the window, leaping to her feet and hurrying forward. "Oh, how wonderful it is to see you!"

Kitty embraced her younger sister tightly. Here was something else that had changed dramatically from her childhood. No longer was Lydia loud, hoydenish, and selfish, eager to flirt with every handsome man who crossed her path. Lydia would doubtless always be vivacious, even perhaps a trifle over-lively at times, but she had grown much more sedate since her marriage. Her devoted care to her young children, Esther and baby Samuel, was a wonder to behold. No less marked was her respect for her beloved husband. Josiah was unflinchingly kind to her, quelling her boisterousness with a glance and a soft word without ever crushing her spirits.

"It is good to be here," Kitty said, looking around her. "Mamma redecorated, I see."

"Indeed I did," Mrs. Bennet cried out, bustling in with Mary Bingley at her heels. "I cannot imagine how I survived so long with those tedious blues and greens. Now my dear, do let me look at you!"

Kitty submitted to her mother's inspection and jumped a little when the matriarch put a quick hand on her abdomen and then beamed in delight. "Kitty, are you..?"

"I am," Kitty cried out happily. "The baby is due in May!"

“Oh, how absolutely wonderful! All of my girls well married with children! I do hope that your first child is a son. Poor Lizzy still has produced only daughters, though the rest of your sisters have at least one son. Oh, Kitty, how happy I am!”

Kitty refrained from rolling her eyes and turned toward Mary, who was waiting with an amused look on her face.

Her elder sister might not ever be described as *beautiful*, but ‘pretty’, ‘striking’, and ‘exotic’ were all descriptors that occurred to Kitty. She remembered being startled some years ago when Miss Adler had first suggested that Mary wear brighter colors. It had been a careful balancing act for a while, between the jewel tones that flattered Mary and the paler colors more suitable for an unmarried girl. But now Mrs. Bingley could wear whatever clothes she pleased, and today she had donned a vibrant emerald green morning dress that brought out the dark luster of her hair under her dab of lace cap.

“Dear Mary,” Kitty said, moving forward to embrace her sister. “How are you and Charles?”

“We are very well, thank you. Charles should be joining us soon; he and Josiah are out dealing with a broken fence lying between Longbourn and Netherfield, but I expect they will be here in time for dinner.”

“We are very grateful to dear Josiah,” Mrs. Bennet said, beaming. “Your father is not as young as he used to be, after all, and should not be dealing with fences! Now where is your husband, Kitty?”

“Allen stepped off the carriage in Meryton and sent me the rest of the way to Longbourn. He will walk here after he speaks to Uncle Phillips about some matters of business.”

“How long can you stay, Kitty?” Mrs. Bennet demanded. “Pray do tell me it is for at least a month?”

“We need to be in Brighton at our next station in three weeks, I fear,” Kitty replied, trying to make her expression one

of disappointment. In truth, as much as she loved her sisters and parents, she was not disappointed that they would only be staying at Longbourn for a little more than a fortnight. She adored being a military man's wife and looked forward to settling in Brighton amongst myriad other regiments. Furthermore, Brighton would be far warmer and more pleasant than their last station in the North.

"Oh, what a pity," Mrs. Bennet said with a slight pout.

"I am certain we will enjoy our time together very much," Mary said, and Lydia added, "Perhaps, if Josiah agrees to it, we might visit Brighton later this summer! I would love to visit the ocean, and I am certain that the children would be thrilled to splash in the waves!"

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Russell Square

London

The arched ceilings of the vestibule soared high and airy above a polished marble floor, the very picture of elegant grace. An equally graceful mahogany staircase curved up one wall, and tall windows stood to either side of an elaborately-carved door. The curtains were drawn back, showing the garden in the middle of the square outside. A wrought-iron railing bordered it, keeping wanderers off the smooth sward of grass, while a plowman statue stood tall and elegant in the middle of the square, with precisely trimmed trees and shrubs surrounding it.

"My dear Mrs. Gardiner, it is beautiful!" Phoebe Somerset exclaimed, holding out her hands to her hostess while her sister, Sophia Dannel, looked around in wonder.

"Thank you, my dears. Welcome to Russell Square! Now do come in and join me in the parlor for some tea. My

rapscallions are all above stairs with their governess and nursemaids, and we should have a pleasant half hour together.”

The twins obediently followed their hostess down a carpeted corridor into a cozy sitting room where a tea tray was already waiting, the urn steaming invitingly.

“Do sit down and warm yourselves,” Madeline said, gesturing toward the small settee by the fire. She poured tea for both women and handed the cups over before pouring tea for herself, even as she considered the ladies with interest.

“You look very well, both of you,” she remarked, taking a sip of her own tea.

“Thank you, Mrs. Gardiner. You do as well,” Phoebe said, and she meant it. Mrs. Gardiner, now mother to seven healthy children, had thickened a little through the years, but she glowed with vitality.

“Please tell us about the house,” Sophia requested, looking around her.

“By all means! Russell Square sits on the former site of Bedford House, which was demolished some years ago, and all the houses here are relatively new. I loved our house on Gracechurch Street, but it was growing crowded as the Lord continued to bless us with children. Thanks to Mrs. Simpson’s very generous bequest, we were easily able to afford this mansion. I was a little uncertain about the move eight months ago, but now I am delighted to have extra bedchambers for special guests!”

“We are deeply grateful for your willingness to host us while our husbands are traveling with Mr. Gardiner,” Phoebe said.

“Oh, my dear, it is my pleasure, I assure you! I will very much enjoy your company. Moreover, I am exceedingly delighted for you both. Mr. Somerset and Mr. Dannel are good men who were fortunate to win you.”

The twins blushed in unison, and Sophia said, “And we are delighted to be their wives, Mrs. Gardiner, I assure you! I

think Lady Appleby was a little disappointed that we did not accept any of the gentlemen who were expressing interest in Bath, but none of them truly appealed to us. Moreover, none of them were even reasonably wealthy, and after our years as governesses, we both were eager to live a financially secure lifestyle. Thank you for your frequent invitations to your table in Cheapside where we met our husbands.”

“Lady Appleby and I both enjoy matchmaking very much,” Madeline Gardiner said, her eyes twinkling. “I am quite confident, too, that she is happy with your choices. After all, dear Mrs. Simpson married a man of trade, and a great many people benefited from her generous bequests.”

“Many people, yes,” Phoebe agreed.

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Darcy House

A Week Later

Darcy sighed a little, looking up at his front door before slowly climbing the steps. He had just returned from Matlock House and the somber little party there. His aunt was entirely distraught by the death of her elder son, while Lord Matlock looked haggard and worn. Darcy paused at the front door, glancing down at his own black suit. He had not known Vincent particularly well but had some vague boyhood memories of giggling underneath the kitchen table waiting to steal pasties when the cook’s back was turned.

At least Richard and Jane had a son, so the succession was secure for the next generation. Richard would be an excellent earl in time, and Jane a charming and kindly countess.

The door opened to reveal his butler, who was waiting expectantly directly inside. Darcy stepped through, removing

his hat and handing it over along with his ebony cane.

“Mr. Darcy?” the butler said.

“Yes?”

“While you were away, Mrs. Darcy, erm, well, Sir William Knighton is here, sir...”

By the time the butler had finished this stately sentence, Darcy was halfway across the vestibule. He thundered up the stairs and along the corridor leading to the room where his Elizabeth was now in the throes of her third labor.

The door was open when he arrived, and he looked within to see his beloved wife sitting up in bed with a little wrapped bundle in her arms, her face red and sweaty with effort, but her lips stretched in a great smile.

“Elizabeth!”

“Fitzwilliam! Oh, my love, we have a son!”

Epilogue 3

Darcy House

London

April, 1832

Elizabeth Darcy, who was writing a letter to her friend Charlotte Collins, set down her pen and stretched her fingers and then stood up and wandered over to the curtains, which she pushed aside. The former parlor, now bedchamber to Mrs. Bennet, faced backwards onto Darcy House's extensive grounds, and Elizabeth smiled at the sight of the lawn full of children and their respective nursemaids and governesses. Darcy House was currently full of guests and visitors, including all the former Bennet daughters and at least some of their many progeny. It seemed that the younger group were enjoying themselves very much as they ran to and fro with balls and bats, in spite of the chilly weather. At least it was not windy.

“What time is it, Lizzy?” a female voice demanded, causing Elizabeth to spin around to find her mother sitting up in her bed, her face twisted in confusion.

“It is just a little before noon, Mamma,” Elizabeth said, hurrying over to pull the bell.

“Noon! Oh, Lizzy, why did you not wake me up? I must speak with Mrs. Hill about the dinner for tonight. Mr. Bingley is coming tonight, and I must ensure that he is pleased with the meal!”

The door opened to reveal Gertrude, who had been Mrs. Bennet's personal maid for more than a decade now.

“Mamma,” Elizabeth said soothingly as Gertrude began finding clothes for her mistress to wear, “we are at Darcy

House, and I will manage dinner tonight. I am certain Mr. Bingley will be very pleased with it.”

For a brief moment, confusion reigned supreme, and then, to Elizabeth’s relief, her mother’s eyes brightened and she said, “Oh yes, Darcy House. Of course, I had forgotten. Gertrude, do help me into my morning attire, so that I may help as needed. And tell your father that while I know he loves the library here, I expect him at dinner tonight, on time!”

“I need to speak to my husband,” Elizabeth said, nodding to Gertrude, who nodded reassuringly in response.

“Of course you do!” her mother exclaimed. “Such a fine man, so handsome and so rich! Oh Lizzy, I never imagined that you would be the one to capture such a wealthy gentlemen! Of course you are not a countess, not like my dear Jane, but that is no surprise. You are beautiful, but she is the most handsome woman in all the land!”

“Indeed she is,” Elizabeth agreed with a smile and slipped out of the room into the corridor while her mother was distracted.

A young woman was waiting there for her in the corridor, a tall girl of some nineteen summers, with blonde locks pulled up into a demure bun and blue eyes and a handsome face.

“Esther, my dear,” Elizabeth said, embracing the girl. “I did not know you and your family were here yet.”

“We just arrived, Aunt Darcy,” Esther Russell replied. Elizabeth, regarding her niece fondly, was greatly relieved, as they all were, that Esther’s beauty imitated her mother’s far more than that of her natural father, George Wickham, long dead from some sort of infectious complaint in debtor’s prison. As far as almost everyone knew, Josiah Russell had sired the lovely eldest Miss Russell, and while her dowry was a modest five thousand pounds, her connections to the Matlocks and Darcys, along with her beauty and charm, had brought her many interested suitors during her first Season the

previous year. Esther had accepted none of them yet, to Elizabeth's relief. Her mother Lydia had learned the danger of rushing into romance, and her children were, while lively, neither vulgar nor forward.

"I was wondering whether I might visit Grandmamma Bennet," Esther continued, and Elizabeth said, "If you like, certainly, though I warn you that she grows only more forgetful with time. She may well think you are your mother, as you resemble her so much."

"Oh, I do not mind in the least," her niece reassured her. "I promise I will do my best not to upset her. Does she remember that Grandpapa Bennet is..."

"She does not," Elizabeth said and felt her throat constrict a little. Mr. Bennet had passed on to his reward more than a year earlier after a protracted illness. She still missed him, though part of her was thankful that he was finally walking Heaven's bright streets, free from suffering. Her mother, who had already been struggling with memory problems before her husband's passing, had grown only worse in the last months, and she often did not remember that she was a widow.

"Perhaps I could order tea, and Grandmamma and I can spend some time together," Esther suggested.

"That would be delightful, thank you," Elizabeth replied, "though you had best not send Gertrude away. She does very well soothing your grandmother if she grows distressed. If you wish to go along, I will send tea."

"Thank you," the girl replied and entered her grandmother's bedchamber, leaving Elizabeth to find a maid and order tea. She was very impressed with Esther's pleasure in spending time with an aged relative, when the girl was so beautiful and lively. It spoke well of her character and of the abilities of Josiah and Lydia Russell in raising her.

Having ordered refreshments, Elizabeth made her way toward the drawing room, pausing at the door of the music

room to observe her two eldest daughters, Naomi and Sarah, who were playing a duet together on the pianoforte. Naomi was a serious soul, more like her Aunt Mary than her mother, and was committed to practicing on the pianoforte daily for at least two hours. Sarah, the second Miss Darcy, had a more playful character and often neglected her practice in favor of walking and reading. Together, the serious elder and cheerful younger made absolutely beautiful music together, with Sarah's energy a delightful counterpoint to Naomi's perfect fingering.

She passed the library next, where her two elder sons were sitting by the fire reading books. She paused to observe them; their eldest son, Isaiah, the heir to Pemberley, had dark blond hair and bright blue eyes, while Luke, born only eighteen months after his elder brother, had the Darcy dark hair and dark eyes. They were both intellectuals like their father, though Luke was a more casual soul. Isaiah, who would one day be master of Pemberley when his father died, took his responsibilities as heir seriously.

She continued on down the corridor, aware that she really ought to be in the drawing room when the rest of their guests arrived. Not that it mattered a great deal, as all of them were either family or close friends and would understand her need to spend time with Mrs. Bennet.

How blessed they all were, she mused as she made her way down the polished floor of the corridor, down another corridor, and into the drawing room, where she stood near the door, unnoticed by the various couples sitting or standing about.

Lydia and Josiah Russell, currently standing by a window staring out at their younger two children in the back yard, having married in haste, had proven a loyal and compatible couple, and had become the cheerful parents of five children. While they often lived with their wealthier relations, they did not take advantage of their hosts and were always charming guests. Given that all the former Bennet girls had proven fertile, the presence of extra young people in

Matlock House, Darcy House, Pemberley, Netherfield, and the Matlock estate of Snowden was always a delight.

Allen and Kitty Harrison had proven a happy couple as well. After Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo, Colonel Harrison had sold out. He and Kitty had purchased a small estate in Hertfordshire and lived within easy distance of Netherfield with their five children.

As for the former Georgiana Darcy, she had not married until she was nearly thirty, suspicious of the numerous suitors who seemed more interested in her money and connections than in her person. Sir Henry Ackroyd, a baronet, had proven the man of her dreams, and they shared both a passion for music and a handsome little son.

Mary had blossomed as Mrs. Bingley and the mistress of Netherfield. She had birthed three children in the first six years of her marriage and was now pregnant again, a full decade after her last birth, which had been a joyous surprise. Elizabeth smiled at the sight of Charles hovering over his wife protectively. Mr. Charles Bingley had developed a backbone in the last years and no longer put up with any absurdity from his sister Caroline who was, at the age of forty, still unwed.

Jane sat in a chair by the fire with her husband standing behind her, his hand reassuringly on her shoulder. Richard and Jane, now the Earl and Countess of Matlock, had stepped up to their new positions with courage. Elizabeth was pleased that Darcy House and Matlock House were close together in London, so at least she and her favorite sister were able to spend a substantial amount of time together when they were in Town.

The former Adler twins were in the corner, speaking softly with Mrs. Gardiner. Even now, so many years later, Elizabeth felt gratitude for Phoebe and Sophia, who had saved the Bennets from horrific scandal with their quick thinking.

"Elizabeth," a familiar voice murmured from behind her.

She spun around quickly and gazed up into the beloved face of her husband. Fitzwilliam Darcy's hair was now sprinkled with silver, and at times his eyes were tired from the burdens he carried, but he was still the handsome, intelligent, loving gentleman who had won her heart so many years ago. He was a devoted husband to her and a hardworking, diligent father to their six children.

Her eyes widened as he pulled her gently into the corridor, away from the potential gaze of their guests and relations, whereupon he kissed her passionately as the two footmen and the butler turned studiously away.

"I love you, my precious Elizabeth," he murmured into her ear when they had broken apart a few inches.

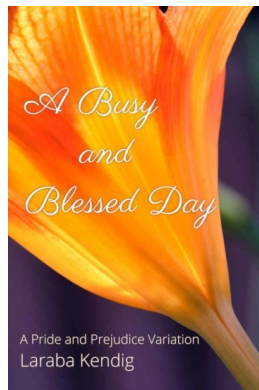
"I love you too," she whispered back.

The End

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Sneak Peek of *The Second Mr. Darcy* - A Darcy and Elizabeth friends-to-lovers story

Elizabeth is surprised to find Darcy charming and intelligent, and she is shocked to discover that her heart has fallen for this second son.

Chapter 1

Assembly Hall

Meryton

15th October, 1811

Elizabeth Bennet looked around the room as she fanned herself. The ballroom was slightly too hot, heated by the crowd milling around and the plethora of candles in their decorative sconces and the glittering chandelier overhead. She admired the effect of the mirrors set skillfully around the walls and behind the sconces, which only brightened the scene.

And what a bright scene it was! Muslin dresses of vibrant pink and blue and red and green and saffron, bobbing plumes carefully dyed by the local milliner, jewels catching the light and glittering at throat and topknot and cuffs.

At one end of the room, on a low dais, musicians in matching livery sat, plying their instruments in a lively reel. On the floor below them, some half a dozen or so couples wheeled through the familiar steps. Along one wall sat a table covered in a fine white linen cloth. More ladies and gentlemen clustered around it, helping themselves and each other to punch and tea and coffee and ratafia cakes and biscuits.

The rest of the room was a blur of activity, with matrons gossiping in chairs along the walls, gentlemen discussing crops and weather, and the youth of local society milling about as they chattered together.

“Elizabeth!” a voice cried out.

Elizabeth Bennet, the second of five daughters, halted in her steps and turned toward her close friend, Charlotte Lucas.

“Charlotte! I hope you are well?”

“Yes, very well,” her friend declared. “I am glad to see you here; I thought perhaps some emergency had befallen you given that you arrived later than usual.”

Elizabeth grasped Charlotte’s arm and guided her into a quieter corner, away from the musicians, and said, “There was no emergency, except for the need to sew on extra lace on Lydia’s gown tonight. Mamma decided, rather at the last minute, that she needed freshly trimmed lace, so that delayed us.”

“Is Mr. Bennet here?”

“No, Father is spending a quiet evening at home in his library. Now, I do not see any strangers, so am I correct that Mr. Bingley and company have not yet arrived?”

“They have not, and my mother is growing distressed,” Charlotte said with a sigh. “I do not expect to win Mr. Bingley’s favor, but naturally every matron in the neighborhood with a marriageable daughter is hopeful.”

“My mother is the same, of course,” Elizabeth said. “Of course, for all we know, Mr. Bingley is an irritating, arrogant sort of man. Wealth does not necessarily march hand in hand with good sense and humor.”

At this moment, the door into the room opened, and a group of newcomers entered, consisting of three gentlemen and two ladies. Two of the men were young and handsome, while the other man was older and slightly corpulent. Of the two younger men, one was fair and one was dark, and the dark one was noticeably tall as well. Indeed, Elizabeth could not help but admire the gentleman’s good looking features and form.

“The fair one is Mr. Bingley,” Charlotte confided, and then, at a signal from her mother, she cried out, “Oh, Lizzy, I must go.”

She rushed away in a swirl of skirts toward her mother, and Elizabeth watched with some amusement as Sir William Lucas, Charlotte’s father and the unofficial spokesman of local

society, guided Mr. Bingley and his party toward Lady Lucas and her two daughters. The female members of Mr. Bingley's party were handsome and very finely dressed. Elizabeth guessed that the elder of the two was seven and twenty years of age, and the younger a little over twenty. Neither was as beautiful as Jane, Elizabeth's elder sister, but then Jane was, without a doubt, one of the loveliest ladies in all of England.

"Miss Elizabeth?" a familiar male voice inquired.

She turned and smiled at Charlotte's next younger brother, Samuel Lucas, "Yes, Mr. Lucas?"

"Might I have the honor of the next dance?" he asked.

She nodded and took his arm, and accompanied him onto the dance floor. As the musicians struck up their tune, Elizabeth noted that the two handsome newcomers had taken the floor as well, Mr. Bingley with Miss Lucas, and the dark haired gentleman with a female member of his own party. Elizabeth was pleased for Charlotte; her friend was sensible and intelligent, but she was also plain and no longer in the first blush of youth. Too often she was forced to sit out the first dance in favor of younger, fairer ladies.

Samuel Lucas, Elizabeth's partner, was moderately handsome, entirely cheerful, and an adept dancer. Unfortunately, his understanding was not powerful, and at this time of year, his thoughts were entirely focused on grouse hunting and the upcoming season when the hounds would pursue the foxes. Elizabeth, who enjoyed dancing for its own sake and had known young Mr. Lucas since he was in short coats, did not mind that the conversation with her partner was very dull.

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"What a dreadful scene this is," Miss Bingley remarked, far too loudly. "So many bumptious gentlemen and vulgar

ladies. Do you see those girls over there? They are far too young to be out and are shrieking like hoydens!”

Darcy grimaced. The three girls in question were indeed very young and rather too loud for company, but given that he and Miss Bingley were but guests in a new place, it was not for them to be loudly judgmental.

“It is the country, Miss Bingley,” he said in a reproofing tone. “The rules of society are therefore somewhat different, and girls often come out earlier than in London.”

“I suppose you would know,” Miss Bingley remarked, turning a disdainful look on her partner. “Charles has told me more than once that you thoroughly enjoy the country and rather despise Town.”

This was true enough, and Darcy was not ashamed of it, but it was obvious that Miss Bingley thought poorly of him for it.

The rest of their dance was conducted in silence.

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“Charlotte,” Elizabeth said as she left the floor on Samuel Lucas’s arm, “do you have a partner for the next set?”

“I do not.”

“Neither do I! Let us get a drink and sit down. I have longed to visit you this week, but it was too rainy and muddy to walk to Lucas Lodge.”

The two friends made their way to the table where the punch and lemonade were available, collected drinks for themselves, and then drifted off to find two comfortable chairs away from the musicians.

Elizabeth took a sip of punch and said, “Well, Charlotte, can you tell me about Mr. Bingley’s companions? Or did the

topic not come up during your dance with the gentleman in question?"

"I do know who they are, yes. The shorter gentleman is Mr. Hurst, who is married to Mr. Bingley's elder sister. The taller gentleman is Mr. Darcy, a single gentleman with a small estate in Leicestershire. The dark haired lady is Mrs. Hurst, and the one with light brown hair is Miss Bingley, the gentleman's younger sister."

"Mr. Darcy is very handsome," Elizabeth said thoughtfully, gazing at the tall, dark haired man who was currently dancing with Mrs. Hurst. "Though he seems rather dour."

"Perhaps he is shy," Charlotte suggested.

Elizabeth, observing the expression on Mr. Darcy's face, thought it more likely that he was proud, but she supposed she ought to reserve judgment until she actually spoke to the man.

She peered around the dance floor and observed her elder sister dancing with Mr. Bingley; based on Jane's expressions, their conversation was an agreeable one.

"What of Mr. Bingley?" she asked. "Does he seem friendly?"

"Oh yes, very much! He spoke of how pleased he is with Netherfield and the environs, and how grateful he is for our kind welcome to his party. His family hails from Scarborough."

"I see."

The two ladies lapsed into silence, content to drink their punch and watch the dancers. At the end of the set, Mr. Bingley and Jane walked arm in arm over to the two ladies, who both stood up at their approach. To Elizabeth's surprise, Mr. Darcy also made his way to his friend's side, his expression rigid with either pride, discomfort, or perhaps both.

“Charlotte, Elizabeth,” Jane said, “may I please introduce Mr. Bingley? Mr. Bingley, Miss Lucas and Miss Elizabeth Bennet, my next younger sister.”

The ladies and gentleman curtsied and bowed appropriately, and then Bingley turned toward his friend and said, “Ladies, may I please introduce my friend, Mr. Darcy? Darcy, Miss Lucas, Miss Bennet, and Miss Elizabeth.”

After another round of curtsies, accompanied by a very proper bow on the part of the gentleman, Darcy said, “Miss Lucas, might I have the honor of the next dance?”

Charlotte’s eyes lit up with pleasure, and she said, “I would be honored, Mr. Darcy.”

“Miss Elizabeth, might I have the honor of the next set?” Bingley asked.

“I would be delighted,” Elizabeth said.

The subsequent dance was thoroughly enjoyable, as Mr. Bingley was both an excellent dancer and conversationalist. He was not, Elizabeth decided, particularly intellectual, but he was genial and enthusiastic, and she could only be thankful for his decision to lease Netherfield Park, which had been sitting empty for far too long.

At the end of the dance, she was pleased when Mr. Darcy appeared and asked for the honor of the next set. He led her out for a country dance, she took her place across from him, and when the music began to play, and the dancers began moving in elegant figures along the line, she was pleased to discover him a most gifted dancer, even if his expression was far less congenial than Mr. Bingley’s.

When they had made their way to the very end of the line, Elizabeth took the opportunity to exchange a few words with her partner.

“I do hope you are enjoying your time here this evening, Mr. Darcy,” she said.

The gentleman looked slightly startled at being addressed, but said, “Yes, indeed, it is, erm, yes, it is quite a pleasant county.”

“Have you been to Hertfordshire before?” Elizabeth persevered.

“I have ridden through on my way north and south, but I have never lived here. My estate is in Leicestershire.”

“I see. Well, I do hope that your stay at Netherfield is pleasant.”

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. I am confident it will be, as Bingley and I are very good friends.”

Their brief pause in the dance came to an end, and they began twisting and twirling their way toward the other end of the line, which gave Elizabeth time to think. She was now inclined to believe that Charlotte was right, that Mr. Darcy was shy, or awkward, or something of the sort. He did not speak with ease, but there was no indication that he was attempting to be disagreeable.

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On the Road to Netherfield

Two Hours Later

Darcy glanced out the carriage window at the moon-splashed road outside. The carriage swayed slightly around a turn, and Bingley’s shoulder just brushed his. Across from them sat Miss Caroline Bingley, Mrs. Louisa Hurst, and her husband, Mr. Hurst. Little of the moonlight made its way into the conveyance, leaving the inhabitants sitting in the dark.

“Oh Charles!” Miss Bingley cried out, “I truly wish that you had considered more before leasing Netherfield Park! That so called assembly was dreadful! I have never seen a

collection of people with so little beauty and their sense of fashion was nonexistent. I have not the smallest interest in any of them. I shudder to think how very dull we will be the next months, trapped in a society such as this!”

“I enjoyed myself thoroughly,” her brother retorted, his tone indignant in the darkness. “Everyone was exceptionally welcoming, and some of the girls uncommonly pretty!”

“The eldest Miss Bennet is a beauty, but none of the other ladies were anything to speak of,” Louisa Hurst said disdainfully. “And even she would be far more handsome if she were properly gowned. Did you see her dress, Caroline? A full year out of fashion, I am certain!”

The ladies continued to gossip and complain, while Fitzwilliam Darcy leaned back in his seat and looked forward to the short journey ending. He had not precisely enjoyed the assembly this evening as he was shy amongst strangers, but the local gentry had been welcoming. He had attended the assembly for two reasons. Firstly, he wished to support Bingley, who so graciously had opened his new home to Darcy and his sister Georgiana. Secondly, he hoped that Georgiana would find some new friends in a place where the standards of etiquette were not as rigid as in London.

He was satisfied with his performance regarding the former, and he was hopeful about the latter. He had danced with several of the local ladies, and none of them aped the fashionable manners of the haut ton, which was a great relief as Georgiana was even shyer than he.

“Netherfield is only five and twenty miles from Town, Caroline,” Bingley said, and Darcy realized he had missed several volleys in the argument between sister and brother. “You know how much we all enjoy the metropolis, and it will be no great trouble to visit London for a few days if we like. I am certain Darcy would agree that it is strenuous to journey from Leicestershire to London and back again, especially in autumn and winter.”

“Yes,” Darcy agreed, “though I am far fonder of the country than Town life, so I do not mind living farther away from London.”

In truth, he selfishly wished that Bingley had found an estate even farther away from London. He and Georgiana should be safe enough here; he had been careful to leave no forwarding address to anyone but his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, who was honorable and discreet.

In any case, Lawrence Darcy, master of Pemberley, and Darcy and Georgiana’s elder brother, would soon leave London for Derbyshire. Lawrence, unlike his siblings, thoroughly enjoyed town life, especially gambling dens and, most regrettably, brothels. But Pemberley was famed for her hunting grounds, and Lawrence, George Wickham, and a few other idle gentlemen would soon make their way to Pemberley, where they would spend the next weeks hunting and shooting and carousing.

And once Lawrence was safely in Derbyshire, Darcy could relax a little. Legally, he and Richard were joint guardians of young Georgiana, but Lawrence, as master of Pemberley and the head of his house, could potentially cause trouble for young Miss Darcy, and Darcy was determined that he would not allow it.

In the five years since George Darcy’s death, the condition of Pemberley had declined, saddled as she was with an improvident, reckless, and spendthrift master.

Fitzwilliam could do nothing about that. By law, Lawrence was master of the estate. But he could, and would, protect his dear little sister from being caught up in their elder brother’s schemes.

Chapter 2

Drawing Room

Longbourn

Midnight

Quiet reigned over the drawing room, broken only by the crackling of the fire and the occasional rustle of a turning page. It was cozy in the small room with candles and fireplace illuminating the entire room with a warm glow, and the curtains drawn against the dark of night.

Mr. Bennet relished the silence and peace. His wife and daughters were at the assembly in Meryton, eager to meet the newcomer from London. Bennet had met Mr. Bingley and knew the man to be single, wealthy, and handsome, which was quite enough to send his neighbors, especially those with marriageable daughters, into a frenzy.

On most evenings, Mr. Bennet sat in his beloved library to read. But he knew well that his wife and daughters would be eager to relate their experiences at the assembly from the moment of entering the house. Mrs. Bennet especially would be overflowing with news and gossip and speculations, and he would not have a moment's peace until he listened patiently to her eager analysis of how likely Mr. Bingley was to offer for one of their daughters.

Out in the hall, the front door opened. Mr. Bennet marked his place carefully and set aside his book, fastening his eyes expectantly on the drawing room door. A moment later, he heard the sound of many feet tripping past, his daughters chattering together as they mounted the stairs to their own rooms to change.

The door to the drawing room opened, and his wife stepped inside, looking very pretty in her assembly dress, her

eyes aglow with excitement.

“Well, Mrs. Bennet, how was your evening?” the master of Longbourn inquired curiously.

“Oh, my dear Mr. Bennet,” his wife cried out, “we have had a most delightful evening, a most excellent ball. I wish you had been there. Jane was so admired, nothing could be like it. Everybody said how well she looked, and Mr. Bingley thought her quite beautiful and danced with her twice. Only think of that, my dear, he actually danced with her twice, and she was the only creature in the room that he asked a second time! First of all, he asked Miss Lucas. I was so vexed to see him stand up with her, but however, he did not admire her at all – indeed, nobody can, you know – and he seemed quite struck with Jane as she was going down the dance. So he inquired after her and was introduced, and he asked her for the two next. He danced with a few others and then, can you imagine, he danced the Boulanger with Jane as well! Oh, if my dear Jane could be installed as mistress of Netherfield, and the others equally well married, I will have nothing to wish for!”

“I thought I heard that Lady Lucas said that Mr. Bingley was to bring a large party from London for the assembly,” Mr. Bennet said. “Were there indeed numerous eligible gentlemen there tonight?”

“There were not!” Mrs. Bennet said indignantly. “There were but two other men in Mr. Bingley’s party, and one is already married, to Bingley’s elder sister! The other young gentleman, a Mr. Darcy, is tall and handsome, but I do not think he is wealthy. Apparently he is master of a small estate in Leicestershire. But he is, at least, not married! Perhaps he will do for Lizzy.”

“Only if the gentleman is intelligent,” her husband said, rising somewhat ponderously to his feet. “Lizzy would not enjoy a foolish husband, and I want her to be happy.”

“Well, I truly do not know why you always give her the preference. Elizabeth is not a bit better than the others, and I

am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humored as Lydia.”

“They are all silly and ignorant, like other girls, but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters.”

“Nonsense, Mr. Bennet. All the same, if she wishes to marry a man of small fortune, I will not quarrel in the least. But Jane must marry Mr. Bingley, of that I am determined!”

She paused, her brow wrinkled, and continued, “Nor can I be entirely certain about Mr. Darcy’s fortune; I must ask Lady Lucas if she knows anything more about the gentleman’s prospects. If he has a private fortune or something of the like, he might do very well for Lydia!”

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Elizabeth’s Bedchamber

Elizabeth slid between the sheets, grateful for the warming pan placed there some half an hour previously. A tap at the door caught her attention, and Jane, clad in nightgown and dressing gown with her blonde head snugly encased in a lacy nightcap, opened the door and hurried inside. Elizabeth flipped one corner of the bedclothes back and said, “Do come lay down, Jane, it is much warmer.”

Jane slid into the bed beside her, grateful for heat. Elizabeth turned her head to look at her sister. “So?” she asked. “What did you think?”

Jane scooted a bit nearer. “I like Mr. Bingley very much,” she admitted, a pink blush spreading across her cheeks. “He is kind and gallant with plenty of good sense and vivacity, but I suppose you think me absurd.”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth said warmly, “indeed, I believe you have neglected to list all of his virtues. He is also quite

handsome, in possession of a fortune and estate, and thus the perfect man. And you would make him a lovely wife.”

“Now, Lizzy, you are starting to sound like Mamma,” Jane reproached, trying not to laugh.

“But I am serious!” Elizabeth protested, smiling widely. “After all, he did dance with you twice.”

“I know,” Jane said and sighed dreamily. “I was not expecting him to ask me a second time.”

“Were you not? It seemed certain to me. He could hardly help noticing that you are by far the prettiest woman in Meryton. But what of his sisters? Does your approbation extend thus to them as well?”

“But of course,” Jane said warmly. “I thought them delightful.”

“You would,” Elizabeth returned, “delightful creature that you are yourself! You think everyone else as charming as you are.”

“Did you not like them, Lizzy?” Jane asked in surprise.

“I think that they are very fine,” Elizabeth said slowly, cogitating. “And I think that they know it. But their manners are quite pleasant, and they are very personable when it pleases them to be.”

“And what did you think of Mr. Darcy?” Jane asked.

Elizabeth was not surprised that her elder sister had turned off the subject of Mr. Bingley’s sisters so suddenly; Jane did not relish hearing criticism of those whom she had made up her mind to like.

“I do not dislike him,” she said thoughtfully. “He is not garrulous – even a trifle stiff, I would say. But he was not overtly rude or insulting.”

Jane blew out a breath. “Mr. Bingley mentioned that he and Mr. Darcy are good friends and that Mr. Darcy is generally

very reserved in company. But he does not mean anything by it.”

“That agrees with my observations also,” Elizabeth remarked.

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The Breakfast Parlor

Netherfield

The Next Morning

Darcy took a sip of hot coffee and turned his attention onto the letter in his hand.

Hyde Park

14th October, 1811

Cousin,

Enclosed are several letters for you; all but one are innocuous, and that one is, not surprisingly, from Lawrence.

He visited me yesterday in my quarters and demanded to know where you and Georgiana are currently lodging. I refused to tell him, of course, and he left muttering about setting the Runners on you. Before you give way to anxiety, I beg you not to concern yourself that he actually will do so. It would cause gossip, and your brother despises gossip. Moreover, it would require him to actually do something more than harass me for an hour, and he is far too lazy a man to bestir himself.

You asked about his indebtedness. I fear that he continues to visit the moneylenders, fool that he is, and has lost a great deal at the gaming tables. Without a doubt, a judicious alliance with a wealthy member of the haut ton

would be helpful to Lawrence, but my father is on your side regarding Georgiana; she is but sixteen and certainly too young to wed. With the two of us legally her guardians, I am confident that Lawrence cannot force her into marriage. However, I also recognize that my dear cousin would be most dismayed at even the smallest degree of attention from Lawrence's dissolute friends, and thus am pleased you have chosen to take her into the country for a time. I hope you will enjoy yourself in Hertfordshire.

I will be in England for the foreseeable future, which I confess pleases me. I have spent enough months fighting through the mud against the Tyrant, though of course we may be called to battle at any time. I am not in charge of my own destiny.

Keep my charge safe, Cousin!

Sincerely,

Richard Fitzwilliam, Colonel

Darcy grimaced but also felt his body relax. It was true enough that his older brother was a thoroughly indolent man and always content to put off the concerns of tomorrow in favor of the pleasures of today. In this, he was much like his father's godson, George Wickham, who was equally inclined to enjoy life as much as possible, indifferent to the needs of the future.

He glanced through the rest of his correspondence – one from his banker, two from his steward in Leicestershire – before unhappily turning his attention to his brother's letter.

Darcy House

London

10th October, 1811

Fitz,

I do not know why you dragged Georgiana away from London, but I find it most irritating. I had planned to host a dinner party with a few of the ton's most eligible families in attendance, all of whom would be pleased to marry a Darcy. Really, Brother, I find you most exasperating! It is not fair to Georgiana to cloister her in the country. Moreover, you and I both know she is shy and needs to become more accustomed to company. I realize that, against my better judgment, I allowed you to become our sister's guardian, but...

“Good morning, Brother.”

Darcy quickly folded the letter and turned to smile up at his sister. Georgiana Darcy was, at age sixteen, already tall and well formed, with blonde hair and blue eyes. She was dressed in a blue sprigged muslin dress with a minimum of knots and lace, which suited her well.

“Good morning, Georgiana,” he replied. “I hope you are well this morning.”

“Yes, very well. I am sleeping far better here than I did in London; the air is so much cleaner, and it is far quieter too.”

“Yes, if you do not mind roosters crowing,” he said affectionately.

“You know I do not,” his sister replied, walking over to put eggs and toast on a plate from the breakfast buffet on the sideboard. “I far, far prefer domestic fowl to noisy watchmen!”

Darcy laughed and said, “I do as well.”

Georgiana took her seat across from her brother and nodded at the letters. “I hope all is well in London?”

“Yes. Richard writes that he is well, and he will be settled in England for some time.”

“I am glad. And Lawrence?”

Darcy sighed and took a sip of his coffee, which was now rather cold.

“He is very much what he always is. He seems well enough.”

Georgiana took a bite of eggs, chewed, and swallowed before saying, “I know we both find London entirely too noisy and busy, but perhaps it is good that Lawrence feels differently. As the head of our family, he needs to spend more time in Town than we do dealing with business.”

“That is true,” Darcy agreed with somewhat forced cheer. He was glad that Georgiana did not seem to be aware of their elder brother’s more unpleasant proclivities. On the other hand, he had no intention of actually lying about his brother, and thus was not certain what to say next.

“How was the assembly last night?”

“Oh, it went well,” Darcy remarked, relieved at the change in topic. “I met and danced with a number of the local ladies, and they seemed very pleasant.”

“Pleasant and provincial,” a supercilious voice announced, and both Darceys looked up as Miss Bingley strolled into the room and declared, “I doubt you will particularly like them, Miss Darcy; you are the daughter of a great house, and I am confident that you would find nothing in common with any of the ladies we met last night.”

“Oh, I doubt that is true,” Georgiana replied. “I far prefer small communities to Town. It is difficult for me to remember all the rules and regulations of polite society, and when I meet dozens of people, my head aches trying to remember them all!”

“Well, you are still young,” Miss Bingley said with a condescending smile, as she walked over to collect food from the buffet. When she had taken her seat, armed with a cup of chocolate and two slices of toast with jam, she continued,

“When you are older, perhaps you should consider a husband who is more at ease with society?”

Georgiana and her brother exchanged amused glances. Miss Bingley was openly, exuberantly interested in having her brother marry Miss Darcy, who had a dowry of thirty thousand pounds.

“We will see,” Darcy said casually. “As you say, my sister is still far too young to think of marriage.”

“Of course. Now, I do wonder what you would care to do today, Miss Darcy. Perhaps you would enjoy playing on the pianoforte? I fear it is not quite as good an instrument as you might reasonably expect, but it has been recently tuned.”

“I am certain I will wish to do so,” the younger woman said, “but for now, I hope my brother is willing to go on a walk with me. Hertfordshire seems a lovely county.”

“Oh!” Miss Bingley said, looking startled. “Well, I fear the formal gardens have been rather neglected, but there is, I think, a pleasant walk to a pond behind the stables?”

She sounded uncertain, but Georgiana promptly responded, “Thank you, Miss Bingley. I am certain that we will enjoy a brisk walk regardless of the presence or lack of attractive vegetation.”

“Would you like me to go with you?” her hostess inquired, trying, and failing, to sound genuine.

“Oh, no,” Georgiana replied gravely, “I know you only arrived here recently, and while I have never been in charge of a household, I know it is a great deal of work. Besides, Fitzwilliam and I are inclined to walk very far and very fast.”

“I do have rather a lot of work today,” Miss Bingley agreed quickly.

Chapter 3

Thirty minutes later

The back door of Netherfield opened just wide enough to allow the egress of two people. Mr. Darcy and his sister Georgiana exited the house; he in a heavy wool coat and she in a fur pelisse, both wearing sensible half-boots against the chilly weather and cold ground.

They strode briskly together down the gravel walk, dried leaves crunching beneath their feet. Leafless elm trees drooped over the path, edged by brown grass. Few spots of color enlivened the scene, but here and there patches of white asters clustered like drifts of snow, marigolds brightening otherwise dead beds with their cheerful hue.

The sharp snap in the air did not lend itself to meandering, so the siblings marched briskly along the crushed rock towards the smell of horses. The stables loomed up before them before the path veered around and behind, and the nickers of horses and the voices of stable boys calling one to another filled the air.

The smells without the warmth of the horses were not pleasant, and the brother and sister hurried on. The parkland forest they entered was rather dreary, with very little green to relieve the gray-brown of the bark of the oaks and elms. Birds rustled and hopped among the fallen leaves, searching for the last dry berries and nuts of the year.

A streamlet ran over to burble alongside their path, its swift-running water chuckling over rounded pebbles before slowing sedately into a pond on the other side of the woods. Georgiana broke the comfortable silence with a delighted little cry.

Across the lily-pad covered pond, a charming belvedere looked out over the glassy water. The siblings hurried, arm in

arm, around the edge of the water, frogs plopping off the muddy bank or peering up at them from between bulrushes as they passed.

They reached the belvedere and stepped inside, and Darcy sneezed as their footsteps stirred up dust that had long laid dormant across the bare wooden floor.

“Mr. Bingley might like to have some furniture placed here,” Georgiana commented, looking around appraisingly.

“I quite agree,” Darcy replied, staring out at the pond. It was a lovely scene, placid and glassy-still. The water was a dull blue, reflecting the pale October sky, the cattails and bulrushes around its edge still delightfully green. Ripples spread out slowly from where a frog hopped into the water, and a fish rose briefly to the surface before vanishing again on business of its own.

“Brother?” Georgiana asked.

“Yes?” Darcy replied absently. His own estate of Bellhaven was a good deal smaller than Netherfield, but it did boast an attractive pond. Perhaps, when there were sufficient funds, he would have a small structure built by the water for Georgiana’s pleasure.

“Is there some reason why Father gave you so little in his will?”

Darcy jerked in surprise and turned an amazed look on his sister, who was staring up with a mixture of embarrassment and indignation.

His mouth opened and then shut. He was not quite certain what to say.

“Because it is not fair at all,” Georgiana continued, and now she looked genuinely angry. “Everyone knows that you are far more responsible and diligent than Lawrence!”

Darcy shook his head and said, “It is the way of our class that the eldest son inherits. You know that, dear one.”

“Yes, I do know, but that is true only of Pemberley. Why did Father give you Bellhaven instead of Timbreline?”

“Do you not like Bellhaven?”

The girl huffed and said, “Of course I do. It is lovely. But it is also small, and had been badly neglected before you took charge of it. I know that Timbreline has an income of at least two thousand pounds a year, and Bellhaven is closer to one thousand pounds. It is not fair in the least that Lawrence should receive both Pemberley and Timbreline, and you were bequeathed only Bellhaven!”

Darcy tightened his lips and turned toward the water. He was not entirely certain what to say. The truth might make Georgiana feel guilty, but perhaps she deserved to know the truth?

“I do not remember much about Father, but I did not imagine he could be so cruel!” she declared.

He sighed and, his mind made up, turned and took his sister’s hands in his own. “It is not like that. Father was a good man, whose only mistake was believing that Lawrence was more reliable and diligent a man than he is.”

“But why not give you Timbreline?” she asked doggedly.

“He did,” Darcy said, and compelled by the look of shock on her face, he continued. “The truth is that I was bequeathed Timbreline, and Lawrence inherited Bellhaven along with, of course, Pemberley. After our father died, our older brother and I met and decided to legally trade estates.”

“But why?”

Again, Darcy took a deep breath and pondered. There were two reasons, and one was bound to upset his sister.

“Brother, please tell me.”

“The first reason had to do with location,” he explained. “Lawrence and I have not been on good terms for many years, and Timbreline, as you know, borders Pemberley to the north.

We would have had to work together regarding fencing and flooding and the like, which would certainly have led to quarrels.”

“And the second reason?” Georgiana asked.

He blew out a breath and looked into her eyes, brown meeting blue. “The second reason had to do with you. Father made Lawrence and our cousin Richard Fitzwilliam your joint legal guardians. I have no doubt that Father had good intentions; Lawrence is my elder by three years, and he was engaged to be married at the time of our father’s death. However, Richard and I were both in agreement that I would be a better guardian than Lawrence. I agreed to exchange estates if Lawrence would legally relinquish his position as your guardian.”

Georgiana stared at him, her face white, and abruptly burst into tears. He stared at her in shock and then pulled her close to him. She clung to him and cried out, “Oh Brother, thank you! Thank you so very much!”

He returned the embrace with relief and for a minute, all was silent save for the girl’s sobs, which eventually died away.

Darcy solemnly handed over his handkerchief and waited until Georgiana had recovered her poise, and then guided her over to the steps which led down to a dock on the pond.

“Shall we sit down, my dear?” he invited. “I daresay our clothes will not suffer particularly.”

“No, we wore very practical garments for striding briskly in autumn,” Georgiana agreed, taking her place on a step. Darcy, a moment later, sat down beside her.

For a minute, the two siblings merely gazed out at the rippling waters, which were charmingly ringed by waving rushes and the like.

“Do you dislike Lawrence?” Darcy finally asked.

Georgiana sighed deeply and wrinkled her nose. “I love him as a brother, of course, but no, I do not like him. More than that, I am afraid of him.”

“Afraid?” Fitzwilliam demanded, turning a frowning look on his sister.

“Of his disapproval? His indifference? I have never imagined he cared about me, which is, perhaps, not surprising given that we are so very far apart in age.” Georgiana paused to smooth a wrinkle in her skirt. “He used to call me a little mewling brat in my hearing, that kind of thing. When I was at school and the headmistress told me, very gently, that my father had died, I confess my very first thought was that Lawrence would be my new guardian, and that is what caused me to burst into tears. I know that sounds dreadful, that I did not grieve my father more, but I truly did not know him all that well.”

“You did not,” her brother agreed, pulling her close to him and planting a kiss on her bonnet. “He was already failing in his health by the time you were six years of age, so naturally you saw little of him.”

“When I came home to Pemberley,” Georgiana continued, “and was informed that you and Cousin Richard were to be my guardians, I was so very relieved! Not that I think Lawrence would physically harm me, of course, but I did not think he would care much for my needs and wants. I know he finds me tedious and tiresome. In any case, I am very grateful, though it makes me sad that you lost a better estate on my behalf.”

Darcy had also paid his brother ten thousand of the thirty thousand pounds that were given to him in the senior Darcy’s will, but he did not intend to tell that to his sister.

“I truly am pleased with Bellhaven,” Darcy remarked instead. “It is good land, and even in the five years since our father’s death, I have managed to increase the income substantially. It had been neglected for many years and only needed a diligent master to improve it.”

“I am glad,” Georgiana said, and sighed. A moment later, she continued, “Did our brother say anything about Anne?”

Darcy frowned in an attempt to remember, and then he said, “I confess I did not read the entire letter yet. I hope he did; she should be seven months along now.”

Georgiana hesitated and then said shyly, “I know that such topics are generally not considered suitable for maidens, but Cousin Anne has never carried a pregnancy this long before, yes?”

Darcy sighed. It was true enough that his young sister supposedly ought not to know the details of pregnancy, miscarriage, and childbirth, but then, she was already sixteen years of age. Far better that he tell her about the realities of life than someone else.

“That is correct,” he said. “Anne has always been sickly, and this is her third pregnancy. The other two ended in miscarriage within a few months of conception. To be entirely honest, I am surprised that she agreed to marry Lawrence. They have nothing in common, and I feared she would have difficulty bearing an heir.”

“Given the character of Anne’s mother, I am not surprised in the least,” Georgiana said dryly. “If I were living with Lady Catherine, I would probably leap at the chance of marrying as soon as possible.”

Darcy considered this, and he eventually concluded that Georgiana was in the right of it. Their aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, was overbearing, autocratic, condescending, and rude. Anne, who was a meek, quiet lady, had probably accepted Lawrence Darcy’s offer because she wished to leave Rosings, the de Bourgh’s estate in Kent, in favor of Pemberley.

And the truth was that Anne might well be content at Pemberley, even with Lawrence as master. The current heir was a spendthrift and a gambler, along with being a rake, but he probably ignored his bride when she was carrying his

child. Mrs. Reynolds, who had been housekeeper of that great house for many years, was an excellent woman and could be trusted to cosset and look after Mrs. Darcy.

“We had best return, Brother,” Georgiana remarked and then sighed, “though this is lovely, and I hope we can come again.”

“Of course we can.”

/

Longbourn

The chatter in the drawing room almost entirely drowned out the sound of clinking cups in saucers and the crackling of a well-tended fire. Maria Lucas and Kitty and Lydia Bennet sat in a picturesque row on the couch, looking fresh and pretty in their pink and blue muslins as they giggled with their heads together. Jane, Charlotte, and Elizabeth sat demurely in their chairs beneath the window, holding conversation, while over in front of the fire, Lady Lucas and Mrs. Bennet leaned towards each other with teacups held carefully in their laps.

“So, Lady Lucas,” Mrs. Bennet said eagerly, “Have you learned anything further about Mr. Darcy?”

“I have,” her companion said. “He is the second son of a Mr. George Darcy, now deceased, and his elder brother is master of a great estate in Derbyshire worth at least ten thousand pounds a year.”

“Ten thousand pounds a year,” Mrs. Bennet shrieked, clutching her chest with her free hand. “Is the elder brother likely to visit, do you know?”

“I fear it matters not,” Lady Lucas said sadly, “because he is already married.”

Mrs. Bennet deflated noticeably. “Oh, what a pity! So this Mr. Darcy has only a small estate up north?”

“In Leicestershire, yes. He met Mr. Bingley some years ago, and since Mr. Bingley does not have any experience in managing an estate, Mr. Darcy offered to spend some weeks here.”

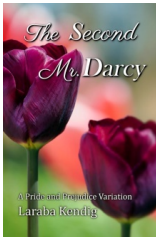
“I see,” Mrs. Bennet said, frowning. “Well, since he is not rich, I suppose Elizabeth can have him.”

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from my novel, *The Second Mr. Darcy!* The complete book contains 42 chapters, plus 3 chapters of epilogue – over 550 pages altogether – and multiple happily ever afters! It is [now available on Amazon and Kindle Unlimited](#).

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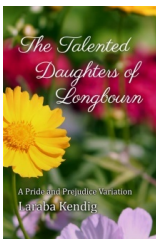
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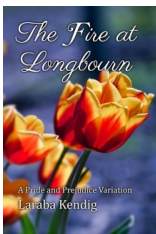
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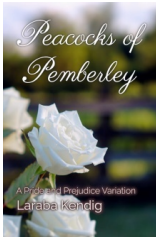
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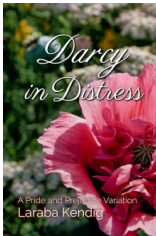
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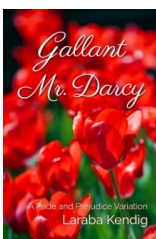
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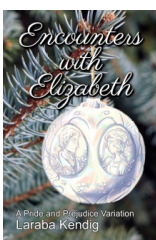
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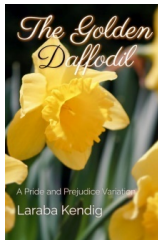
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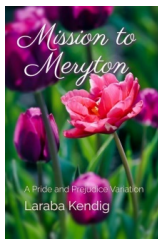
Encounters with Elizabeth



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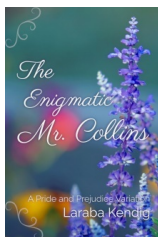
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Note from the Author

As an American in the 21st century, I struggle to understand “pounds” in Regency times. So how much was Elizabeth’s seventy thousand pound inheritance? It was huge. It is a little hard to compare money then to money now because of servants and taxes and how much food cost and this and that ... but online calculators suggest that it was more than a million dollars – wow!

The Bingleys are even wealthier. Bingley makes four thousand pounds a year presumably off of his investments; at four percent, that means he has one hundred thousand pounds. The Bingley sisters each have twenty thousand pound dowries. So the Bingleys are super wealthy.

Darcy is even wealthier, of course. Ten thousand pounds a year was a huge income.

Another major plot point was, of course, Lydia’s pregnancy. It is hard, again, as a modern day American to understand how serious it was during the Regency for an unwed woman to become pregnant. Lydia’s situation affected not just her reputation, but that of the entire family – again, a rather foreign concept. In that day, it was a disastrous situation. Thankfully, Lydia avoided a marriage to Wickham. He is a total jerk and deserved to be locked up.

Again, many thanks to my wonderful readers who do me the honor of reading my books, which allows me to do what I love, write more stories. You are awesome!

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Dedication

I praise God for my wonderful publishing team consisting of my dear husband; my super editor, Maple Steely; and my marketing genius, Pemberley Darcy. You are awesome! I am spoiled having such a great group taking care of so many things, allowing me to focus my time on what I love, writing stories.

I am also eternally grateful to Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Gal 2:20(NIV)

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