

3-BOOK COLLECTION

The Dramas



ELIZABETH ADAMS

THE DRAMAS

THREE PRIDE & PREJUDICE
VARIATIONS THAT WILL MAKE YOU
LAUGH, CRY, & FALL IN LOVE

ELIZABETH ADAMS

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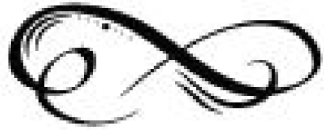
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UNWILLING



For my eldest daughter, on the occasion of her tenth birthday.

Dream big, baby girl. The world is yours.

CHAPTER I



3 *December, 1811*

7 Days After the Netherfield Ball

Longbourn, Hertfordshire

Thomas Bennet sat in his study facing his old friend Withers, a man he had known since they were boys together and who was a physician in the next town. Once a month, they would meet for a game of chess and a glass of port to discuss old times and new discoveries. Today, after their game, which Withers happily won, Bennet asked his friend if he wouldn't mind giving him a bit of an examination. He'd had some chest pain lately, and though he thought it was likely nothing, it was frequent enough that he thought he should bring it up.

After an examination lying on the divan in his bookroom, Bennet sat up and retied his cravat and pulled his jacket back on while his old friend looked on worriedly. Finally, Withers told Bennet what he suspected, as much as it pained him.

Thomas Bennet's heart was failing and he wasn't long for this earth.

"Are you sure?" asked Mr. Bennet.

"I'm sorry, Bennet. I know it isn't welcome news. But with any luck, you will have another year, possibly two. It could be more. These things aren't always predictable."

Mr. Bennet nodded slowly. "Is there anything to be done?" he asked.

"I'm afraid there isn't much. Relaxation, a calm environment. Some say the seaside is restorative. Perhaps your family is due for a holiday."

Mr. Bennet nodded again, his eyes on the floor.

The physician held out his hand. "Don't hesitate to call for me if you experience further problems. I will attend you as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Withers."

"Of course. Take care, Bennet." The physician left the room and closed the door quietly behind him.

Thomas Bennet sat stunned, staring out the window for he knew not how long, wondering what would become of him. Would he go quietly in his sleep? Would he collapse on his horse in a far off field, not to be found until it was too late? And his girls! Five daughters between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one. What would become of them? What of Jane and Lizzy? His two most sensible daughters did not deserve the life that was about to be thrust upon them.

After a poor night's sleep, Bennet rose early with a new determination.

He may have preferred to ignore the world, but that did not mean he didn't know how it worked. His wife had a meager portion. Her two brothers would surely assist, and perhaps Collins could be worked on for something, but he couldn't be sure. His brother Gardiner was successful, true, but his house was not large enough to suddenly fit in six grown women.

No, he knew how it would be. His wife would become even sillier than she already was and would continue to throw his daughters at every possible gentleman that came within a hundred yards of them. Now was the time to think and plan.

He was ever good at thinking; of thinking, he'd had no lack. But what he thought about before his diagnosis and what he thought about now were very different topics indeed. He must now use his considerable powers of mind to find his daughters husbands—good ones. Ones who would look after his widow when he was gone. Failing that, he needed to prepare them to earn their way in the world, if it came to it. He imagined Mrs. Bennet could live with her sister Phillips, and possibly Kitty and Lydia with her, though it would be tight. His three elder daughters could move to London with his brother Gardiner. If only one of them could marry, even moderately well, it would widen their social sphere and show that the girls were marriageable.

In a fit of industry rarely seen in the master of Longbourn, Thomas Bennet went to his desk and withdrew the estate

ledgers. He may only have a year or two left, and he wouldn't be able to save anything significant, he should have started doing that years ago, he knew, but he could do something, surely.

Firstly, he examined the entail papers and made note of everything that was not required to go to his obsequious heir, Mr. Collins—a distant cousin of poor mental powers. Second, he drafted a detailed will, ensuring his wife retained everything she had brought into her marriage and all the gifts he had given her over the years. All of the Bennet family jewelry that could be separated from the estate he divided between his two eldest daughters, knowing they were the least likely to lose it and the most likely to know to sell it if it became necessary. Perhaps he could convince Collins to release the artwork as well.

He then went over the estate budget, and as much as he knew they would not like it, he reduced his wife's and daughters' pin money to a mere pittance, saving the balance for their future. If they stayed in the country, it could go toward a small cottage. If they went to town, he would give the money to his brother Gardiner to invest on his daughters' behalf. Perhaps the man could make more of it than he had.

With that thought in mind, he began his letters. He sent one to his solicitor asking him to finalize the will. Another went to his brother Gardiner, asking if he knew of any seaside towns that weren't too expensive but where he might enjoy a pleasant rest. He also asked his brother if he would consider hosting one or more of his daughters during the season.

It was a conundrum. He knew his daughters needed to marry well and that they had the best chance of doing that in town, but he did not want to part with them when he knew he had so little time left. His most marriageable daughters were his two eldest, Jane and Elizabeth, who also happened to be his two favorite. Of course, he could go to town with them, but he did not find London relaxing and relaxation was what the physician had told him he needed. It was all very vexing.

Finally, he asked his wife to wait on him.

“Yes, Mr. Bennet, what is it?” his wife asked impatiently as she bustled into the bookroom.

“Mrs. Bennet, please sit down. There is something I must tell you.”

Mrs. Bennet sat before her husband, her hands clasped in her lap, her cheeks flushed and her white cap with the lace trim slightly askew on her head. She looked at him with pursed lips, clearly ready for him to begin.

“Mrs. Bennet, I have decided to make a few changes to Longbourn. There is news of which you need to be made aware.” At that, Mrs. Bennet began to look worried and shifted in her seat. “We did not yield as much as we had hoped with the recent harvest, and our income reflects this.” She gasped. “Now, do not fret, my dear, we are not destitute, but I will need to reduce your and the girls’ allowances for some time.” She opened her mouth but closed it again before any sound came out.

“Now, you may find this strange, Mrs. Bennet, but I believe we need to prepare our daughters for marriage.” At this, Mrs. Bennet sat straight up and looked queerly at her husband. “Of course, we don’t want any suitors to be put off by our reduced circumstances, so you mustn’t say anything to anyone about it. We don’t want to ruin their chances now, do we?” he said cajolingly.

“No, of course not, I won’t breathe a word of it.” She wrung her handkerchief for a moment before asking, “Is it very bad, Mr. Bennet?”

“No, my dear, not so bad. But we want to urge caution, don’t we? We’ll have to cut back on entertaining, and the meals could be simpler.” She nodded vigorously. “Now, about our girls. What say you to a music master for them? I have also thought about drawing lessons.”

Not being a very clever woman, Mrs. Bennet never questioned how they could afford masters when they were supposedly in financial straits. And so the conversation continued, Mr. Bennet suggesting he himself would tutor them in literature, something he knew would not be easy but he thought necessary if they wanted to pass themselves off as having any kind of intelligence. Mrs. Bennet suggested French lessons to which her husband quickly agreed and though she did not like it, she agreed with her husband’s idea of having the girls learn some basic cookery skills in the kitchen. Finally, he came to the most difficult part of the conversation.

“Mrs. Bennet, I must tell you something you will not like.”

She looked at him with wide eyes, surprised after their very pleasant conversation about their girls. It was amazing what having an attentive husband could do for one's nerves.

“What is it?” she asked.

“About Catherine and Lydia, I do not think they are prepared to be out.”

Mrs. Bennet began to protest, her voice rising shrilly as she went on about what fun they should be having and how pretty and lively they were. It was almost enough to make Mr. Bennet give up on his plan entirely.

“Now, now, Mrs. Bennet, listen to me.” He waited for her to calm before he spoke again in a soothing voice, so unlike his usual acerbic way of addressing her. “Think about it. We have five daughters. Taking them all about and dressing them as they ought will be very expensive. Would it not be easier if there were only two or three of them to dress and plan for?”

She was about to protest again when she saw his serious look entreating her to consider his plan. Silly and petty she might be, but Mrs. Bennet knew the cost of fabric and she understood his logic, however much she might dislike it.

He could tell she was wavering and decided to add another log to the fire. “If we can successfully reduce our expenditures, and if Kitty and Lydia can focus on their music and studies, I may be able to take you to the seaside for the summer.”

“The seaside?” Her eyes brightened suddenly and she sat up straighter in her chair. “Truly, Mr. Bennet? You are not teasing?” she asked hopefully.

Mr. Bennet felt the tiniest twinge of guilt over her enthusiasm and apparent distrust of him, but it was gone almost as soon as it appeared. “Truly. I would like to take a house for the summer. I’ve already sent out inquiries.”

That was enough to convince Mrs. Bennet to agree to even the most stringent changes, and so they continued their plans for the girls, deciding that Kitty and Lydia could attend family functions at home. Until at least one of her other sisters was married or she turned nineteen, whichever came first, Kitty was not to be out, and Lydia must follow suit. Three daughters out was enough for anyone to handle, Mr. Bennet told his wife, and he did not want her to overtax herself. Mrs. Bennet blushed prettily and smiled at her husband, readily agreeing that he knew best.

CHAPTER 2



Over the next se’nnight, Mr. Bennet engaged a music master, a drawing master, and a French tutor. He brought all his girls into his bookroom and told them of the coming changes: he had created a schedule for each of them, and each day they would be expected to study with the masters, practice a bit on their own, and assist their mother in running the household. In addition, they would each meet with him every week to discuss literature and history. They were stunned, and for a full minute, no one said anything; the girls just stared at their father as if they had never seen him before. Jane finally broke the silence.

“I will look forward to the drawing master, sir. Thank you for the consideration.”

Her sisters murmured thanks as well and exchanged confused glances. Mr. Bennet held up a hand.

“That is not all. From now on, your excursions and allowance will depend upon your diligence to your daily tasks.” Five pairs of eyes widened. “If you complete them satisfactorily and give your masters no trouble, you will be

granted privileges. If you do not,” he looked at his youngest two daughters steadily, “you will take your meals above stairs and not be permitted in company.”

At this, Lydia, the youngest and silliest Bennet daughter, loudly erupted. She complained of how harsh this all sounded and wondered when they would walk to Meryton or visit their friends if they were busy studying all the time. She appealed to her mother who looked at her husband for a moment before calmly telling Lydia that she supported her husband’s edicts. Lydia gaped at her father until he told her that her unladylike and childish display had just earned her an afternoon in her room and a meal above stairs.

Lydia stared at her family incredulously, looking to her sisters for support, but their eyes were trained steadily to the floor. Finally, Lydia balled her fists at her side and stomped her way upstairs, loudly slamming the door to her room.

“That will earn her breakfast in her room as well,” Mr. Bennet said calmly. “Now, here are each of your schedules.” He passed out a paper with a calendar of sorts on it to each of his daughters, who in turn continued to stare at him strangely.

“Music lessons every day!” commented Mary and Kitty, though only one sounded pleased by the prospect.

“Yes. As you can see, your practice times are there as well. You will each spend one hour with the master and another in practice each day, though more would certainly not hurt you.” He looked at Elizabeth significantly. She gave him a sheepish look. “I’ve ordered the pianoforte in the back sitting room

tuned and it shall be used to practice while the music room shall be used for lessons. Any questions?”

Mary timidly spoke up. “What do you mean by ‘non-religious texts’?”

“I mean that your reading time should be spent reading something other than doctrine and Fordyce. Now,” he looked at each of his daughters authoritatively, “you know what needs doing. Get to it.”

He turned back to his desk and sat down, his initiative used up for the day. He remained upright, watching them carefully, though, not wanting them to see his weakness. He told himself it would only be difficult in the beginning. Once they had a rhythm going, everything would move along smoothly.

Longbourn was a very noisy house that morning, Mary pounding away on the pianoforte in one room, Elizabeth tinkling half-heartedly in another, Jane huffing quietly as she attempted to draw a bowl with appropriate shadowing and Kitty repeating her French tutor with a very bad accent, though it must be said that she made up for it with enthusiasm.

Sitting alone and thinking about what was to come, Mr. Bennet had a moment of regret for not demanding Elizabeth marry Mr. Collins the month before. Yes, the man was an obsequious toad, but perhaps she could have made something of him. He’d no doubt that she could have managed him, had she set her mind to it. But he had not known then what he knew now, and he wasn’t sure which Elizabeth would have hated more: being married to Collins or having to earn her

living as a governess or a companion. If another suitor came along, for any of them, he would have to say yes out of simple necessity. As long as the man was good, respectable, and solvent, he saw no reason to withhold his blessing. Had Collins asked after his diagnosis instead of before, he did not know how he would have acted.

He simply did not know.



By mid-afternoon, each of the Bennet girls, save Lydia, had spent time with a music and drawing master, had been told by said master what she should work on and accomplish before her next lesson the following day, and had spent an hour learning French with the tutor. The two eldest girls, Jane and Elizabeth, would take their lessons together and be one another's practice partners. Kitty and Mary would continue on individually and practice together in the afternoons, which neither was very happy about, Mary being very serious and Kitty being very silly. When it was time to dress for dinner, Longbourn had never seen four more tired young women trudging up the stairs to change.

Dinner that evening was a subdued affair. The girls were tired and confused by their father's recent actions. The elder were worried that something had occurred to cause so drastic a change—for before, he really had been a very indolent father—and the younger were by turns happy to be studying seriously (Mary) and pleased the day was over (Kitty). It

should be said that Kitty did miss her younger sister Lydia, for the first little while, at least. She missed having someone to talk to and giggle with. But it should also be said that while Kitty was a very silly girl, she was also a girl of hidden talents. She had done well with her scales in her music lesson and the master had complimented her high, delicate voice, and to her great surprise, the drawing master told her she was learning the quickest of all her sisters. Though exhausted and confused and missing her sister slightly, Kitty Bennet went in to dinner just a tiny bit happier that day.



Lydia Bennet was in a fine mess. She had thought having dinner in her room wouldn't be so very bad. She had a delicious novel to read and everyone at the table would miss her lively conversation and her father would be sorry he sent her upstairs. Come breakfast, they would all be thrilled to see her again. She changed her mind when she saw the tray of lumpy porridge Sarah, the maid, brought to her room. When she asked about it, sure there must have been some mistake, the maid informed her that it was brought on Mr. Bennet's orders and he'd said that proper food was served in the proper dining room to proper ladies. The maid's cheeks burned as she recited the message, and Lydia positively quivered with anger. She balled her fists and stamped her foot and let out a most unladylike grunt. Sarah bobbed a quick curtsy and dashed out of the room, just in time to avoid the heavy spoon Lydia threw at the door.

Mrs. Bennet heard the commotion from upstairs and worried over her youngest and most favored child, but her husband reassured her and said that Lydia just needed time to adjust and would accept the changes in good time. She nodded and attended her meal, imagining how jealous Lady Lucas would be when all five Bennet daughters sang in perfect harmony at the next neighborhood party.

The following morning, Lydia was surprised when the maid came in with another tray for breakfast: porridge again. There was a tiny bit of jam dolloped in the middle, but it was an uninspiring meal. She huffed and sat down to eat, thinking the sooner she was through, the sooner she could leave this room.

“Sarah, you’ve forgotten the spoon!” she called to the retreating maid.

“The master’s orders, miss. There’s a note from him there.” She pointed to a small piece of folded paper on the corner of the tray and quickly left.

Lydia picked up the note and read, “*Silver is not a ball meant for throwing. See you don’t treat it as such.*”

Lydia became so angry, the tips of her ears turned red. He expected her, Lydia Bennet, to eat without a spoon? How was she going to manage it? She certainly couldn’t put her face in the bowl like an animal. Huffing, she crossed her arms and sat on the edge of the bed, trying to ignore her growling stomach and maintain her ire. It was exhausting.

Finally, her hunger won out and she held the bowl carefully and tipped it toward her mouth. It did not work. The porridge

was far too thick. The only thing she accomplished was sliding the jam across the top and onto her own nose. Wiping her face, she poured a little bit of milk from the tiny creamer and stirred it in with her finger. She then licked the digit clean and tried her pouring system again. She was more successful this time and managed to get most of the porridge in her mouth and very little on her chin and only a few drops on her gown. Finally, after several minutes of very undignified eating, she wiped her face, washed her hands in the basin, and left her room to find her sister. Perhaps they could go visit Maria Lucas and walk into Meryton to buy some new ribbons.

Once downstairs, Lydia was met with the sound of Mary practicing the pianoforte in the back sitting room while Jane very painstakingly worked her way through basic scales in the music room. She stepped into the morning room where she found Elizabeth bent over a sketchbook, looking back and forth at a bowl on the table while a thin young man looked on. Searching for her sister Kitty, Lydia wandered back into the main hall where she was quickly met by Mrs. Hill, the housekeeper, who immediately greeted her.

“Miss Lydia, your father has said it’s your time for your French lesson. The tutor’s waiting for you in the parlor.” She quickly ushered Lydia into the room and left, leaving her alone with a portly man about forty years old with a curling gray mustache.

In quick order, Lydia was sitting and repeating words the man told her to say and wondering why she was being forced

to undergo such torture when she would so much rather be having fun.

She made it through the first lesson unscathed, but when she got to the music lesson, she refused to sing or play the scales the master instructed her in and stubbornly sat on the edge of the bench, her arms crossed and her lower lip jutting out. Altogether she looked like an angry little duck. Her father was quickly summoned and he sent her to her room, informing her she would miss another dinner and more besides, but she paid him no heed.

Lydia continued to be trouble. By the end of the third day, she had taken every meal in her room, all porridge, and while this did create some small improvement for the times she was downstairs, it was short-lived. Mr. Bennet was forced to admit what he had ignored for so long: his youngest child was a spoiled little beast. Sighing, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and told himself to go ahead and do what needed to be done—putting it off would get him nowhere and might even sabotage the work he'd already put in. Mr. Bennet was not in the habit of putting large amounts of effort into anything, and he had no desire to see what he had already established fall away. Summoning all his reserves of energy and a good bit of stubbornness, he called Hill and informed him of the changes he wanted implemented.

He sent Lydia on a walk around the grounds with her sisters—she really had grown quite plump—and set to work. Lydia's things were removed from her room and taken to the nursery the next floor up. It was accessed by a staircase at the end of

the hall and the remainder of the floor was used for the servants' quarters. When each of the girls turned sixteen, she had moved out of the nursery and into her own chamber. When it was time for Kitty to come down last year, Lydia had wailed about being left all alone upstairs and had convinced her mother to allow her to move into the second guest chamber across the hall from her sister's. In the end, Mr. Bennet had allowed it, not wanting to argue with his wife or his very vocal fourteen-year-old daughter. Now he saw that he had done her no favors and that he was reaping the sour fruit of his nonexistent efforts.

So it was that by the time Lydia came back from her walk, hungry, tired, and complaining of poor treatment, she found her room locked up and all her things being put away in the old nursery, which had been closed and under sheets just that morning. A great wail was heard through Longbourn the likes of which had never been heard before. Lydia railed on about the injustice of it all, and Mr. Bennet did find himself sorely tempted to hide away in his bookroom, but when his youngest daughter looked at him red-faced and angry and, in the heat of the moment, cried out that he was an unfair and mean old man, his resolve instantly hardened. How had he let her get so far out of hand? True, she did look shocked at her own outburst and backed away slightly, but there was no excuse for such disrespect.

With great swiftness, Lydia was informed that she would no longer be allowed to visit anyone unchaperoned, not even her friend Maria Lucas, and no matter how well she behaved or

how hard she studied, she would not attend family parties nor receive any kind of allowance. She would no longer wear her hair up like a lady, but would go back to the braids and bows of a little girl. All of her gowns would be remade for her sisters as she would now be dressing her age, and until she learned to behave like a lady, she would be treated like the child that she was. If she could not behave, she would not even be permitted to eat with the family, ever.

Lydia was shocked into silence and when she finally regained her senses, she ran up the stairs to the nursery as quickly as she could and slammed the door behind her. She flung herself across the narrow bed and sobbed noisily, hoping her mother would rescue her soon. She couldn't stand this long. She simply couldn't.

Mrs. Bennet stood in the hall twisting her hands and looking worriedly between her husband and the stairs her daughter had just stomped up. Normally, she would console her child or make whichever girl Lydia was fighting with give her what she wanted to shut her up, but in this case, Lydia was fighting with her father, not her sisters, and he *had* promised to take them to the seaside... He had even brought Mrs. Bennet into the bookroom just that morning to ask her opinion on a house he'd received word of and inquired how near to the beach she would like to stay.

That settled it. She would side with her husband. Lydia's wails were not so loud from the nursery and she did so want to spend the summer at the seaside.

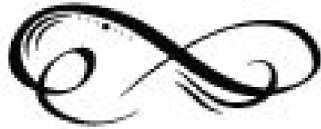


And so the days established themselves. Each morning, the girls rose and had breakfast with the family, except Lydia who ate in the nursery on her own, then went on to one hour each of music, French and drawing lessons, though not necessarily in that order, followed by an hour of music practice. Once a week they would meet with their father to discuss what they were reading and give him a progress report on their other lessons. Twice a week they sat down with their mother and reviewed menus, looked at ledgers for household purchases and servants' pay, and wrote and answered letters and invitations. Three times a week they met Cook in the kitchen and learned a thing or two about how to prepare food, something that Mrs. Bennet did not want them to learn but that she grudgingly admitted would be useful if one of them married a clergyman or an attorney. Of course, she didn't think that was likely, at least not for Jane or Lydia and possibly not Kitty either, but she did admit it was a possibility for Mary and Elizabeth. At least it kept them all occupied and out of her way for an hour or two. And of course, nobody needed to know.

Kitty had taken the news of her reduced status in stride. Of course, that was largely because she had seen the punishments enacted on Lydia, and she had no desire to return to the nursery or eat nothing but porridge noon and night. And though it was uncharitable, Kitty felt a certain amount of glee in Lydia's set down. Her younger sister had been usurping her for as long as she could remember and Kitty was ready for her

own moment in the sun. She thought her chances were good that Jane and Elizabeth would both marry soon, and then it would just be she and Mary out; she could easily outshine her very serious sister. Then it would be a full two years before Lydia was out, and with any luck, she would be married or engaged by then. In the meantime, not being officially out relieved her of making tedious calls with her mother and entertaining bores in the drawing room. No, Kitty Bennet did not mind the change much at all.

CHAPTER 3



By the time the Gardiners, Mrs. Bennet's brother and his wife, arrived from London for Christmas, the household was in a smooth routine. The girls had been practicing with their masters for more than two weeks, and the results were already beginning to show. The meals were much simpler, per the master's request, and while tired, the girls were proud of their progress and satisfied in the way only a hard day's work can provide.

They were a very merry party and there was significantly less cringing than there had been before. The officers continued to call, but Mrs. Bennet planned no parties for them, and without Kitty and Lydia running into town and dragging home soldiers for tea, fewer of them ventured out of Meryton. Once it was made clear that Lydia would not be coming down at all and that Kitty was not formally out, the visits tapered down considerably.

There had been one officer, a Mr. Wickham, who had had a particular interest in Miss Elizabeth. He had shown her great attention and flirted and smiled with ease. She had received

him with joy and had taken a certain feminine pleasure in being the object of such a man's attention. He was a great favorite among many in the area, especially among the Bennet women. He had favored Elizabeth enough to tell her about his past and about a particularly difficult experience with Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley's friend who had visited the area in the autumn.

Mr. Wickham told Elizabeth that he had been the son of the previous Mr. Darcy's steward and had grown up with Darcy, and that he was Mr. Darcy Sr.'s godson and had been that man's favorite. He and the younger Darcy had been friends, but Darcy had grown jealous of his father's affection for another and when his father passed and left a living for Mr. Wickham, Darcy had prevented the disbursement of it on some sort of technicality, and poor Mr. Wickham was reduced to poverty and forced to eke out an existence in the militia.

Elizabeth was greatly touched by his tale of woe, being of tender heart and vain spirit. Mr. Darcy had insulted her before they were even introduced, and in a very humiliating way, though there may not be another way to be insulted. At the first assembly he and his party had attended in the neighborhood, Mr. Darcy's friend Mr. Bingley, an amiable and cheerful man, had suggested he dance with Elizabeth who was currently without a partner. Looking her over disdainfully, Mr. Darcy declared that she was not handsome enough to tempt him to dance. She! Elizabeth Bennet! Second of the Bennet sisters, famed as the most beautiful family in the county.

Elizabeth liked to think she was a fair lady, with good judgment and a kind disposition, but, oh, how she hated Mr. Darcy! She had laughed and told her friends the ridiculous story, for really she did not think he could have looked at her very closely, or perhaps there was something wrong with his eyes, or maybe he was accustomed to done-up women and did not appreciate simple beauty, and of course, she was not *so* vain, but it did sting. Yes, it did. She had decided then and there that though he may be rich, in her eyes, Mr. Darcy was most assuredly lacking.

Her subsequent encounters had been much of the same. He had not overtly insulted her, but he had been proud, arrogant, and dismissive. When Mr. Wickham told her of his mistreatment at the hands of the horrid Mr. Darcy, she readily believed him, for had she not been witness to his disdain herself, and in quite a personal matter? No, Mr. Darcy was not a good man—that, she was sure of. He was pompous and difficult and thought he was above everyone else. She disliked him heartily.

Mr. Wickham's constant attentions were a balm to her wounded pride and went some way to rebuilding her image of herself in her own mind. She was not undesirable; Mr. Wickham was clearly quite tempted by her beauty.

Alas, Mr. Wickham was poor and Elizabeth was not much better, having only a small dowry and not even receiving that until her mother passed on. There was no future for the two of them and she found that she did not really mind. He was charming, to be sure, and she was greatly flattered and

appreciated his attention, but she knew her heart was not touched. Mr. Wickham was, well, she did not like to admit it because it made her sound terribly mean, but he was, quite simply, not enough. She was not sure what it was that he was lacking, or who *would* be enough, but she thought she would know it when she encountered it.

She discussed all of this in great detail with her Aunt Gardiner, a kind and understanding woman, and her aunt helped her to make sense of her convoluted feelings and congratulated her on not feeling anything very deep for Mr. Wickham, for he could not afford to marry her, and his prospects were severely lacking. In any case, by the next month he had moved on to another lady, a Miss Mary King who had recently inherited ten thousand pounds. She had not felt his defection keenly at all, confirming the untouched state of her heart, but Elizabeth did not like the words and looks of her neighbors who teased her for it. She reminded them that a man must have something to live on and that she and Wickham were only friends, no more.

One evening, after they had attended a party at Lucas Lodge, Jane and Elizabeth sat on Jane's bed, brushing out their hair and discussing the evening.

“What do you think will become of us, Jane?” Elizabeth asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you think we will ever marry? Or will we live with uncle after father passes? Or worse, will we have to take

employment?”

“Oh, surely not! We will not be as poor as that. And Papa is young still. He might live many more years. Surely we do not need to worry about that now,” Jane soothed.

Elizabeth could not be so easily comforted. Her father was acting strangely, not just with his recent edicts about their comportment and education, but with his own activities as well. He no longer went for solitary rides—he had asked Jane to accompany him the last three times he’d ridden out. And he drank less wine at dinner, not that he had ever drunk much, and he often looked at her in a way that made her feel eerie, as if someone had stepped over her grave. Jane was not the person to discuss this with—she was determined to see the bright side on every matter and whatever evidence Elizabeth produced, Jane would find a way to explain it away. It was a maddening and endearing quality.

She wished she had someone to talk to, but Jane would not do and Charlotte would usually be her next choice, but she was marrying the ridiculous Mr. Collins soon and busy with preparations for the wedding and leaving her home. Besides that, she had changed, at least in Elizabeth’s eyes. She had made a strange decision, to marry a man she neither respected nor held in any affection. Elizabeth supposed she must be looking at it as a sort of business arrangement—he would provide her a home and she would keep it for him, but she could not approve of so worthy a woman as Charlotte being wasted on so silly a man as Mr. Collins.

For now, she would keep her thoughts to herself and hope that all was well with her father.



January brought with it a return of Mr. Collins, the heir apparent to Longbourn, for his wedding to Charlotte Lucas. Mrs. Bennet wanted to lament the loss of an eligible suitor, for after all, Mr. Collins had desired to marry a daughter of Longbourn to heal the breach in the family, and her home along with it, but did not. Her husband had commanded a peaceful house and as he was being so kind and attentive and taking such good care of their girls, she wanted to give him what he'd asked for. The three eldest Bennet daughters and their parents attended the very awkward wedding of their dear, sensible friend Charlotte and their annoying, but thankfully distant, bore of a cousin.

At the breakfast afterward, Charlotte asked Elizabeth, her particular friend, if she would come visit her at her new home in Hunsford Village in Kent when Charlotte's family made the journey in the spring.

Elizabeth couldn't help but imagine how awkward such a visit would be. After all, Mr. Collins had proposed to *her* a mere three days before proposing to, and being accepted by, her friend. Could there be a more awkward situation? She thought not. However, Charlotte was her very dear friend and had been for many years now and she didn't feel quite right

saying no just because she didn't like her friend's husband—or her motives for marrying him.

So Elizabeth said she would ask her father and promised to write.



By early February, Mr. Bennet had secured a house on the seaside for the summer. It was in a quiet section of Margate, a seaside town in Kent not too popular with tourists. He agreed that Elizabeth could go visit her friend Charlotte at Easter, largely to keep peace with Mr. Collins. They would collect her on their way to the seaside.

Jane had been invited to London after Christmas to stay with the Gardiners with the hope that she would see Mr. Bingley, the young man who'd stolen her heart and callously left the area last November. In the end, Mr. Bennet said no to the journey.

He didn't know how much longer he had left with his family, and he did not want to send off one of his favorite daughters when he knew his days were numbered and thought it was unlikely she would even see Mr. Bingley, making the entire journey an exercise in heartache. She was doing well at home, making progress in drawing and French especially, and her singing was improving. No, he would not send his sweet, beautiful daughter off to the wolves of London to have her heart broken. It would be much more prudent for her to continue her studies and find someone at the seaside. Perhaps

he would send her to London for part of the season in the spring. For now, she would stay safe with him, where she belonged.

As the winter passed on, the girls at Longbourn continued their lessons and had two very proud parents to show for it. Having finally gotten tired of eating porridge, though it took over three weeks, Lydia agreed to participate and put forth effort in her lessons, which earned her regular meals that included meat and vegetables and the accompanying silver with which to eat them, but she still ate above stairs and was not permitted to sit with the family unless it was a holiday or she had been particularly well behaved. When they had guests, which wasn't terribly often but happened once or twice a fortnight, Kitty would eat upstairs with her and they would giggle and laugh like old times. When the family went out to neighborhood parties, the two youngest stayed home and read books or worked on their needlepoint.

The family soon learned why Lydia had been reluctant to sing or play for the master after she had performed tolerably well for the French tutor. She sang like a magpie. It would appear that the poor girl was positively tone deaf, which was very odd considering all her sisters had at least some sense of musicality and very disappointing to her mother's dream of having five daughters all singing like angels from heaven. No matter, she would learn to play tolerably well and leave the singing to someone else.

She looked quite different with her hair down in curls and her old dresses cut like a girl's instead of a woman's. She

looked more like the girl she was and was subsequently treated like one by her sisters, but in the best possible way. She was read to by Jane when she complained her eyes hurt, and helped with her scales by Mary, who was the most disciplined of the Bennet sisters, and even snuck a sweet treat or two by her sister Elizabeth, who knew how much she liked raspberry biscuits. It took the length of a long cold winter, but Lydia eventually made peace with her place in the family as the doted on youngest sister and was pleased enough with that. Mr. Bennet was simply relieved that she had quit throwing fits, complaining incessantly, and flirting with everything in breeches. And, of course, he was proud of her French, which he was told by the tutor was quite good.

February brought with it Jane's twenty-second birthday which strengthened Mr. Bennet's resolve to find husbands for at least two of his daughters before his demise, preferably for his two eldest. Jane put up a brave front and never complained, but he could tell she was still saddened over Mr. Bingley's removal from the neighborhood. The cad had not even said goodbye. He had paid her an inordinate amount of attention, singled her out on every possible occasion, then hied off to London promising to be back within a few days but never actually returned. His sister had sent a letter, of course, but it was no substitute for his presence and it was not a kind note, deftly killing all of Jane's dreams with a swift stroke of the pen. But what else could be expected from Miss Bingley, a woman with such a spiteful tongue and prickly nature?

Mr. Bennet increased his time with Jane, hoping to make her just a bit more worldly-wise if he could, assigning her books with themes of betrayal and strategy in order to open her eyes to the darkness of the world. He feared for her tender heart when he was gone. She was still his first-born, his darling little girl handed to him by a midwife and held awkwardly in his shaking arms. He had never known love like he felt for the tiny little being that was his daughter, and he felt it still. The sense of responsibility and protection that he had felt so long ago was reasserting itself, and he vowed to put extra effort into Jane's preparation. She deserved it, for she was so sweet and kind, and more importantly, would be considered on the shelf in a few more years. Anything that was to be done had best be done now.

He spoke with Mrs. Bennet and she ordered new spring and summer gowns for the three eldest girls. For her birthday, he gifted Jane with a beautiful gold necklace on which a large, single white pearl suspended delicately. He knew it was extravagant, but he saw it as his final gift to his beloved daughter, a sort of token to remember him by. Already he was planning birthday gifts for each of his girls to be given throughout the next year.

Mrs. Bennet was not entirely in agreement with Mr. Bennet's plans and preferences. She still thought Mary had little chance of securing a husband, except for possibly a clerk or clergyman, and that it would be wiser to promote Kitty in her stead. And while she was happy with the attention being bestowed on Jane, she felt that so many dresses would be

wasted on Elizabeth. In truth, it was only three day gowns, two morning dresses, and two ball gowns—one suitable for the theater—with matching pelisses and reticules. But Mrs. Bennet had always struggled to understand her second child. Elizabeth had always been more like her father and her mother didn't understand him either, despite twenty-three years of marriage.

Mr. Bennet was able to dissuade her from buying new things for Kitty and Lydia, which they could ill afford under his current scheme to save money and pay for masters and trips to the seaside, by encouraging her to focus on Jane.

“Just imagine how pretty Jane will be in her new gowns,” he said convincingly.

And that did it. Jane was her prettiest daughter, even prettier than her mother, who had been a celebrated beauty in her time and was lovely still.

“How clever you are, Mr. Bennet! Yes, we will focus on Jane! Oh, how splendid she will be!”

“And you must find the most flattering things for Elizabeth,” he continued.

“Oh, that girl! She will never find a husband with the way she goes on!”

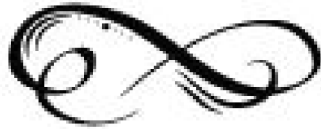
“Elizabeth will have no problem finding a husband, and I'm sure he will be an exceedingly good one.”

She gave him a look that showed how strongly she disagreed with him.

“Surely you know I understand men and what they want better than you, Mrs. Bennet, being one myself? Trust me, Elizabeth will be perfectly fine,” assured Mr. Bennet.

Mrs. Bennet huffed and said no more about it, but smoothed her skirts and pursed her lips, swallowing her disagreement whole.

CHAPTER 4



Charlotte's father, Sir William Lucas, and her sister Maria, planned to visit her at her new home in Hunsford in early March. Sir William invited Elizabeth to ride with them, but Mr. Bennet did not like to lose her company so soon and convinced his old friend to delay several days by telling him that the roads would be in much better condition once winter was firmly behind them. It was decided that the carriage would drop Jane in London to spend some weeks with her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner and enjoy the season, and Mr. Bennet would collect both his daughters on the way to Margate.

Mr. Bennet made his daughters promise to keep up with their studies while they were away. Jane would continue with French and the pianoforte with the assistance of Mrs. Gardiner, and the drawing master had given her several tasks to complete. Elizabeth had no such resources at her disposal, not even a pianoforte, but she was sent with assignments nonetheless. Her music and French master gave her weeks' worth of daily assignments, and she was given a sketchbook by her drawing master that she was ordered to fill before her

father collected her in five weeks' time. Her father sent her with two histories and a book of poetry; they would continue their discussions through correspondence. Elizabeth sighed but packed the books away with her belongings and promised she would do as she had been directed.

Mr. Bennet did not give Jane as many tasks as Elizabeth because he knew she would do them without being told, as she always had, and secondly because he wanted her to spend her time socializing and hopefully meeting a man she could respect and esteem. He had spoken at length with his brother Gardiner when they were in Hertfordshire over Christmas. He did not share his diagnosis—he had shared it with no one—but he was sure his brother suspected something by the way he looked at him so shrewdly.

Regardless of his suspicions, Gardiner had agreed to host Jane for a time during the season and to introduce her to as many eligible men as he could. Between the two of them, they decided a well-off tradesman might be best and most realistic. Jane was sensible, something a man of business would surely need in a wife, and very kind and gentle, qualities a man living near the warehouses could appreciate even more than the residents of Mayfair. And of course she was beautiful, easily the most beautiful woman of one's acquaintance. The fact that she was the daughter of a gentleman would bring a sense of prestige to whatever match she made. With his marching orders in hand, Gardiner was prepared to find his niece a husband.



Her second day in town, Jane attended a dinner party with her aunt and uncle. Her spirits were still low due to the absence of Mr. Bingley, the most amiable man she'd ever met, but she put forth a strong effort to be agreeable. She smiled and asked questions of the people she met before dinner and was very pleasant to her dinner partner, a Mr. Eastman. He was very kind, very handsome, and very recently married.

Mrs. Eastman shot interested glances at Jane throughout the meal and was overly inquisitive when the ladies withdrew, but Jane answered simply and discreetly, not giving the nosy woman any satisfaction. She was serene and agreeable, as she always was, but she was not blind to the looks she received from the women. At first, she told herself they were merely curious of a stranger to their circle, but eventually she began to recognize that the young unmarried women were not pleased by her presence, and neither were the older women with a daughter of marriageable age. The young married women, with the exception of Mrs. Eastman, were kind to her, though.

Jane stayed close to these women and hoped the night would end soon, wondering slightly when she had become so negative. Was this disillusionment?

The following weeks were much of the same. Dinner parties, balls both private and public, and outings to the museum and Hyde Park. Jane became friends with a Mrs. Caldwell who had recently married a merchant of no small

means, and her cousin Mrs. Pearson, who was not much older than Jane herself, but had been married two years and had an infant son.

The three ladies went on outings together, took walks in the park, cooed over young Master Pearson when his nursemaid brought him in to see them, and took tea together several times a week. Mrs. Pearson was the second daughter of a wealthy ship magnate and had married into the gentry. Her large dowry had attracted Mr. Pearson and his failing estate. She was given entry to the quality through marriage; he was saved from destitution and humiliation. Mrs. Pearson had refused to give up her familial ties when she married, and so straddled the line between tradesman and gentry.

More importantly, Mrs. Pearson had an elder brother, Mr. Walker, who had been very attentive to Jane on the few occasions he had met her. The last time she took tea at Mrs. Pearson's, he had unexpectedly dropped by, just to say hello to his sister, and stayed for half an hour, talking almost exclusively to Jane.

Mr. Walker was pleasant and very gentlemanly in his address, always kind to Jane and to everyone she saw him interact with. After three weeks in town, Jane had danced with him twice at two balls, attended two dinners at his sister's—one only a small family party, and attended a musical soiree at his father's home. She found his family to be genteel and kind, and all seemed disposed to like her a great deal.

It was quite refreshing to be surrounded by genuine people, which she was shocked at herself for noticing, but after sending three letters unanswered to Caroline Bingley and calling on her only to be told the lady was not at home when Jane could clearly hear her talking to Mrs. Hurst in the drawing room, she was less sure of her friendship in that quarter. It seemed quite clear that Miss Bingley was ending the acquaintance and Jane could not think of why, unless it was that Miss Bingley simply did not like her.

Poor Jane felt very misused, after Miss Bingley had made such a fuss over her in Hertfordshire and gone on about what great friends they were. Why would she suddenly change her mind when Jane had done nothing at all? Or had Miss Bingley never truly been her friend and only acted as if she was? But if so, to what purpose?

Jane believed that all people were not only basically good, but *actually* good, and if their rude actions could not be easily explained, there must be some sort of great need that only they knew of that caused them to behave in such a way. She only ever had kind motives herself, and she simply could not comprehend how some people were vicious, or mean, or unkind on purpose; that some people actually *meant* to hurt others, or that they were unfeeling and selfish, doing what they wanted, when they wanted, without a thought about others affected by their actions. She was sure that they must simply have not realized what they were doing, that no one had ever taught them how to do right, that they were unaware of the consequences of their heedless decisions.

Her father had had many discussions with her over the past few months about the nature of people, using literature as a guide, impressing on her that not all could be trusted and that some were actually purposely dishonest while having all the appearance of goodness. Jane had not wanted to believe him, indeed had argued with him that there could be some sort of misunderstanding, but her father had been firm and without realizing it, Jane had learned something of the darker side of life. She was not at all pleased by it, and the disturbance of her mind was great.

If all in the world was not bright and clear, what was it?

So it was with great surprise and trepidation that she turned around at the small ball at Mrs. Pearson's only to come face to face with Mr. Bingley.

"Miss Bennet!" he cried, surprise all over his face.

"Mr. Bingley." Jane was no less shocked. She colored and looked to the floor.

"What brings you to London?" he asked.

"I am visiting my aunt and uncle." She glanced quickly behind her at the stylish looking couple talking to Mrs. Pearson's parents.

"Ah." Bingley seemed to run out of things to say and looked about awkwardly until Mr. Walker approached and reminded her that their set was next. She curtsied to Mr. Bingley and left gratefully, her heart thudding in her chest.

Bingley walked the perimeter of the dance floor, not talking to anyone, simply watching Jane Bennet dance. She wondered what he was about, staring at her so. He had never looked at her like that in Hertfordshire. Would he ask her to dance? Would she accept?

Two sets later, Jane and Bingley stood across from each other. The dance was a sedate one, leaving plenty of time for conversation and cross examination. The first few minutes were spent in silence, each looking around them or at the floor, but never at each other.

“How do you know the Pearsons?” he finally asked.

“Mrs. Pearson has lately become a friend,” she answered.
“And you?”

“Pearson and I were in Cambridge together.”

She nodded and they continued on in silence. Feeling all the awkwardness of quiet where there had once been no lack of conversation, Jane spoke.

“How are your sisters?”

“Well, thank you. And your family? Are they well?” he asked.

“Yes, they are, thank you.”

The niceties were painful to both but Bingley seemed determined to go on. Jane was not sure how she felt about that.

“Are any of them here with you?” He gave a cursory glance around the ballroom.

“No, I am in London on my own. My younger sisters but one remain at Longbourn.” At his questioning look, she added, “My sister Elizabeth has gone to Kent to visit our friend who has recently married and moved there.”

“Oh? Anyone I know?”

“Yes. Miss Charlotte Lucas married my father’s cousin Mr. Collins. They have settled in Kent where he has a living.”

“Really!” He smiled brightly. “When you see her, please give Miss Lucas my heartfelt congratulations. She is such an amiable lady.”

“Yes, she is. She is well missed in the neighborhood.”

He squeezed her hand before releasing it to walk around her. “I am sorry you’ve lost a friend, Miss Bennet. But surely you can visit each other! Kent is not so great a distance.”

“No, it is not, but I fear that her new responsibilities will not allow her to travel overmuch.”

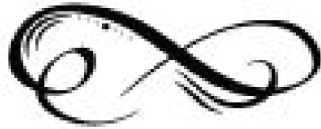
He nodded and they lapsed into silence again. When it was time to take her hand, he held it a little too tightly and kept it a little too long. They soon overcame their shyness of looking at each other and once he had caught her gaze, he stared at her, his grey-green eyes never leaving hers, and thus they finished the dance without looking at anyone else.

That night as she lay in bed, Jane was in turmoil. What could he mean by holding her hand in such a way? She had convinced herself that she had been wrong about him, that he had only meant to offer her friendship and that her desire for

more had colored her impressions. But he had been quite unmistakable tonight. Her friends and her aunt had all remarked on it after their dance. How he had stared at her, how he had ignored everyone else around them. Mrs. Pearson informed Jane that Mr. Bingley had asked after her.

What was she to think? Oh, teasing, teasing man! It would be so much easier if he could simply tell her what he meant by all his confusing actions. And so she had another shock: Jane Bennet was *irritated* with Mr. Bingley.

CHAPTER 5



On Thursday the nineteenth of March, Elizabeth Bennet, Sir William, and Maria Lucas arrived at Hunsford parsonage in Kent, the new home of her friend Charlotte Collins. The first few days were as expected. Charlotte showed them all around her little home: the gardens, the small orchard, her chicken coop (of which Charlotte was exceedingly proud), the kitchen garden, and, of course, the house. The friends drank tea and caught up, sharing all their news and laughing together.

On Monday, they were invited to take tea at Rosings Park, home of Lady Catherine De Bourgh, personal advisor to Mr. Collins and benefactress of his small living. After bowing deeply and reciting a small monologue on how charming Miss De Bourgh looked and how fine her mother's dress was, Mr. Collins introduced his new family, Sir William and Maria Lucas, and his distant cousin, who would sadly be without a home when he inherited her father's estate in Hertfordshire, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Lady Catherine looked them all over and nodded, and directed them each to seats around hers, placed in such a way that she could see everyone with only a tiny turn of her head. After questioning Sir William for a few moments and finding herself bored, she moved on to Elizabeth.

“Miss Bennet, you come from Hertfordshire?” she called in strident tones.

“Yes, ma’am. Near a town called Meryton,” answered Elizabeth.

“You live on your father’s estate?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It is entailed on Mr. Collins. It is fortunate for my rector but quite disconcerting for you,” continued Lady Catherine. “You have no brothers?”

“No, ma’am.”

She tsked. “A pity. Whenever there is an entailment, sons should always be born. Rosings has no such encroachment. Anne will inherit everything.” She smiled at her pale daughter sitting to her left. Anne smiled weakly back and wrapped her shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

Elizabeth only nodded and sipped her tea.

Several minutes went by with nothing heard but the tinkling of china as cups were placed on saucers. The lone bird chirping outside the window seemed uncommonly loud.

“You are the eldest, Miss Bennet?” asked Lady Catherine.

“No, I am the second.”

“And how many of you are there?” she asked with a suspicious look, as if she expected additional Bennet sisters to leap out from behind the tapestry.

“We are five sisters, ma’am,” replied Elizabeth.

“Five!” Lady Catherine clutched her chest as if she couldn’t breathe. “And you only the second?”

“Yes.”

“And you are out.”

“Yes.”

“Is your elder sister married?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Are your younger sisters out?”

“One, ma’am.”

“Well, three daughters out, and none married! Your mother should take you to town for a season. Surely at least one of you could find a husband,” Lady Catherine advised.

“My eldest sister is currently having a season in London,” said Elizabeth.

“Oh! Oh, well that is good. Very good, as she should do.” Lady Catherine smiled as if her advice had just been taken and continued her inquisition.

“Do you play, Miss Bennet?” Lady Catherine continued her questioning.

“Yes, ma’am, but not very well,” answered Elizabeth.

“She has a lovely singing voice,” Charlotte added, but was ignored completely.

“You should practice! That is the only way to become truly proficient. You must play for us while you are here. Mrs. Collins always hits the keys too hard. I have told her she must practice to achieve true proficiency.” She glared at Charlotte. “Do your sisters play?”

“Yes, ma’am, all,” Elizabeth replied. Jane had only mastered simple tunes, Kitty was little better, and Lydia could hardly make it through her scales, but they *were* playing. Besides, she and Mary had improved markedly; that had to count for something.

Lady Catherine nodded approvingly. “And do you all sing?”

“All but one, ma’am.”

“Do you draw?”

“Yes, ma’am, but I am not very talented. My sisters fare much better than I.”

“Do they all draw?”

“Yes, all.”

“Which languages do you speak?”

“Only French and English, ma’am.”

“Well, that is something at least.” She glared at Charlotte again. “I don’t know why anyone wants to learn that dreadful

German. All that spitting and hacking. It makes one sound positively ill!”

Elizabeth smiled. “I agree, Lady Catherine.”

The great lady nodded again. “And that Italian! Entirely too much enthusiasm. It isn’t good for one’s health.”

Elizabeth hid her smile behind her teacup.

“Miss Lucas,” called Lady Catherine. At this, Maria’s head shot up and her eyes went wide as saucers, “do you play and sing? Perhaps you and Miss Bennet could perform a duet for us.”

“Oh! I, well, I...” she stammered, looking helplessly from Elizabeth to her sister and back to Lady Catherine.

Finally, Elizabeth rose and spoke. “What a wonderful idea, Lady Catherine. Come, Miss Lucas. I will play and we shall sing together.”

Maria smiled gratefully and quickly followed Elizabeth through a set of open doors to the pianoforte. It was in a small room connected to the drawing room, able to be closed off but appearing as if it were open most of the time.

Elizabeth looked through the music and chose a simple country song, not too vigorous, and gave Maria the alto part while she took the soprano. Maria had a full, soft voice, but not having had any formal training, she didn’t really know how to use it to her advantage. Elizabeth had previously been a moderately good singer and middling player, but nearly four months of daily lessons can improve one rather quickly, and

she could now play significantly more difficult pieces than she could prior to her lessons, with fewer mistakes and better timing. Her voice had also become more confident and with the frequent exercise, she had expanded her range, allowing her to sing a wider variety of songs.

When they were through, the gentlemen clapped and complimented the ladies.

“That was nicely done, Miss Bennet. Play us another. Miss Lucas, you may turn her pages,” Lady Catherine declared.

Elizabeth stifled her laugh and winked at Maria, who gladly turned the pages while she sang. After half an hour, Elizabeth rose from the bench and rejoined the group in the drawing room.

“Miss Bennet, if you want to maintain your voice and your skills, you must practice. Mrs. Collins has no instrument, but I have told her that she may play in Mrs. Jenkinson’s room. She would be in nobody’s way, in that part of the house. I now extend the same invitation to you.” She smiled beneficently, as if she were bestowing a great treat.

“Thank you, ma’am. I would love to be able to practice, but I do not want to disturb Mrs. Jenkinson’s private quarters,” said Elizabeth.

“Nonsense! She wouldn’t be disturbed at all. I insist,” declared Lady Catherine.

Knowing her father would want her to take every opportunity to practice, and remembering her promise to him,

Elizabeth nodded and agreed.



Midday Tuesday, after taking a walk in a very pretty grove and helping Charlotte with some cooking, Elizabeth gathered her sheet music and went to Rosings. She asked the butler to direct her to Mrs. Jenkinson's room where she was to practice her music. He made no expression, but Elizabeth thought he must feel how irregular this was. After all, she was the daughter of a gentleman and this was the companion's private room. She could not help but feel she was both invading another's privacy and disturbing the delicate balance that existed between servant and served, or in this case, almost servant. But she had made a promise to practice and practice she would.

He led her downstairs to an apartment not far from the servant's hall. She could hear the noise of the kitchen in the distance. The room was neat and tidy and furnished comfortably but sparsely. Elizabeth thanked the butler and closed the door behind her, quickly setting out her music and glancing at the clock. One hour; she would practice for one hour and then she would go.

Reading through the new sheet music her father had bought for her, Elizabeth set herself to working on the first movement. She picked her way through the opening chords and carefully began to play. She sincerely hoped few of the staff were around, for she knew her playing did her no credit. After fifty

long, tedious minutes of working on Mozart, she stretched her cramped back and flexed her fingers.

Just for fun, she began a lively jig she had often played at home for dances and that she knew from memory. The piece brought a smile to her face, especially since it was so much easier for her to play it now than it had been before, and she laughed freely and moved on to another, a lively Scottish air that she sang along with, attempting the brogue passably and cheering herself considerably in the process. After playing and singing two more songs, she realized she had gone over her self-imposed time limit and quickly jumped up, gathering her music together and dashing out of the room.

She nearly ran into two maids in the hall who seemed to have been listening near the door. Elizabeth excused herself and hurried upstairs.

Unbeknownst to Elizabeth, she had created quite a stir below stairs. The housekeeper had been angry to have the room used for such a purpose. Angry at the mistress for suggesting it and angry at the young lady for accepting. It would disrupt her staff and upset Mrs. Jenkinson, whom she would have to soothe later. But she eventually decided not to be upset about something she could not change and made herself scarce for the duration of the young lady's visit.

Once Elizabeth had begun, the kitchen staff, busy preparing dinner, smiled to each other to hear the instrument being played. Of course, the practice was not very enjoyable to listen to. It wasn't bad exactly, but neither was it pleasant, so they

tried to ignore it and went on about their business. But once she got going and began playing jigs, two scullery maids grabbed each other by the arms and danced through the kitchen, Cook hollering at them to stay out of the way. One of the footmen came out of the silver room and danced a quick jig with the undercook, and for a good fifteen minutes, the kitchen of Rosings Park was a very happy place.

And so a new routine was set. Elizabeth began every morning with a walk through the park, then helped Charlotte in the kitchen, improving her own cooking skills in the process. She answered her letters and had tea with her friends, then went to Rosings for an hour of practice. She went over her time on several occasions, but not terribly, and she always ended every practice session with a few songs she knew, unknowingly creating regular afternoon dances for the servants.

She did her singing practice on her daily walk. She would wander through manicured gardens and wild groves, singing scales and simple tunes to warm up her voice, then practicing the newer pieces that tested her range. On more than one occasion she was joined in song by the local birds, an experience that never failed to make her laugh.

When she returned from her morning walk Thursday, Charlotte informed Elizabeth of the impending arrival of Lady Catherine's nephews.

“Her nephews? As in more than one?” Elizabeth asked.

Charlotte nodded.

“Did she say which ones?”

“I’m afraid not, but I think Mr. Darcy is one of them. She spoke of him quite a bit before you arrived and mentioned an impending visit,” replied Charlotte.

“Oh! I wish it were any nephew but him! Why is he tormenting me? Does he not know how I loath to see him?”

“I’ll be sure to tell him to consult your feelings on all future familial visits when I next see him, Miss Bennet,” Charlotte teased.

“Thank you, Charlotte. You are a dear.”

Charlotte laughed and left the room, leaving Elizabeth alone.

“Of all the estates in England, his aunt must live in the one my cousin is vicar to. Of course!”

She blew out her candle and went to sleep, making plans to avoid Mr. Darcy as much as possible. Hopefully the second nephew wouldn’t be so bad, but judging by the rest of the family, she wouldn’t hold out *too* much hope.

CHAPTER 6



Jane had never had so many social engagements in her life. Nearly every day there was something. A musical evening with friends of her aunt, a dinner party with her uncle's business acquaintances, a ball, a tea, a night at the theater. After a fortnight in town, she was exhausted!

Her friendship with Mrs. Caldwell and Mrs. Pearson grew stronger daily. The ladies were very kind and seemed genuine to Jane, though her newfound doubt in people made her question her own abilities to discern character. She was not at all happy about that development.

At least she was being given ample opportunity to meet and converse with men who had no connection to Hertfordshire. She had come to London before, of course, but her schedule had never been quite this active. Now, her aunt and uncle seemed to be eagerly pushing her towards courtship. They introduced her to several very eligible men, some with as good an income as Mr. Bingley, and gave her every encouragement. It was all very odd, but Jane took it in stride as she always did.

Perhaps the oddest thing of all was Mr. Bingley.

His behavior toward her at the Pearsons' ball had left her in a muddle, but it had been several days since she had seen him. Now, at a musical performance at a public room, whom should she see trying to catch her attention across the room? Mr. Bingley, in a very handsome blue coat, with his sister Miss Bingley. He had seen Jane and quickly made his way to her while Caroline glared at her. Was Miss Bingley truly a bad egg, then?

How disappointing.

And an alarming confirmation of her father's advice regarding human nature.

Setting aside her disenchantment with the human race, Jane smiled and held her hand out to Mr. Bingley. He bowed over it and smiled at her joyfully; her heart stumbled a bit before breaking out into a run. She registered that he was looking at her expectantly. His lips had moved. What had he said?

"Good evening, Mr. Bingley," she managed.

"Are you here with your aunt and uncle?" he asked.

"Yes. They are just there." She pointed to the same couple she had indicated at the ball.

"Might you introduce me?"

"Of course." She led him toward her relations just as they finished conversing with another couple. "Aunt, Uncle, this is Mr. Bingley. I met him in Hertfordshire last autumn. This is my Uncle and Aunt Gardiner."

Bingley bowed gallantly and smiled, happy to be meeting Miss Bennet's relatives and oblivious to the wariness in their gazes. They continued on in simple conversation, Bingley being as charming as he ever was, and the Gardiners eventually thawing to him. Finally, he asked where they were sitting and Mrs. Gardiner, being a genial hostess, asked if he would like to join them. He said he would just tell his party and hastened off like an excited boy granted a treat.

Even as she shook her head, Jane couldn't help but smile.

Bingley approached his sister and her friends with less bounce in his step than he had left them with. He had not wanted to come tonight, preferring to stay in his rooms and think. But Caroline had whined and wheedled and finally told him something about there being a man she thought was showing interest in her and wanting her brother to examine the situation for her. He should have known she was lying to get her way, but he was so anxious to marry her off that he came along. Of course there was no such man. Caroline said something must have come up that caused him to cancel, but Bingley knew she was lying.

However, there was a *lady* that would like to marry into the Bingley family. Caroline introduced her old school friend with a sickly sweet smile and a look in her eyes he remembered from childhood. It often preceded the breaking of his favorite toy. He had accepted the introduction to the blonde beauty, who was remarkably similar to Jane Bennet in stature and coloring, and then made his way to the outskirts of the group, feeling put out with Caroline's manipulations and angry at

himself for falling for it once again. Would he never learn with her?

He so sincerely wanted her to be nice, *wanted* her to have good motives, *wanted* her to actually care about his happiness and be kind to those around her. Was that so ridiculous? He was beginning to think it was. It might be a nice imagining, having kind sisters instead of catty ones, but it wasn't reality, and perhaps it was time to let the dream die. He felt an ache at the thought of it, but also relief. Did not hope deferred make the heart sick?

And then, just as he was deciding he had had enough of his pernicious sister, the crowd parted and he saw an angel. Or rather he saw Jane Bennet. But was it any wonder he thought her an angel considering the harridan he had grown up with? Without a moment's delay and not a word to his sister, he made his way to her. Perhaps this night would not be a waste, after all.



Poor Jane. Just as she was accepting that she would have to choose a man to marry, and that said man would *not* be Mr. Bingley, who should sit next to her at a concert? Who should be so alarmingly close that his coat sleeve would brush against her arm so many times? Who would look at her with the sweetest, most guileless look in his eyes when the music was particularly pleasing? How was her heart to stand it?

She was so tired of the confusion, of the people who said one thing while meaning another, and the relatives trying to make her see the world as she sincerely hoped it wasn't. Mr. Bingley's artlessness was a relief and made her heart soften. But before she could allow the sweet softness to take over, she remembered her anticipation at seeing him after the ball in Hertfordshire, and how she had waited for him to come and then received his sister's horrid letter, destroying all her hopes. He had left her, heartbroken and humiliated in front of her neighbors, whispered about behind fans and sniggered at when she left the room.

Mr. Bingley's candor was as false as his sister's, only he was much better at it. Perhaps he really did like her. Perhaps he was simply oblivious to how his actions affected her, in which case he was an inconsiderate man with little honor, playing with women's hearts as he did. She pulled her arm in tight to her body and scooted to the far edge of her seat. She would not be anyone's play thing. She may be good, but she was not stupid, and she would not be played a fool. Again.



Bingley called on Jane at the Gardiners' home in a few days. He was as attentive as ever, but she was more reserved. She was polite and kind, according to her nature, but she offered him no encouragement. He could not really blame her. His actions had certainly been confusing.

And he would have been discouraged if it weren't for the telltale blush that rushed onto her cheeks when he kissed her hand after their first meeting. Or the way she stammered when he helped her with her shawl before a walk in the park at his second call, or the gooseflesh that had leapt onto her bare arms when he danced with her at a ball. So he continued to call, hoping to soften her regard.

Meanwhile, Caroline was being insufferable, as she nearly always was. They could be pleasant together, but there was a reason he kept his own rooms instead of living with his siblings. He had a meeting with his solicitor to assess the state of Caroline's dowry and go over the conditions in his father's will. The only stipulation for its release seemed to be Charles's approval of the husband. If he were not available, it fell to an uncle.

This knowledge in mind, he decided to begin his own search for Caroline's husband. She was a year older than him, making her nearly four and twenty. He thought it wasn't presumptuous of him to think she had better get to it quickly before she was considered on the shelf. He also thought his chances were better at getting a certain woman to want to marry him if he could promise his sister would not be living with them.

This decisiveness was a bit new for him; he usually talked everything over with a trusted friend like Darcy before making any decisions— he was more like a big brother, really. But Darcy had been preoccupied of late. They had spent little time together before Darcy was due to leave for Kent and instead of waiting around, Bingley thought he would try his hand at

figuring out what to do with his sister. He would consult with others before making any drastic decisions, probably Darcy and his uncle in Scarborough, but he had just turned twenty-three; surely it was time to do some things on his own?

He would begin by dealing with his sister. *Heaven help me.*

CHAPTER 7



Saturday morning, after a hearty breakfast and a swiftly written letter to her mother, Elizabeth went for a walk in the park. As had become her habit, she sang as she walked through the grove, a secluded and pretty part of the park that had escaped Lady Catherine's fastidious manicuring.

There was a little stream meandering alongside her and she stood on its banks and threw petals of the cherry blossom she was holding into the water as she sang a country song about a shepherd who'd fallen in love with an unattainable maiden.

"Pardon me. I didn't mean to disturb you."

Elizabeth jumped and pressed her hand to her heart. Standing not ten feet away was a tall man, with broad shoulders and blond hair, a smile on his face as he looked directly at her. She quickly deduced by his clothes that he was a gentleman and assumed he was one of the mysterious nephews, though he was certainly not Mr. Darcy. The man rapidly approaching them, however, was.

"Ah, Darcy, there you are!" cried the blond man. "I was walking along and stumbled across this lovely creature. Shall

we introduce ourselves?”

“That is hardly necessary, Fitzwilliam,” said Mr. Darcy. “Miss Bennet, it is a pleasure to see you.” He bowed and she curtseyed, saying nothing. “May I introduce my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam? This is Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire.”

Another round of bows and curtseys ensued. “I am pleased to meet you, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Mr. Darcy.” She bobbed again. “Good day.” She walked away from them, leaving the men to look at each other quizzically before following after her.

“You are staying at the parsonage, are you not? Please, allow us to escort you,” Colonel Fitzwilliam said quickly. She stopped and looked at him and then at his cousin before nodding.

“Very well.” She began walking again, now flanked on either side by Lady Catherine’s nephews.

“How do you find Kent, Miss Bennet?” Mr. Darcy asked quietly from her right.

“It is very beautiful,” she answered.

He nodded.

They fell silent.

Elizabeth felt all the awkwardness of having been caught in so indecorous a pursuit by a stranger, and then forced to keep company with Mr. Darcy. Of all people! She had hoped to avoid him as long as possible, and here she was, a foot away

from him, walking down the lane like old friends, only they had nothing to say to each other.

Colonel Fitzwilliam, never one to be silent when he could be speaking to a pretty lady, began asking her about her home. At first, his questions were simple and her answers even simpler, but they persevered, and before they reached the garden gate, the colonel and Elizabeth had laughed twice and shared innumerable smiles about the vagaries of village life and market towns. Elizabeth invited them in for tea and they were quickly introduced to Charlotte and Maria and conversation continued much like it had outside. Mr. Darcy sat quietly, speaking only when necessary, Colonel Fitzwilliam had enough to say for both of them, and Maria was so nervous she said nothing at all. Charlotte and Elizabeth kept the colonel well entertained between the two of them and Mr. Darcy seemed happy to simply observe. After half an hour, the gentlemen left, the colonel all smiles and Mr. Darcy wearing his usual haughty expression.

That afternoon, as was now her habit, Elizabeth went to Rosings to practice her music. The butler greeted her as he usually did and a footman guided her downstairs. She practiced for an hour, ended with a song she knew by memory and enjoyed playing, and went upstairs and let herself out a side door near the stairwell.

What she didn't know was that Mr. Darcy was in the room just above, standing at the window looking out at the estate.

“What is Miss Bennet doing here?” he asked.

“Sir?”

“Nothing, Timms. I just saw Miss Bennet leaving and wondered if she was visiting my aunt,” Darcy mused as his valet continued laying out his riding clothes.

“As I understand it, she visits around this time every day to practice the pianoforte.”

“Practice? Where?”

“In the companion’s room. Will there be anything else, sir?”

“No, that will be all. Thank you, Timms.”



The Monday following Easter (and a long and tedious Easter sermon followed by an even longer holiday dinner), Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam spent the morning reviewing estate accounts. After tea, Darcy took a turn in the garden and when Miss Bennet exited the house after her usual pianoforte practice, he offered to escort her home. She deferred at first, saying it wasn’t necessary and she was perfectly fine on her own, but he insisted.

They did not speak for the first five minutes, until they were out of sight of the house and walking through a sunny grove.

“How long will you stay in Kent, Miss Bennet?” he asked.

“My father will collect me at the end of the month,” she answered.

“Does he have business in Kent?”

“I believe he means to speak to Mr. Collins about the estate, but otherwise it is a pleasure trip.” At Mr. Darcy’s confused look, and indeed, who could blame him, for speaking with Mr. Collins could never be termed a pleasure trip by any sensible person, she explained. “My father has taken a house in Margate for the summer. He and my mother and sisters will stop here for me, after collecting my eldest sister in London.”

He nodded. “How is Miss Bennet enjoying London?”

“She likes it well enough. She has made many new acquaintances there.”

“It is a busy season in town,” he said.

They walked on in silence until they reached the parsonage gate.

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy.” She curtsied. He bowed and wished her good day, then left.

Elizabeth entered the parlor where Charlotte sat near the window, sewing something white and lacy.

“Was that Mr. Darcy walking with you?”

“Yes, he escorted me from the main house.” She sighed and dropped into a chair.

“What did you talk about?” Charlotte asked.

“Nothing, it would seem. I told him we were going to Margate after leaving here and that Jane was in London. That was all. Hardly a riveting conversation,” she replied with a bored expression.

“We can’t all be as bright and sparkling as you, Eliza,” Charlotte teased.

“I would settle for tolerably interesting at this point,” Elizabeth retorted.

Both women laughed and the topic changed to other things.



The next day, Mr. Darcy once again met Elizabeth when she left the house. He walked her home, they spoke a mere five sentences between them, and he left her at the parsonage gate. She thought fate was terribly perverse to have him around just when she would be leaving Rosings and not the amiable Colonel Fitzwilliam, but thought no more of it. He was absent the remainder of the week.

The following Monday, it happened again. He even ran into her twice on her morning walks and joined her. He was always civil and acted somewhat happy to see her, even though she knew he was only being polite. She dearly wished he would simply greet her and move on, but it was not to be.

The parsonage was invited to Rosings for tea and cards on Wednesday and Friday for dinner. She enjoyed her conversations with Colonel Fitzwilliam very much. He was similar to herself; at ease in company, good at discourse, and quick to laugh. Mr. Darcy sat near them and tried to join the conversation occasionally, but he often commented on a topic just after they had moved on to a new one, and after a few

attempts, he sat close but remained silent except for the odd sound of agreement.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was fond of hearing Elizabeth play and often asked her to favor them with a song. He turned her pages and laughed with her behind the pianoforte while Darcy suffered his aunt and cousin on the other side of the room, a distracted look on his face. Elizabeth wondered what he was about, frowning so at everything that was said and glaring in her direction every few minutes. She knew her playing wasn't perfect, but it was much improved and Colonel Fitzwilliam seemed to find her perfectly entertaining. She told herself to put Mr. Darcy out of her mind and focused on charming and being charmed by the good colonel.

Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam called again Saturday morning. Darcy often sat slightly back from the group and Elizabeth wondered why he bothered coming if he wasn't going to speak to anyone. They were in company often enough; surely he was accustomed to their presence by now? She thought his lack of conversation was indicative of his belief in his own superiority and it confirmed that her assessment of him in Hertfordshire had been correct. She had seen him nearly every day that week, but she doubted he'd spoken more than a dozen sentences altogether. *Insufferable man.*

Monday, he was in the garden when she left Rosings and he fell into step beside her, alternately making dull conversation and watching her in a way that made her feel inadequate somehow. She raised her chin in defiance and walked on,

hurrying her pace. He was there again the day after that, and the day after that. Thursday, Mr. Darcy was not waiting when she stepped out of the house, and Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief and walked on her own.

Friday, he was awaiting her outside Rosings' side door, and she thought she saw him jump a little when she arrived, as if he had been leaning against the wall waiting for her. For the first time, and perhaps belatedly, she wondered if he was meeting her on purpose. She had thought he simply liked to walk in the garden on a sunny afternoon before tea, a perfectly normal habit, and eventually their paths would stop crossing, but now she wondered if that wasn't the case. She couldn't really blame him. Three weeks at Rosings could make anyone long for escape.

"If I didn't know better, Mr. Darcy, I would guess you were hoping to spot me," she teased. Elizabeth was never one to hold in her thoughts when Mr. Darcy was involved.

He looked away for a moment, before giving her a small smile.

"Did you enjoy your music today, Miss Bennet?"

"Yes, I did. I have almost mastered this piece." She gestured to the music sheets she was carrying. "And how did you spend your morning?"

It was the first time she had asked him anything beyond the weather and he seemed pleased by her interest.

“I have been reviewing the crops in the home farm and discussed some possible alterations for the next season with my aunt’s steward. And you?”

“Oh, the usual. I took a walk, wrote a letter to my mother and my sister, helped Charlotte in the kitchen, and then I came here.”

“The kitchen? I didn’t know you were adept at the art of cookery, Miss Bennet,” he said.

“Adept is not the appropriate word, Mr. Darcy. Stumbling or awkward might be better,” she noticed he smiled slightly, “but it is enjoyable and I want to spend time with and be of use to my friend. My father thinks it is a useful skill to learn, and I am inclined to agree with him.”

“Did you cook at Longbourn, then?” he asked.

“Only recently.” She did not want to tell him about her father’s recent about-face in parenting and expose her family more than they already were, but she also wanted to discuss her suspicions with someone sensible. Regardless of her opinion on his personality, she had never thought Mr. Darcy *silly*. Charlotte could not be trusted not to say anything to Mr. Collins, and that would only be humiliating and possibly disastrous if it was what she suspected. She also admitted to herself that a man’s perspective, and that of someone older than her twenty years, might be helpful, though she could hardly expect Mr. Darcy to be that person. Perhaps Colonel Fitzwilliam would be a good confidante?

After another moment's hesitation, she noticed Mr. Darcy was looking at her expectantly. "Forgive me, Mr. Darcy, my mind wandered. I meant only that my father has recently added to his daughters' usual education and cookery is one of those additions."

"Oh? What sort of additions?" He looked curious now, and she realized she must answer something.

"He has engaged masters for us," she said simply.

"What sort of masters?" Mr. Darcy seemed determined to continue this conversation.

"Music, drawing, and French." He nodded his head in approval and she couldn't resist adding, "And he is tutoring us in literature himself, to improve our minds with extensive reading." She had meant to tease him about his ideal of the accomplished woman, but her words provoked an unexpected response. Mr. Darcy laughed. Not a loud guffaw and she never saw more than his front teeth, but he most certainly chuckled and shook his head.

"And what sort of books are Mr. Bennet's daughters reading?" he asked. She couldn't help but notice that his eyes looked happy, and she wondered at their semi-pleasant conversation.

"Each of us is different. My two youngest sisters are focusing primarily on history, though different periods. My sister Mary is currently reading poetry, and Jane is reading Hamlet."

“And you?”

“Nothing at the moment, though I just finished a book on war strategies.”

He chuckled again and she smiled in response. Looking up, she saw they had reached the parsonage.

“Good day, Mr. Darcy.”

“Good day, Miss Bennet.” He bowed over her hand and left, his countenance still looking happier than she had ever seen it before. *How odd.*

Monday he walked her home while she discussed the weather and a little of the book she was translating. Tuesday he was absent.

Wednesday, he was there again. She did not stop to greet him but merely nodded in his direction and carried on, knowing he would step beside her.

“Are you always so diligent in your music practice, Miss Bennet?” he asked.

“No, quite the opposite, actually. I promised my father that I would practice when I could on this trip. When Lady Catherine offered the opportunity, I couldn’t say no.”

He nodded. “Are you also practicing your drawing and French while you are here?”

“Yes, to an extent. I draw most days on my own, and I have a French book my tutor sent with me to translate.”

“I speak French. I would be happy to assist you if you’d like,” he offered.

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy, that is very kind of you, but I’m satisfied with my progress at present.” He nodded and they walked on silently a few minutes more. She felt relieved he had accepted her refusal so graciously. She was half afraid he would be like Lady Catherine and insist she practice French daily in the butler’s office. She could not fathom spending an hour alone with Mr. Darcy, studying or not.

“What has brought about the change in your family?”

“Excuse me?”

“Pardon me. You said your father has changed his parenting habits and that things were now being done differently. I merely wondered what the cause was.”

“In truth, I do not know.” She hesitated, not sure what to say and uncertain if she should confide in Mr. Darcy, but knowing she desperately needed to talk to someone. “Mr. Darcy, might I ask you something? I mean, your opinion on something?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I will have to ask you to keep this in strict confidence, for it is only my own conjecture and I have no facts to corroborate my thoughts.”

“You have my word, Miss Bennet.”

She nodded. “You see, my father has never taken much interest in his children before now. He has always been kind to me and those of us that wanted to learn never lacked for

instruction, but one could certainly be indolent if one wished.” Darcy nodded again, saying nothing. “But last winter, just before Christmas, everything changed.

“Suddenly there were masters in the house and he was assigning books to read and actually discussing them. He insisted we help my mother with the household accounts, though only Jane and I had done so previously, and he took a house by the seaside for the summer, when he never travels. My sisters Catherine and Lydia are no longer out, and he even moved Lydia back to the nursery!”

At this Mr. Darcy looked thoughtful and nodded his head slightly.

“Do you suppose... oh, I am being silly, never mind,” she closed her mouth and walked swiftly ahead.

“Miss Bennet!” He quickly caught up to her and said, “Please, continue. This is quite intriguing.”

She paused, took a deep breath and looked around before speaking quietly. “Do you suppose it’s possible that something is wrong with him?” At Mr. Darcy’s raised brow, she hastily continued, “Not with his mind, I do not mean that what he is doing is silly. On the contrary, I have wished he would do exactly this for some time, but it is so out of the ordinary, and so unlike him, I cannot help but think that something must have brought it on. Surely he did not wake up one day and suddenly think his daughters needed to learn French and that the youngest should go back to the nursery?”

“No, it does not sound likely. You think there is something amiss with his health?”

She licked her lips and nodded, looking around her worriedly. “It is as if he is trying to give us everything he can, before he can give us no more,” she said softly.

She looked to the ground and her expression was hidden by her bonnet, but Mr. Darcy was sure she was upset. “It does not sound implausible. My father did something similar in his last days.”

“He did?” She looked up in surprise.

“Yes. He knew for some months that his end was near. He had already been training me to take over the estate, but he had a new vigor. Even at mealtimes, he spoke to me of investments and tenants and road projects. It was as if he wanted to impart all his knowledge while he had the time.”

Elizabeth nodded, feeling dangerously close to losing her composure. “He has never taken us to the seaside before.” Mr. Darcy only nodded and walked alongside her slowly, while she hid behind her bonnet. “He gave Jane a beautiful necklace for her birthday. He has given us gifts before, but something about this one...” She trailed off, despising herself for exposing so much to Mr. Darcy of all people, but also feeling immense relief at having unburdened herself. “I am sorry, Mr. Darcy. I am afraid I’m not good company today,” she said.

He handed her his handkerchief and she dabbed at her eyes before handing it back to him. “It is no trouble at all, Miss Bennet. I am honored to share your confidence.”

They had reached the parsonage by now and he bowed deeply. She gave him a weak smile and a curtsey, then went silently into the house.

Elizabeth went straight to her room where she thoroughly berated herself for talking to Mr. Darcy. *Mr. Darcy* of all people! She had grown accustomed to his presence and his quiet questions on all their walks. She had forgotten herself and let her worry for her father overtake her good sense. She had asked him to keep a confidence of hers! He was not even a friend! How could she have done such a thing? She burned with embarrassment—she had just spilled her heart to a man with little compassion and even less respect for those beneath him, as he most certainly viewed her to be.

If he walked with her again tomorrow, she would apologize for overstepping and speaking of things she should not have and hope that would put an end to it. Her family would arrive in two days' time and shortly after that, they would be on their way to Margate and her first glimpse of the sea. She could survive a few more days in Mr. Darcy's company, but she must be careful not to be alone with him. After she apologized, that is.

CHAPTER 8



The following day was rainy and muddy and Elizabeth stayed in the parsonage, much to Mr. Darcy's disappointment and his valet's displeasure when he cleaned his employer's boots.

Friday, Mr. Darcy spent the morning riding over the estate with his aunt's steward and was so late getting back that Elizabeth had come and gone from her regular music practice. He sighed and was disappointed, but told himself there was still tomorrow. Her family was arriving, so he planned to meet her in the grove on her morning walk if he could, or perhaps her family would arrive late in the day and she would come to practice her music at her usual time.

He had spent the morning thinking of her as he rode across the Kent countryside. He was decided. He would offer for her. He really had no other choice, as he had come to love her so dearly he was sure he would go mad without her. He had surprised himself when, several days ago, his cousin Fitzwilliam had commented on how well Miss Bennet had looked at dinner. Something in Fitzwilliam's expression, in the

way he waggled his eyebrows and smiled at Miss Bennet when they rejoined the ladies, had set Darcy on edge. He was jealous! He, Fitzwilliam Alexander Darcy, was jealous of his verbose cousin and the many smiles he cajoled from his beloved.

He was decided to ask, and now had only to find the right words to say and an opportune time. It was great luck that her father was visiting Hunsford on his way to Margate. It would save him a trip to Hertfordshire, which would have been impossible anyway since the family was not in residence, and allow him to avoid visiting Margate and spending time with Elizabeth's family, an exercise he would like to avoid if possible.

The following morning, Darcy was disappointed not to find Elizabeth in the grove. She had walked into the village on an errand for Charlotte and hurried home to prepare for her family's arrival, but of course Darcy did not know that, and he returned to Rosings disappointed.

The Bennets arrived midday at Hunsford with all the fanfare that could be expected of a carriage filled with five ladies and one man. There were hugs and kisses all around and a proud Charlotte showed them to their rooms. Jane was sharing with Elizabeth, Kitty with Maria, and Lydia with Mary. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet were given the grandest guest room (the younger girls' rooms were family apartments not yet taken with tiny Collinses), and Mr. Collins happily droned on about the changes and improvements Lady Catherine had made to the house when he accepted the living.

Dinner was a lively affair and Mrs. Bennet complimented Charlotte on her table, which made Charlotte beam and Mrs. Bennet say marriage became her so much so that she was almost pretty. Elizabeth apologized quietly to her friend while Jane hung her head in mortification. Everyone retired early after such a full day, and Jane and Elizabeth eagerly curled up in their bed to share their experiences of the last week.

“Do you think Mr. Bingley will return to Netherfield?” Elizabeth asked after Jane told her that she had seen Mr. Bingley and that he had called on her after the ball and had been present at several other dinners and events. He had even invited her to dine with his family.

“I do not know.” Jane twisted her hands and looked uncharacteristically conflicted.

“Has your heart healed, then?” Elizabeth asked gently.

“Yes and no. I still ache from the way he left so unexpectedly, and I will always think him the most amiable man of my acquaintance, but I have come to wonder if that is the best kind of husband.”

“What do you mean, Jane?”

“My friend in London, Mrs. Caldwell, I wrote you about her, is recently married to a friend of uncle’s. He runs a business and manages his income, and yet he had time to court his wife and he courts her still. He is attentive and thoughtful and very kind.”

“But is he handsome?” Elizabeth teased.

Jane laughed and tried to glare at her sister. “Actually, no, but that is not the point! Mr. Bingley, who has no business to run and no family to look after, or even a home or estate to take care of, could not be bothered to say goodbye to the neighborhood, not even his closest acquaintance.” Jane looked down and fiddled with a thread on the bedclothes. “Not even me.”

“Oh, Janie!” Elizabeth put her arm round her sister and hugged her close.

“I simply wonder if a man who is so easily swayed and convinced is the best sort of husband. Mr. Pearson, Mr. Bingley’s friend, came with his wife to see me off. They were all so considerate and kind. It was a stark contrast to Mr. and Miss Bingley’s behavior.”

“Yes, it would be,” agreed Elizabeth.

“Lizzy, I have never felt myself as confused as I am now. My heart wants Mr. Bingley still, but my reason tells me that life with a sister who dislikes and disdains me as much as Miss Bingley clearly does would be unpleasant at best. And would I really like being married to a man who cannot even maintain his own schedule? Does that not sound like folly to you?”

Elizabeth had never heard her sister speak in such a way before. Jane was usually so docile, so serene and peaceful. But Elizabeth could remember a few occasions when Jane had been stubborn when she felt she was right. Those who did not know her well would be surprised to believe Jane Bennet could ever disagree with anyone, but they did not know Jane.

“Did Mr. Bingley give any reason for not returning to Hertfordshire?”

“No, he did not. He merely said something had come up in town that prevented his return and vaguely mentioned his sisters. He said Miss Bingley had written to inform us of his plans.”

“Did you tell him you’d received naught but the first letter from Netherfield?”

“No. I did not want to be petty. Miss Bingley has made it clear she does not want me matched with her brother. And again, that makes me think perhaps encouraging Mr. Bingley is not a good idea if it will bring disharmony to the family.”

“Do you believe he wants you to encourage him?” asked Elizabeth.

“Perhaps,” replied Jane.

“Is he behaving as he did in Hertfordshire?”

“In some ways. He is as charming and as amiable, but he seems both more sure and more frightened than before.”

“Perhaps he is sure that he wants you and frightened he has lost you,” suggested Elizabeth.

Jane tilted her head as she thought about the prospect.

“Did he meet Mr. Walker in London?” Elizabeth asked eagerly.

Jane had written often of Mr. Walker, Mrs. Pearson’s older brother, and she had been much in company with him in

London.

“Yes, they met. They were cordial to each other, but I do not believe they are friends,” said Jane.

“Do you have romantic feelings for Mr. Walker? Do you think he has those feelings for you?”

“I don’t think so. Mr. Walker is a kind and intelligent man. I enjoy conversing with him and benefiting from his greater information, but my heart is not touched as yet. I do esteem him and respect him as a friend, and given time, perhaps I could feel more, but I’m afraid I am not capable of it at the moment.” She sighed and laid her head on the pillow. “As for Mr. Walker’s feelings for me, I hardly know. He has said nothing and neither has his sister. I believe he likes me and he frequently asks me to dance, but beyond that, I know nothing.”

“Oh, dear Jane!” Elizabeth stroked her sister’s hair and lay down beside her. “I am so sorry your heart is going through this. It could not happen to a less deserving person. You have always been so good. It is not fair!”

“Would you wish heartache on someone else then? No, I will manage. As Papa says, it is the way of the world and unfortunately, cannot be avoided. I will be fine.”

Elizabeth nodded and kissed her sister’s cheek, then blew out the candle and went to sleep.



While the women were preparing for bed above stairs, Mr. Bennet asked Mr. Collins to speak with him in the study. After listening to Mr. Collins drone on for a quarter hour, Bennet finally interrupted.

“Mr. Collins, I’d like to go over some estate papers with you, since you are to inherit.”

“Oh! Of course!” Collins put his brandy glass on the side table and leaned forward. “I would be only too happy to discuss the great estate of Longbourn with you, though it can be nothing to Rosings Park. Lady Catherine says that a gentleman must have an estate and a proud one, of which I am sure —”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Mr. Bennet interrupted. “Now, here is the map of the home farm. You see in these fields we plant barley, and this is where the cows graze.” He continued on in a quiet voice, pointing to the diagram he’d brought and explaining what went where and who was responsible for what. He was describing the fifth tenant family when he noticed Mr. Collins’s eyes glazing over and his head beginning to tip.

“These are the entail documents, and this describes what is left with the estate and what is my wife’s personal property. Of course she has a year to leave Longbourn for Dunley Cottage. You remember that one—it is the land at the back of the property nearest to Netherfield. It is currently let by the Jones family, but they will be given ample time to remove themselves, and I imagine Mr. Carter’s cottage will be empty

by then and would be an ideal location.” Mr. Bennet tapped Collins’ boot with his own and the younger man jolted upright.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Carter, the um, the one in, hmm.”

“The man in Mulberry Farm. You must remember, Mr. Collins! I was just speaking of him. He is getting on in years and his wife died last spring. His three daughters have all married and he is working the land alone with a hired boy.” Mr. Bennet had in fact not told Mr. Collins that, but that was a technicality.

“Oh, yes! The widower Mr. Carter. I remember, of course.”

Bennet nodded. “Now, as I was saying, Mrs. Bennet and our daughters will remove to Dunley, the Jones family will go to Mulberry Farm, and Mr. Carter will likely move to one of his daughters. Sign here, please.”

“Oh, right, yes. Mr. Carter will be most happy with his daughters.” Mr. Collins scratched his name next to Mr. Bennet’s on the paper.

“Yes, I’m sure he will.” Bennet quickly folded the paper and placed it in the packet he’d brought with him, then poured Collins another glass of the ill-tasting brandy.

By the end of the conversation, Bennet was able to secure Mr. Collins’ signature on documents stating that all the Bennet family jewels would stay with the Bennet daughters, on account of Mr. Collins not really being a Bennet. He’d convinced his younger cousin that it would be the perfect olive branch and would right any wrongs perceived in the

entailment and ensure his welcome in the community. Mrs. Bennet and any unmarried daughters had lifetime rights to live in Dunley Cottage rent free, and Mrs. Bennet herself would receive four-hundred pounds per annum from the estate, plus an additional fifty pounds for any unmarried daughters.

He knew it was a lot, and if his daughters were not to marry it would deprive Collins of over a quarter of the estate's annual income, but his first loyalty was to his wife and children, not to his buffoon of a cousin. Besides, the daughters were nearly all of a marriageable age. Surely some of them would marry soon, hopefully at least one (though preferably two) before he died. He could not, would not, feel guilty about providing for his family.

CHAPTER 9



The next morning was Sunday and everyone was up and dressing for church to hear Mr. Collins give his sermon. He was excessively nervous about it and ran about the house, telling everyone to hurry and rushing through his own preparations so that his appearance was not what it could have been. Thankfully, Charlotte pulled him aside and quickly set him to rights as the entire family assembled at the door and prepared to walk to church.

Their small processional was quite a sight. Mr. Collins walked with Charlotte and Maria on either arm, Mr. Bennet with Mrs. Bennet and Jane, Elizabeth next to Mary, and Kitty and Lydia followed. Kitty was in more grown-up clothes, but wore her hair down as a sign that she was not yet out, while Lydia was dressed as the girl she was, with long strawberry blonde curls cascading down her back and a braid wrapped round her crown. She was on her best behavior, speaking only when spoken to and doing nothing to usurp her older sisters. Her father had threatened her seriously that any rudeness or soldier chasing or sister teasing would be rewarded with a

lonely trip back to Longbourn and the watchful eye of Mrs. Hill while her family enjoyed the seaside without her.

Lady Catherine did not particularly like what she saw, but she did feel a certain perverse fascination to see the Bennets up close. Miss Elizabeth Bennet was a pretty little thing, and certainly very lively, especially when near Anne, who was so very dull in comparison. Unfortunately.

The eldest Bennet daughter was quite easily the prettiest woman she had ever seen, except for herself when she was younger, of course. The next sister was fairly unremarkable but not unpleasant to look at, and the two children in the back seemed like nice enough girls. The service was predictably dull and drawn out and afterward, Lady Catherine issued an invitation for dinner to the Hunsford party. They had previously been invited to tea, but Lady Catherine found she wanted to learn more about these Bennets before they departed on the morrow.

Mr. Collins thanked her profusely for such an undeserved honor and the attention bestowed on his humble family. Mr. Bennet merely smiled and thanked her, as did Mrs. Bennet, who was too much in awe to say anything else.



Darcy had a plan. Since he had been unable to speak to or see Elizabeth the day before, he planned to offer for her before dinner. He would ask her to take a quick turn in the gardens, or if the weather changed, he would speak to her in a corner. The

pianoforte would also be a likely location. He could suggest she play and offer to turn the pages for her. Under the cover of music and with the privacy afforded by the instrument's location, he would pour out his heart and ask for her hand. He dressed with particular care and waited in the drawing room with his heart pounding.

The Bennets arrived in good time. The two youngest, Kitty and Lydia, had stayed at the parsonage, and Maria, feeling odd arriving without them and outshone by the eldest and prettiest Bennet sisters, stayed with them.

Mr. and Mrs. Collins entered with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet directly behind them. Jane, Elizabeth, and Mary followed. Everyone was introduced to Miss Anne De Bourgh and her companion, Mrs. Jenkinson, and asked to sit. Lady Catherine quickly began quizzing the elder Bennets and found an eager recipient for her advice in Mrs. Bennet, who was only too happy to hear what the great lady had to say.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was quite enchanted with two pretty women and another who would have been more attractive had she not been next to her sisters. He quickly engaged all three women in conversation, including Charlotte and Darcy occasionally, and enjoyed his role of storyteller and center of attention immensely.

After a polite amount of time had passed, Darcy suggested Miss Elizabeth play as Lady Catherine did so love her music. Before he could offer to turn her pages, Elizabeth and Mary

had looked at each other and nodded, silently agreeing on something, before they both made their way to the pianoforte.

“Shall we move closer to the instrument?” Jane suggested. “I believe this will be a charming performance.”

The gentlemen gladly moved with her, though Darcy wondered how it would be a charming performance with Mary Bennet playing. He had heard her more than once in Hertfordshire and he sometimes thought his ears were still ringing.

He was in for a surprise.

Elizabeth and Mary played a duet, both playing on the instrument, and eventually Elizabeth began singing in her high, clear voice. He had only heard her sing once since coming to Rosings and that had been a simple tune, not a song like this that was designed to challenge the performer and impress the audience. Before he knew what had happened, Mary Bennet had joined in with a soft alto, all the more surprising because she had sung the soprano part in Hertfordshire. Of course, her being a natural alto explained why her attempts had always gone awry.

The song ended with applause all around and then Mr. Bennet made a request. Next he knew, Mary was playing a lively air and Jane had joined her sisters behind the pianoforte. The two eldest sang while Mary’s hands flew across the keys, invigorating the air around them and filling the room with an almost palpable joy. Then the most extraordinary thing happened. When the song came to the part that was usually

sung by a man, and in this case would have been sung by Mary's low voice, Colonel Fitzwilliam began singing!

He had a pleasing baritone and sang with aplomb, to the great delight of the ladies who could not stop smiling at him. The next verse Elizabeth sang directly to the colonel, as the song dictated, and he actually sang back to her! Then Jane took a turn and before they were done, his sneaky cousin had sung with every Bennet sister in the place! They finished to a hearty round of applause and before they could begin another song, dinner was announced.

Darcy cursed his ill luck and the rain that kept them from walking out and his fool cousin for stealing the smiles that should have been his. Elizabeth was leaving tomorrow! He had to ask her tonight; it was his last chance! And he must speak to Mr. Bennet before they left, if only to give him permission to write to her while she was at the seaside. They were to be there above three months. He could not become engaged and then go an entire three months without seeing or even hearing from his beloved. It was not to be borne!

Dinner was no better. He was seated two places away from Elizabeth, her sister Jane between them. They participated in conversations together and he was able to talk to her, but there was no opportunity for private discourse. After an interminable meal, during which his aunt continued to heap advice upon her newest supplicant while Mr. Collins commended everything she said, the ladies finally departed for the drawing room and the men remained behind. Darcy quickly pulled aside his cousin and asked him to leave him

alone with Mr. Bennet to discuss some private business. Fitzwilliam merely winked and poured himself and Mr. Collins a drink while Darcy asked Mr. Bennet to join him in the library for a moment.

“Mr. Bennet, would you like a brandy?” Darcy asked as he closed the door behind them.

“No, thank you.” Mr. Bennet seemed greatly distracted by the shelves of books he was surrounded by and he walked along slowly, reading the titles and occasionally touching a spine.

“I understand from your daughter that you are a great reader,” Darcy said, more from the need to do something than an actual interest in the conversation.

“Yes. There is nothing so good on a cold day as a good book and a warm fire.”

Darcy agreed. Then, swallowing his nervousness, for he had wanted to talk to Elizabeth before talking to her father, but there was no opportunity—well, no opportunity lately—and here he had the perfect opportunity with Mr. Bennet, he began.

“Mr. Bennet, there is something I would like to speak to you about.”

“Ah, yes, of course. What do you wish to speak of?” Bennet continued to peruse the shelves, unconcerned about the impending conversation.

Darcy had planned to have this conversation face to face, but how could he do that when the man refused to turn

around? Could nothing go to plan?

“Sir, I would like permission, and your blessing, to marry Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy stated formally.

Mr. Bennet stopped where he was, his hand reaching toward a volume, and slowly turned to look at Mr. Darcy. “You want to marry my daughter Elizabeth?”

“Yes.”

Mr. Bennet stared at him. “Has she accepted you?”

Darcy breathed deeply and worked his jaw. “I have not had a chance to ask her. That is, I have not had a moment alone to offer my hand.”

Mr. Bennet nodded slowly, then walked to a chair near the window and eased himself into it. “Why?” he asked.

“Why?” repeated Darcy.

“Yes, why do you want to marry Elizabeth?”

Darcy looked surprised for a moment, then opened and closed his mouth twice before speaking. “I love her, sir. I do not believe I could lead a complete life without her. I am sure we are well matched in mind and character, and I can assure you that I will always treat her with respect and kindness. I am prepared to be very generous with her settlement and with any children we may have.” He sat in the chair opposite Bennet’s.

Mr. Bennet nodded again, his hands steeped in front of his mouth and his eyes looking into the distance. “You love my Lizzy,” he said quietly.

“Yes, I do. Very much,” Mr. Darcy said, just as quietly.

“Mr. Darcy, I will have to ask you some questions that I know you will not like, but before I can agree to this in good conscience, I must ask them for my daughter’s sake.”

Darcy sat up straight and squared his shoulders. “Go ahead, sir. I would do the same for my own sister and cannot fault your desire to see your daughter safe and happy.”

“Very good. Do you drink to excess, Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy was somewhat surprised. He had thought the questions would be more about his income than his behavior, but he supposed it was a reasonable question, so he answered. “Not often. I have, upon occasion, over imbibed. Usually at a holiday or when something unexpected has occurred, but I do not make a habit of it.”

“And when you have, have you done anything you might regret? Have you gambled unwisely? Do you become violent? Are your morals left behind with your sobriety?”

Darcy looked mildly appalled, but thinking he would want to know the same thing about a man who wanted to marry Georgiana, he answered, “No, sir. I do not gamble as a general rule, beyond a drawing room game, and I have never forgotten myself. I believe the worst instance was on the eve of my cousin’s wedding and I sang a very bad rendition of an Italian love song and was put to bed by my valet.”

Mr. Bennet stifled a laugh. “Very well. Is your estate mortgaged or entailed?”

Darcy was more prepared for this question and relaxed significantly. No one could find fault with Pemberley. “No and somewhat. The estate is not mortgaged and there is an entailment on the original portion of the land and the house, but it is not entailed away from the female line and should I not have any children, my sister’s child would inherit. The remaining property is mine to do with as I please.”

Mr. Bennet nodded. “And your sister, would she live with you and my daughter?”

“I hope she would, after a period of adjustment for us to become accustomed to each other.” Mr. Bennet smiled slightly and Darcy shifted in his seat. “Georgiana is only sixteen and a sweet, unassuming girl. I believe she and Miss Elizabeth would get along well.”

“Where would you live?” Mr. Bennet sat back in his chair as if he were just relaxing on a Sunday evening, which, once Darcy thought of it, he supposed he was.

“I currently spend roughly half the year at Pemberley. Once I marry, I hope to increase my time there. I also have a house in town and spend the season there.”

“Would Elizabeth be permitted to visit her family?” he asked quietly. Bennet’s eyes were on the floor.

Darcy paused. He had hoped, originally, to minimize her contact with her family and see them only when necessary, but after speaking to Elizabeth about her father and hearing about the changes made in their household, he wondered if Mr. Bennet was coming to the end of his life. And the youngest

two girls, who had always been the biggest problem besides the mother—who had been remarkably well-mannered on this visit—were no longer out and seemed to have been taken in hand by their father. He could not know if it would continue, but he could hope.

“Yes, sir, I would ensure she had the means to travel to Hertfordshire whenever she wanted, and it would be no hardship to visit on the way to and from London. You would always be welcome at Pemberley, sir.” Darcy almost hadn’t said the last, but seeing the old man already missing his daughter made him think about Georgiana and how, some day soon, he would have to give her up to a man he would hope loved her as much as he.

“You should know that her dowry is only a thousand pounds when her mother passes.”

“That is not a concern, sir. Please, distribute her portion among your other daughters.”

Mr. Bennet nodded. “Very well. I give you my permission and my blessing. Take good care of my girl.”

Darcy smiled the widest smile Mr. Bennet had ever seen him don and shook the older man’s hand vigorously. “Thank you, sir. I’ll take excellent care of her and will treasure her always. You have my word.”

“One more thing, Mr. Darcy.”

The younger man looked at him expectantly.

“Allow me to talk to Elizabeth first. I will speak with her tonight, and you may speak with her in the morning before we depart. I assume you would want to correspond while we are in Margate?”

“Yes, of course. Do I have your permission to write to her, then?” asked Darcy.

“Yes, yes, of course. Have you thought about a wedding date?”

“I have, but I was unsure of your family’s plans.”

“If I may make a suggestion?”

Darcy nodded.

“I would like to see her wed before the summer ends. Not so soon that she has no time to prepare, but not so far out that you despair of the day ever coming,” said Mr. Bennet.

“Why do we not marry in London? It would be an easy distance from Margate and your family could stay in my home,” suggested Darcy.

“We will have been in Margate long enough to have the banns read there, if you’d rather. London will be frightfully hot in midsummer. Or you could purchase a special license and residency would not apply,” supplied Mr. Bennet.

Darcy did not want to tell him why he wished to avoid the Bennet family and Margate, where he had no control over anything that was happening and would be forced into unpleasant company, but it was becoming more difficult not to say something of the matter. “I will be very busy in town,

making sure everything is ready for Miss Elizabeth's arrival and getting my affairs in order so that I may be at leisure after we are wed."

Mr. Bennet nodded. "Very well. I will plan on London in midsummer. Shall we say the first of July? A little more than two months' time?"

"I was hoping for closer to six weeks, sir. I wanted to take Miss Elizabeth on a wedding trip and it would be best to travel in summer," said Darcy.

"Where did you have in mind?"

"I had thought The Lakes. She mentioned once that she hoped to see them one day and I thought it would be an ideal destination. We could easily go to Pemberley afterward and stay through the autumn and winter if we did not want to return to town for the little season."

"Would one of her sisters accompany her, or would you prefer your sister do the job?"

Darcy shifted uncomfortably. "I had hoped we would travel alone. Once we are returned to Pemberley, her sisters, indeed all your family, would be welcome to visit."

"I see." Mr. Bennet nodded. "I will have to discuss this with Mrs. Bennet and Elizabeth, of course, but I believe a wedding in mid-June and a trip to The Lakes after will be acceptable. Is there a place I can tell Elizabeth to meet you in the morning?"

Darcy was taken aback that a father would suggest an assignation so blatantly, but he quickly answered, "There is a

grove she favors. I will meet her there before breakfast.”

“Very good. Do not worry, Mr. Darcy, I trust you.” Mr. Bennet chuckled. “I would not agree to let you marry my daughter if I did not.”

Darcy looked ashamed of his earlier thoughts and nodded.

“If I may give you a piece of advice,” Mr. Bennet said. “Go slowly with Elizabeth. My daughter does not tell me everything, but I believe I am correct when I say her feelings are not equal to yours.”

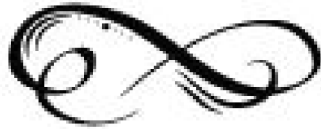
Darcy nodded once in response, trying to keep the surprise from his eyes. Mr. Bennet turned to walk out the door and Darcy followed slowly. Truly, he did not know if he had ever given her feelings much thought before, but if he had been forced to guess, he would have said she felt similarly to him. They were much of a mind and he felt she understood him and he her, and that was why they would do so well together.

He took a deep breath. It was no matter. Of course his feelings were stronger, as they should be. He was to be the leader of their household, after all; it would not do for him to feel less than she did. And she was a lady. She would have kept her feelings in check until she was sure of his. Poor dear, she likely wondered why he had not spoken up. He had walked with her almost daily but spoken nothing of love or marriage. How could he have let her suffer so?

When they returned to the drawing room, both men’s eyes were drawn to Elizabeth where she sat at the pianoforte, playing and singing with her sisters and Colonel Fitzwilliam

who had rejoined the ladies. Darcy sat down and enjoyed the show, gazing upon her with a soft expression on his face. When she looked his direction, he smiled so brightly at her that she lost her place in the music and wondered what he was about.

CHAPTER 10



After they arrived at the parsonage, Mr. Bennet asked Elizabeth to join him in the garden. It was newly dark and she slipped out behind her father and joined him on a stone bench near the far wall, well away from the house.

“Lizzy, I must speak to you.” He took her hand and looked at her face, shadowed in the evening light.

“Yes, Papa?” Elizabeth was nervous. What would he tell her? Would her fears be confirmed?

“I need to tell you something, but I must ask you not to react until I am finished, and you must not run off, but stay here and speak with me when I am through, for I have not the energy to chase you down.” He smiled at the last and she returned it.

“Very well, Papa. I am listening and I will not run away.”

“I spoke with Mr. Darcy this evening. He is an intelligent man, well regarded, respectable.”

“He is. And rude, proud, and thoughtless,” she added lightly. She looked to her father to join in her joke, but he was

serious. “What is it, Papa?”

“Do you really find him thoughtless?” He also found Mr. Darcy proud, but perhaps not overly so, and while he could be rude, Mr. Bennet wondered if he could actually be very thoughtful. After all, he had remembered Elizabeth’s desire to see The Lake District.

Elizabeth thought on her father’s question for a moment, and remembered Mr. Darcy listening to her confession a few days ago, and how he had handed her his handkerchief and been kind while she was in distress.

“No, I suppose he is not,” she said slowly.

“And is he always rude? Has he never been polite or civil to you?”

Again she thought for a moment before answering her father. “No, he is not *always* rude, but when he is, it is quite memorable.”

They shared a smile and Mr. Bennet took her hand in his and looked at her seriously. “My dear Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy is in love with you.”

She looked at him for a moment and then laughed. “Papa! I don’t think Mr. Darcy would appreciate you making such distasteful jokes. Although it is very funny.” She laughed and looked at her father who was not laughing with her. “Papa?”

“My little Lizzy, this is not a joke.”

She stared at him. “Mr. Darcy? In love with me?”

He nodded.

“With *me*?”

He nodded again and squeezed her hand.

“But I am not tolerable enough to tempt him to dance!”

“He danced with you at Netherfield,” said Mr. Bennet.

She looked at him, her face confused and reflecting a dawning horror.

“He is intelligent and well read. He is respectable and not ridiculous. Capable of holding a decent conversation and I imagine he argues and debates intelligently. He is thoughtful, Lizzy, at least where you are concerned.”

She began to shake her head and lean away from her father, too afraid to speak the thoughts that were swirling through her mind faster than she could sort them.

“He is not an unattractive man,” Mr. Bennet’s expression showed his distaste for this particular topic, but he would not have his daughter believe him unfeeling or unaware of the difficulties a woman faced in her marriage and the intimacy that came with it. “He does not smell of cabbage or sweat profusely,” he tried to tease. Deciding he should be more practical, he added, “He is a very busy man, I doubt he would want to be entertained all day. He will have his own activities to keep him occupied.”

“Papa,” she whispered, on the verge of tears.

“My sweet Lizzy, he loves you, very dearly. He will take good care of you, and when I am gone, your mother and sisters.”

She cried in earnest now.

“Please, my darling girl, you will be all right. He will be good to you, I know it. I trust him. Please don’t cry, my dear.”

“But, but, it’s Mr. *Darcy*! He does not like me! How can he, how can we, I cannot! I simply cannot! Please do not ask it of me, Papa!”

Mr. Bennet was feeling nearly as distraught as his daughter at the sight of her tears. “Lizzy, you must listen to me.”

She sniffled and looked toward him.

“Mr. Darcy is an honest man.”

She interrupted him. “Honest! What of his behavior towards Mr. Wickham? And I strongly suspect he had something to do with Mr. Bingley never coming back to Netherfield.”

Mr. Bennet shook his head. “You are too much like me sometimes, Lizzy. Think! Use the cleverness you are so known for! Mr. Bingley is his own man. No matter what anyone tells him, he has the right to come and go as he pleases. If he was persuaded to stay away by Mr. Darcy, and we do not know that he was, is that truly the kind of man you wish your sister to marry? She who is not forceful herself? All their decisions would be made by others! And has not Jane seen Mr. Bingley again in town, several times? Has she not met other men, other suitors, perhaps more worthy than Mr. Bingley?”

She watched him with wide eyes and he shook his head. “Lizzy, you must not lay the problems of the world on Mr. Darcy’s doorstep. Jane has seen Mr. Bingley’s true character and it is now for her to decide what she will do. She is the one who will have to live with him, after all.”

“And would I not have to live with Mr. Darcy?” she asked sharply.

“Yes, but you see, Jane is in a hypothetical situation. Pretty and sweet as she is, she has not had a single proposal, while you are in possession of two. You must open your eyes to Mr. Darcy’s good qualities, Lizzy. It is the only way you will be happy and respectable. And he is a respectable man. I do not know the particulars of what happened with Mr. Wickham, but I do know that he is always at the gaming tables when they are available, and I also know that he was very quick to tell you his tale of woe, and very keen to avoid Mr. Darcy.” He saw his daughter was about to protest and held up his hand. “You have a clever mind, Lizzy. Tell me, why did he speak to you as he did? Why did he not come to the Netherfield ball when he said he would? And why, I might ask, is a man his age only beginning in the militia? Do not let your mind be carried away by your vanity, Elizabeth. He complimented you while Mr. Darcy insulted you; yes, I see that. And he is handsome and amiable and very charming. But do not lose your head over it! You do not know the grief from choosing for the wrong reasons, Elizabeth, and I pray you never do.”

“Is marrying for nothing but material gain not also a wrong reason?” she cried.

“You are determined to be against him! Are you truly so stubborn? It must be my fault for not having taught you better. Ask yourself this: would you be as inclined to believe everything Mr. Wickham said, after an acquaintance of days, if it came from Mr. Collins? Do not speak, just think on it.” He was silent and getting angry himself, and so let his daughter stew on what he had said.

Long used to obeying her father, Elizabeth did as he asked. She imagined Mr. Collins speaking to her so intimately on so short an acquaintance and felt nothing but revulsion and disbelief. Swallowing her pride, she spoke slowly.

“I may have been hasty in my judgment of the situation between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham. But Mr. Darcy has said nothing to refute Mr. Wickham’s claims,” she said.

“Have you asked him?”

She looked at him with surprise.

“Of course not, it would be improper,” he said, dripping with sarcasm. “Mr. Darcy is not one to bandy his personal business about the neighborhood. Neither am I, I might add.”

She looked at him worriedly for a moment before hanging her head. “You have given Mr. Darcy your consent?”

“And my blessing, yes. He did want to speak to you first, but he said he hasn’t had a chance.”

“Not had a chance! He has walked with me almost daily –” She stopped herself as realization dawned on her. “Was he courting me? All those times he walked me back to the

parsonage, I thought it was just perverse fate,” she said quietly, confused wonder in her voice. “How could I have missed it?”

“We often do not see that which we do not wish to see,” he said.

Elizabeth laid her head on her father’s shoulder, exhaustion overcoming her. Disbelief coloring her voice, she asked, “Father, do you actually think I could be happy with Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes, I think you could. You are not built for low spirits. Your liveliness will brighten his disposition and his greater information and position in the world will feed your mind in ways you never imagined. Picture it, Lizzy, quiet evenings spent in front of the fire with a good book, the man beside you would be quiet and reading his own tome, not blathering on about insipid topics,” he chuckled while Elizabeth smiled weakly. “Intelligent discourse, travel, elegant company. Mr. Darcy will make a good companion in time, I think. You may have to train him a bit, but if anyone can do it, it is you.”

Silent tears tracked down her cheeks as she realized her father was deadly serious and would not support her refusal. But still, she had to ask.

“What will happen if I refuse him?” She felt her father stiffen. “Will you throw me from Longbourn? Will I be forced to find employment or take refuge with whatever relatives will take me in? Will Mr. Darcy seek revenge for his humiliation?”

“I would never throw you out, my dearest daughter, and I do not believe Mr. Darcy is the kind to seek revenge on a lady for

nothing but refusing his suit. However, he is a powerful man and I would not actively seek to anger him.”

“Do I have a choice?” she asked in a small voice.

“There is always a choice, Elizabeth. But I beseech you to listen to your father. I know what’s best, and I have lived longer in this world than you. A woman without protection is in a precarious position. I would not like to see it happen to you, my most beloved child. Please, accept Mr. Darcy when he asks you in the morning. Write to him while you are away and come to know him without prejudice. Open yourself to the possibility of caring for him and respect the man that he is. He will take good care of you and look after your mother and sisters. That is not to be taken lightly.”

“Why will we need protection, Papa?” she asked so quietly he almost didn’t hear her.

He stroked her hair and said quietly, “No one knows what the future holds, my dear.” He kissed the top of her head and asked, “Will you marry Mr. Darcy?”

She took a deep breath and shuddered against him. “It is one of the only things you have ever asked of me, Papa. I could not do it for someone I loved less.”

“Very good, my dear. In time, I hope you will come to see you do this for yourself as well.”

Feeling all the weight of the promise she’d just made, she leaned on her father and wept bitter, heart-rending tears.



Elizabeth slept fitfully and when she set out to meet Mr. Darcy, she looked wan and tired. She pinched her cheeks and reminded herself to be polite, then headed towards the grove. Mr. Darcy was already there, pacing near the stream.

“Miss Elizabeth!” He smiled and approached her quickly, taking both her hands in his and squeezing them tightly. “I am so glad to see you.”

“Did you think I wouldn’t come?”

He only smiled in response and looped her arm in his. They walked in silence a few minutes before he said, “I gather you spoke with your father?”

“Yes, we spoke last night,” she answered, her eyes on the ground.

He stopped and faced her, causing her to do the same. “Miss Elizabeth, you must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.” She blushed and looked down, not knowing what to say. He needed no encouragement to continue. “I am sorry I spoke to your father before you. It had not been my intention.” She nodded. He took a deep breath and straightened his tall frame fully. “Miss Elizabeth, would you do me the very great honor of accepting my hand in marriage?”

She took a breath, rose her face to his long enough to see his eyes shining in expectation, looked back to the ground and

said, "Yes, Mr. Darcy. I accept."

He smiled radiantly and raised one hand to his lips and then the other, pressing fervent kisses on her gloved hands.

"Thank you, Elizabeth." She startled and looked up at the familiar address and he smiled to see her surprise. He caressed her cheek with one hand, slowly and deliberately, and she grew so flustered she looked all around, not knowing where to rest her eyes, and finally settled on the buttons of his waistcoat.

He took her arm and began walking again, this time pulling her as close as possible and resting his hand over her smaller one on his arm. His thumb rubbed lazy circles on the back of her hand, giving her the strangest urge to swat him away.

"Are you looking forward to the seaside?" he inquired.

"Yes, I am. It will be my first trip and I am quite eager to see the shore," she said, grateful to speak of something other than their engagement.

"May I write to you there?"

"You may," she answered quietly.

"And will you write to me?"

She flushed. "If you wish it."

"I do. Has your father spoken to you of a wedding date?"

"No, there has not been time," she replied.

"We had discussed the middle of June. It would give you enough time to prepare but still leave plenty of time for us to

travel on a wedding trip.”

“June?”

“Do you object?”

She did, most strenuously, but if her father wished it, she saw no other way. She was not ready to openly defy him and run away. What better circumstances could she possibly hope to find through that method?

“It is a bit sudden, but I believe I could be prepared by then.”

He squeezed her hand in sympathy. “I know it is a great many changes at once, more so for you than for me. I shall live in the same house and have largely the same activities with the lovely addition of your presence. You will have a new home, a new role within that home, and only my presence to comfort you when you have long had a house full of family. Georgiana will eventually join us, but I understand that you do not know her as yet.”

She understood that he meant well, but his speech had the unwanted effect of making her want to burst into tears. How would she do it? Leave her sisters and her parents and her beloved Hertfordshire and go live with a man she hardly knew? She looked away and blinked rapidly, not wanting him to see her tears. They would do her no good now.

Darcy walked her back to the parsonage and stepped inside to have a word with her father while she joined her sisters Mary, Kitty, and Jane at breakfast. Thankfully, Mr. Collins had

been called to the sickbed of an elderly parishioner early that morning, so the Bennet family was left in relative peace. Her mother was still preparing for the journey and she gratefully sat at the quiet table and ate, looking around her and glumly wondering how many more meals like this she would have. It was likely Jane would be married soon, too, hopefully to a man she esteemed and could love one day if she did not already. Jane had always been the lucky sister.

Before her mother came down, Elizabeth finished her meal and went to the parlor to meet with Mr. Darcy and her father. Mr. Bennet smiled when she came in and pressed her arm as he walked past her out of the room.

“You may have a few moments to say goodbye,” he said, and closed the door behind him.

Her eyes widened at the sight of the closed door and she turned back to Mr. Darcy, her shock still evident on her face.

“Your father seems to trust me a great deal,” he said, a bit bashfully she thought. But that must have been her imagination, for surely Mr. Darcy was never bashful or nervous.

“I’m sure he would not have given his consent if he did not,” she said noncommittally.

He nodded and came toward her, taking both her hands in his and bringing them to his chest.

“My dearest, loveliest, Elizabeth. I shall miss you while you are away.”

She looked at him in wonder.

“Surely that does not surprise you?” he said with a smile.

She startled and looked away. “Yes, sir, I’m afraid it does.”

“Elizabeth, when a man loves a woman as I love you, separations are not desirable occurrences,” he explained in a soft voice.

She wasn’t sure if he was reprimanding her or flirting. He lifted one hand and kissed the inside of her wrist delicately. *Definitely flirting.*

“Promise you will write to me, dearest,” he requested in a low voice.

Without thinking, she found herself responding with a soft, “Of course.”

He kissed her bare hand and she felt a strange warm sensation where his lips met her skin. “Safe travels, Elizabeth.”

“You as well, Mr. Darcy.”

He gave her one last look, then escorted her outside where her father was overseeing the luggage being loaded onto the carriage.

“When will I see you again?” she asked. She was curious about the plans he had made with her father and wanted to prepare herself, but he smiled at the question.

“Your father said he will bring you to London a few days before the ceremony.”

She wanted to ask why they were marrying in London and not from Longbourn or Pemberley or even Margate, but she didn't have a chance. Her father interrupted and then Mr. Darcy was walking up the lane to Rosings.

CHAPTER II



The house in Margate was a small blue cottage surrounded by a flower garden just beginning to bloom. It was close enough to the sea that waves could be heard in the background, but the water could not be seen. The Bennet family poured into the home, quickly exploring and deciding who would get each room. There were three bedrooms to be distributed among five girls. Before their father's changes, they would have split into pairs: the two eldest and the two youngest, leaving Mary at odds. But now, they were all conscious of a new order and unsure how to proceed.

Lydia had originally declared loudly that she and Kitty would take the large room with the pink paper and the soft green linens, but when she heard her father's footsteps, she remembered she was the youngest and, therefore, least entitled sister and that she was to be on her best behavior or risk being sent home.

When Mr. Bennet entered the hall, he found five pairs of eyes looking at him expectantly. He chuckled and asked what they were about.

“How would you like the rooms arranged, Papa?” Mary asked softly.

“I believe that is your mother’s purview,” he responded. The shrill sounds of Mrs. Bennet ordering the housekeeper about and giving instructions to the maids rang through the house. “Jane, as your mother is otherwise occupied, I will entrust you with this most important task. You have precedence, after all.” He smiled at his eldest and stood back next to his daughters.

“You want me to choose all the rooms?” He nodded. Jane looked uncertain. “Including yours?”

“It is not far from what you would be doing as mistress of your own home one day. Surely it is a manageable task.”

Jane proceeded to walk into the bedrooms, mentally calculating their size and how many people each room could comfortably hold and the size of the accompanying dressing room or if there even was one. Her sisters watched her curiously from the hall, feeling an odd sense of suspense with this simple task.

Mr. Bennet, as usual, had an ulterior motive in asking his daughter to choose for him. He had no doubt that she would give her mother and father the grandest of the rooms. But as the eldest, she should be the one to receive her own room while her younger sisters shared. It was her right, but she had never been one to put herself forward other than walking at the head of the line when going in to dinner. She knew her place, but she had never been one to exercise it when it could possibly put someone else out. She reprimanded her younger

sisters when it was called for, but they rarely listened for more than a moment. In contrast, Elizabeth had once famously dragged Lydia inside by her ear when her younger sister would not heed her command.

Jane had made significant strides in her studies and in her evaluation of human character. She could see more of a person's true nature than she could before, and she seemed wiser, but she was not any happier. Mr. Bennet knew that she was Jane still. She preferred to see the best in people and would always want things to be simple and clear cut, without mystery or falseness. He only hoped he could guide her long enough for her to see the world as it was, or at least more realistically than she usually did, but also be able to maintain her joy in life. He did want to leave her when he had begun the play but not completed the final act.

In the end, Jane made her father proud. She assigned her father and mother the two largest apartments with ample dressing rooms. She gave Kitty and Lydia a moderate sized room with a view of the street, and Elizabeth and Mary the slightly nicer room with a view of the garden, in respect to their ages. She gave herself a small bedroom overlooking the back garden. It was smaller than the others, but no less grand in its decoration, and it featured a lovely balcony through a set of glass doors. She had felt a tiny twinge at giving such a decadent feature to herself and not to her sisters who would have also enjoyed it, but she judged that the room was not large enough for two comfortably, and that as the eldest, she ought to have her own chamber. She also did not think it wise

to constantly leave Mary on her own as had been their pattern in the past.

Decisions made, the girls quickly set to unpacking and within an hour, they were setting off for their first glimpse of the sea.



After seeing Elizabeth off, Darcy left for London with his cousin. He wasn't at his townhouse an hour before he had dispatched a letter to his solicitor requesting an appointment. He then busied himself planning Elizabeth's settlement. He felt almost giddy with excitement over what he could give her and the lifestyle she would be able to lead as his wife, so much better than the one she had been living as a Miss Bennet. After he'd made all the necessary notes, he toured the mistress's chambers.

He hadn't been in them for some time and most of the furniture was covered in sheets. He carefully lifted the white cloth from a chair near the fireplace and sat down, imagining what this room would look like with Elizabeth in it. He didn't know how she would like to decorate it, but he could not wait to see her installed so close to him. Their chambers were across the hall from one another, and there was a sitting room at the end of the corridor, with an adjoining door to his bedchamber. The mistress's sitting room was in another location. He wished there was an adjoining door to her rooms, like he'd seen in other homes, so the couple could traverse

between rooms without everyone in the house being aware of their comings and goings. Perhaps he could create a door? The eastern wall of her chamber bordered his sitting room. In fact, he rarely used his sitting room, having a library, private study, and other rooms in this enormous house at his disposal. If he was going to sit and read, he did so by the fire in his own chamber. He used his private sitting room at Pemberley most often when they had guests or when he wished to lounge about in his robe, but that, too, was infrequent.

Perhaps he and Elizabeth could share this sitting room together and have their own bedchambers? The sofa in the sitting room might be more conducive to a couple relaxing in the evening than the chair next to the fire in his bedchamber. Though sharing a chair with Elizabeth was not an unappealing prospect. He felt odd making these sorts of decisions at all, let alone without Elizabeth, but he could not help the eager smile that formed when he thought of bringing her here as his wife.

He summoned the housekeeper and informed her of the work he wished done and asked her to select a suitable workman to complete the job. She almost raised a brow at his words, but quickly schooled her features.

Once these tasks were completed, he did the only logical thing he could think to do. He sat down and wrote a letter to Elizabeth.



Returning from a walk on their third day in Margate, Elizabeth was greeted by her father with a letter for her. The handwriting was distinctly masculine and she took it carefully and carried it to her room, grateful that Mary was practicing her music downstairs. She sank into the chair next to the window and broke the seal, taking a deep breath of salty air before reading.

My Dear Elizabeth,

You cannot imagine my joy at being able to address you as such. My time in town has been spent preparing for our impending marriage. The mistress' suite is being aired and the settlement papers should be prepared by the end of the week.

Georgiana is beside herself with excitement. She has told me no fewer than five times how she has always longed for a sister. I am glad I may oblige her with such a charming one as you.

How do you find the seaside? I wish I could have been with you when you saw it for the first time and thus been part of what must remain an indelible memory in your mind. It comforts me to know that your first sight of The Lakes will be at my side and will be the first of many memories we make together.

I do not know if you will have decided any of this yet, but Georgiana wishes to know what color your wedding gown will be. She will begin shopping soon and she would like to wear something complementary but does not wish to insult you by wearing the same color. There, my promise is now discharged

and I may continue on topics more interesting to the male sex, or at least to me.

Have I told you how completely I adore you and with what anticipation I look forward to our union? I am sure that we will be very happy together. Six weeks has never seemed so long.

Think of me while you are walking in the sand and remember how dearly I miss your smile.

Yours,

F. Darcy

How was she to respond to such a letter? What could she possibly say in reply? "It's all very well that you adore me and cannot wait to be married to me, but I look on the event as one would a trip to the guillotine." No! She could not! It would be completely inappropriate and likely quite cruel. He seemed to be rather in love with her, though how true his feelings were she could not say. He barely knew her! How could a deep and abiding love come from so slight an acquaintance between such disparate characters?

Deciding it was best to get the unpleasant task dealt with and out of the way, she sat at the writing desk and began a reply. She only left off twice and spent the better part of two days working on it in some form or another before she finally finished and gave it to her father to post.



In London, Darcy had just finished his final meeting with the solicitor and walked into his home with a spring in his step. Tomorrow, the final copy of the settlement would be prepared and he could send it to Mr. Bennet. Once the articles were signed, he would announce it to his family and they would know he was a claimed man.

His mood further increased when he saw a letter from Elizabeth on his desk. He ran his finger over the 'B' stamped into the wax before opening it and beginning to read. He read it once through, his brow furrowing deeper the further he read, before reading the entire thing again.

Her first lines were about the sea and what she had seen so far. However, when he got towards the middle, he saw this.

I must speak of something difficult, but I fear my justice cannot allow it to go unsaid. I must tell you that I have doubts of our conjugal felicity. You speak of love and adoration, but I cannot help but feel that you do not know me well at all, and therefore I question your feelings. Rather, I question the longevity and depth of those feelings, and if they are strong enough to overcome our differences. Will they wane when the bloom has gone from the rose? Will you eventually cease to think me charming and merely find me impertinent? Will you resent and hate me for not being suited to you and your

position in the world? I could not bear to live with a husband who despises me.

I do not mean to be insulting and please take these words with the honest intention with which they were written. I mean this as no slight on your character whatsoever, only that we may not be suited.

I have no desire to injure you or embarrass you. As yet, the engagement has not been announced to my family, and unless you have announced it, you may withdraw without consequence. I certainly would not hold it against you. However, if you wish to continue as planned, you have my word that I will say no more about the topic and I will endeavor to be a good wife to you.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Bennet

After the third reading, Darcy was incensed. He quickly dashed off a reply and sent it immediately.



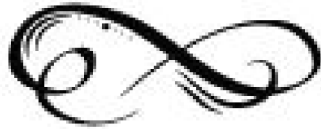
Two days later, Elizabeth received a letter. She recognized Darcy's neat hand and quickly broke the seal.

Elizabeth,

We will proceed as planned.

Darcy

CHAPTER 12



In London, Darcy was in a fine state. What had she been thinking? Not suited? They were perfectly suited! Why did she think he had chosen her? Because she had a fine figure and a pretty face? Surely she must know he had seen many pretty faces but had never been tempted to propose marriage before. He knew she was sheltered and young, but surely she knew she wasn't the only pretty girl of his acquaintance?

After two days of ranting and silently questioning his own sanity—who desires to marry a penniless woman that does not desire to marry him?—Darcy decided to give her questions the benefit of rational thought. She had said her justice could not allow her doubts to go unspoken. Well, his justice could not allow her questions to go unexamined. After careful thought and deliberation, he came to the same conclusion he had all the other times he had thought about marrying Elizabeth Bennet. The advantages far outweighed any negatives. Yes, they were unfamiliar with each other, but that would change with time. He believed they truly were suited and he knew his feelings would not fade. They had only grown stronger since

he'd met her last autumn and that was without being in her presence.

Once he had seen her in Kent, his feelings had grown enormously, to the point he could hardly think of anything else. He knew this part of it all, this fever of the heart, would not, could not, last forever, but he also knew that the abiding care he felt for her was long lasting and that his enjoyment of her presence was unlikely to diminish with time. He could only imagine how much more he would come to enjoy her when they were permitted to spend unlimited amounts of time together, undisturbed and unchaperoned. He imagined that once they were fully intimate with one another, there would be an unshakeable bond between them, in addition to the increase of feelings and pleasure in her company such closeness would necessarily bring.

Still, she should not have tried to cry off. Or to convince him to do it for her. It was cowardly of her. His pride told him to let her worry about it for a while and hopefully that would teach her not to try to break a promise, especially with him. A smaller, quieter part of him was very worried about her actions and the thoughts that must have led to them. Her obvious lack of attachment to him was surprisingly disturbing. What would it mean for their future together? Her father had told him she did not love him as he loved her, as was only right, but her lack of devotion was worrying.

Alas, his pride won out and he did not send her another letter for nearly a fortnight, letting her bask in the uncertainty she was sure to be feeling.



Elizabeth spent the next few days in constant fear of the repercussions of her actions. What had she been thinking? Why did she write that letter? She simply hadn't been able to resist an opportunity to escape what she saw as an untenable situation. She had promised her father she would accept him, but if Mr. Darcy wanted to be released, she would not hold him. Truly, she was terrified of the future and angry over being forced into such a situation. Of course she would try to change her circumstances! Mr. Darcy was not the sort of man she had thought to marry, and she was terribly afraid her future would hold very little in the way of joy.

She had to admit to also feeling guilty about receiving his letter and affections. Mr. Darcy clearly felt strongly for her. And she was angry at him for feeling that way. What right did he have to come into her peaceful world and fall in love with her? To force her hand by speaking to her father before herself? To be so rich her father couldn't refuse?

She had no way of knowing if his feelings were lasting or not, but *he* certainly believed they were. She read his letter with some measure of repulsion and increasing embarrassment, as if it was written for someone else and she was trespassing in a most intimate way. She couldn't allow him to humiliate himself by continuing to speak and write to her in such a way, believing that she at least welcomed his affections even if she didn't return them. It was all too much!

And now she had angered him. She had angered the man who would have ultimate power over her in a matter of weeks. The settlement had arrived shortly before Darcy's letter and her father had happily signed it. It was done. Her mother and sisters had been told and she had an appointment with a dressmaker that afternoon. There was no turning back now.

But instead of marrying a man who loved her and wished to please her, she would marry a man who was angry at her and likely had no desire to please her at all; a man whom she had humiliated and attempted to jilt. What had she been thinking? Stupid, stupid, girl. Wretched, wretched mistake!



After a week had passed, and he had calmed enough to think about it clearly, Darcy wondered that she just didn't break the engagement herself. He thought she either wasn't brave enough to do it herself and wanted the decision taken away from her, though he doubted that was likely, or she feared her family, namely her father, would not support her if she did. He thought the latter was more probable until he was at a dinner with his Fitzwilliam cousins and, quite by accident, heard a lady sharing her concerns about marriage with a group of women and how little a lady knew a man before being completely in his power. The lady had expressed her fears about accepting a proposal on short acquaintance and before he heard more, he'd walked away, but it did make him think that a large part of Elizabeth's reasoning might have been

based in fear. Of the unknown, and chiefly of him, and what life with him would be like.

She did not know him. She had said in her letter that he did not know her well, and perhaps he didn't know her in the way she thought he should, but he had spent countless hours observing her in a variety of situations and felt he really did know her. Not as well as he would once they had lived together for a time, but well enough. And that was when he realized she did not feel the same about him.

She had not spent hours observing him. It was not in her nature to observe without engaging and she was much younger than he. She likely did not know what to look for. She had not spent endless evenings in drawing rooms with desperate would-be husbands fawning for her attention. She did not have his experience with society or with the world at large. She would not know how he compared to other men. The only men she knew were in Hertfordshire's limited society. She could not help but think his feelings similar to her own. She did not know him well or feel secure in her choice, so she assumed he must feel the same.

Well, he did not.

After a few more days had passed, his anger with her had faded and he found compassion for her. She would be thrust into a new role and a new place with a man she felt was nearly a stranger. She could not know the depth of his feelings—he had not told her. She could not know his reputation for kindness and integrity—they were not from the same circles.

She could not know he intended to support her in whatever way she needed and to do his utmost to be an exemplary husband. She had seen poor examples and could not know her future was much brighter than her mother's.

She would see. He would show her.



Twelve days. Elizabeth had received Mr. Darcy's brief reply to her letter twelve days ago, but he had yet to send a longer missive. She assumed he had been in contact with her father, at least in regard to signing the settlement, but for whatever reason, though she likely knew the reason perfectly well, he was not communicating with her. Elizabeth was in a state of anxiety beyond anything she had experienced before. The documents were signed, the date was set, the announcement had been sent to all her family. It was done—she was as good as married now. Breaking an official engagement was nearly impossible and would be humiliating in the extreme. She couldn't think of doing such a thing, even if she thought her father would support her, and she was sure he would not.

After another restless night and no word from her betrothed, she concluded he was not going to send her a lengthier letter. The questions she'd dreaded were clearly not coming. Deciding she had to do something, she sat down to write a letter to Mr. Darcy. She had said she would say nothing more about their lack of suitability and endeavor to be a good wife to him, and so she would. Starting now.

Dear Mr. Darcy,

How is London? I hope your business is being seen to satisfactorily. (This is ridiculous, but what else can I start with?) How is your sister? I cannot wait to meet her. I hope we shall be good friends. (And I dearly hope she is not as proud and awful as Mr. Wickham said she is. I could not bear two Darcys staring at me all day long.)

Margate is just as pleasant as I hoped it would be. I walk along the shore daily. (Really, Elizabeth, could you be more dull?) I'm afraid I have become quite tan! I hope you will not mind a brown bride overmuch. Mama is constantly telling me to carry a parasol and stay out of the sun, but when the light is dancing on the water so prettily, I cannot be bothered with such mundane details as parasols.

My sister Catherine has become quite enamored of the birds near a small pier. She feeds them old bread and some of them have come close enough to actually eat out of her hand! I have never seen the like of it. I tried the same myself, but the birds would not come so close to me. Perhaps they know that I would reach out to pet them would they venture so near. Catherine has always had a way with animals. She has been sketching them ceaselessly since we arrived. I have included her drawing of the marmalade cat that sits in our back garden. I have taken to calling him Felix and sneak him fish scraps after dinner. He is a delightfully fat thing and makes the sweetest purring sound when I scratch behind his ears. I haven't enjoyed such simple pleasures since I was a child. I am

very glad my father has taken this house for the summer. Everyone is so much more relaxed than they usually are—the sea air appears to be working its magic on the Bennet family.

Have you ever been to the sea? What a question! I'm sure a man such as you, who has lived in the world, has seen a great many things. (This may be the most boring letter ever written. Think of something interesting to say or quit torturing the poor man!) Do you want to know something scandalous? You must promise not to tell my mother, for she would never let me hear the end of it. Yesterday, while out walking, I removed my shoes and stockings and walked barefoot in the sand. It felt delightful under my feet! I even picked up my skirt and walked into the water. It was like nothing I've ever felt before. It was soft and foaming and cool all at the same time. I laughed in sheer delight. I'm sure the children playing nearby thought I had lost my senses. But, oh! It was so lovely!

I am wanted by my mother so I must close now. (She spent a good three minutes thinking of how to end her letter.) Give my best to your sister.

E.B.

P.S. You mentioned The Lakes in a previous letter. Are you planning a journey thither? Might I know when? I have always longed to see The Lakes!

It was not the most riveting letter she'd ever written, but she supposed it would have to do. She sanded and blotted it, pressed her seal into the wax, and sent it on its way. Hopefully

it would buy her some measure of good will with her future husband.



Darcy received Elizabeth's letter with a mixture of confusion and trepidation. He had been working on his own letter to her, wondering what he should say and how they should proceed. He was even considering a trip to Margate to spend time with her. Slightly appalled at how desperately he wanted to know what was written, and more importantly the tone of her letter and whether or not she was jilting him, he broke the seal and began to read. He scanned through it quickly, looking for words like "break," "engagement," and "sorry." Happily, he found none and leaned back to read it more slowly.

It was obvious that she was unsure what she should say to him, but she did seem to be keeping her word in regards to not talking about her attempt to end their betrothal. He was pleased and happy she was enjoying a season of relaxation with her family before he carried her off to Derbyshire. He recognized a bit of her liveliness in her words and thought she simply needed to accustom herself to the idea of their being wed. It probably hadn't helped that immediately following their engagement they'd separated. If they had been able to stay together, even for just a few days, she probably would have felt less odd about it all.

He picked up his pen to reply to her.

~~Dearest Elizabeth,~~

Dear Elizabeth,

I am pleased to hear you are enjoying the seaside. I have many fond memories of visiting the shore with my family as a lad. (Great, Darcy, bore her to tears why don't you?) I am glad you have this time with your family prior to the wedding. ~~Derbyshire is a great distance from Hertfordshire and you aren't likely to see them often.~~ (Seriously, old man? Are you trying to frighten her? "Come away to my dungeon in the north. You'll never see anyone you love again." Stupid man!)

As regards the Lake District, I thought we might take our wedding trip there. I remember you saying you'd always wanted to see the area and thought it would be an ideal location. We can spend the first few days in London, then begin the journey north. We can return to Pemberley afterward and remain there until the spring. I spoke of it to your father and he thought it a good plan. Mayhap your family will join us in the autumn or perhaps for the festive season. I shall leave that to you and your father to decide.

Georgiana was asking about you again—you are one of her favorite topics of conversation—and I realized I do not know when your birthday is. Nor do I know precisely how old you are. Please oblige me with these details as well as what sort of gifts you prefer and whether you favor Mozart over Saleiri.

I hope to complete my business in town within the next fortnight, and then perhaps I will join you in Margate. Until then, I remain,

Yours,

F. Darcy

Darcy satisfied himself that it was a passable effort and that it would have to do. He made a fair copy, put the old one in the drawer of his desk, and put it on the pile of outgoing mail.



Elizabeth opened Darcy's letter with more than a little nervousness. She had no idea how he would receive her letter, or if he was even willing to be civil with her after what she had suggested. It was with great relief that she read his lines and noticed he seemed to be putting it behind him, just as she had. It would seem they were going to pretend it had never happened. Only, she did notice there were no endearments in this letter. Of course, she hadn't really expected them. What man makes love to a woman who has just asked to be released from their engagement? But still, she wondered if she had damaged something irreparably and what the consequences would be. She was no expert on marriage, but she did think a husband who loved his wife was likely to be much kinder than one who did not.

Deciding there was nothing she could do about it at present, she set to writing her reply.

Dear Mr. Darcy,

The Lakes sound like a wonderful idea for a wedding trip! I long to see them! Thank you for arranging it—it is very thoughtful of you. As for answers to your questions, my birthdate is the fourteenth of July. Mayhap I will celebrate this year in the Lake District? That sounds like a charming gift to me. My exact age should remain a mystery, as no woman likes such information spread abroad, but if you can keep it to yourself I will tell you. This summer I shall attain my majority. There. Now you know I am but twenty years of age to your—well, isn't this odd? It would seem I do not know how old you are, either. Now, sir, I do think it only fair that you tell me forthwith since I was gracious enough to provide you with the same information about myself. Men are never so secretive about their ages, anyway.

While you are divulging personal information, would you be so kind as to tell me your favorite color and scent and your favorite dishes? My mother would like to know. Not that I am uninterested, but if I am going to ask questions, I would prefer to know your favorite book and which pastimes you prefer. Do you favor riding over shooting? Do you like to fish? My uncle is very fond of it, but it has always seemed frightfully dull to me, though perhaps I am missing something of import.

Papa has sent for more music from town and I am learning a new Mozart concerto. I prefer him to most composers, though if I am being honest I must admit to dearly loving Scotch airs. They always feel light and happy and never fail to leave me smiling. In answer to your other question, I do not know what sort of gifts I prefer—the thoughtful kind, I

suppose. I do not need expensive jewels or extravagant parties—though a room full of friends is always enjoyable. My favorite gift to date is a necklace from my uncle. He was on a business trip to Spain, many years ago, and he saw an intricately carved locket in a small shop in some out of the way place. He said it immediately made him think of me and as the next day was my birthday, he bought it. I hung it on a ribbon and wore it daily for years until the hinge broke. I'm sure it was not too expensive, though it was beautifully done, but my uncle was right—it was ideally suited to me. Perhaps that is one of the reasons I loved it so much. It proved to me just how well he knew me. I'd suspected and I knew we shared a special bond—he is my godfather as well as my uncle—but this added proof was very welcome.

I am wanted by my mother so I must close.

Faithfully,

Elizabeth Bennet

She questioned somewhat her closing, but she thought it a measure of goodwill and decided to leave it. Before she posted it, she went to her father in the parlor and asked if he would like to add a note to her letter.

“No, I sent Mr. Darcy a letter two days ago. I am not so forlorn for correspondence that I already feel the need to write again.”

Elizabeth smiled and sat next to him on the settee. “Father, has Mr. Darcy spoken to you about the wedding trip?”

“Yes, he has. He wishes to take you to The Lakes; he remembered you’d mentioned wanting to see them.”

“Yes, that part I know and it is very kind of him.” She ignored the very pointed look her father was giving her. “I was wondering who is to accompany us? Did you discuss it?”

At this Mr. Bennet lost his teasing smile and looked grave for a moment. “We did. I asked him if his own sister would perform the job or one of your own. He said he would rather you go just the two of you,” her brows raised to her hairline, “and I said we could discuss it later. Shall I take it from your expression that you do not favor the idea of a month long tête-à-tête?”

She chose her words carefully. “I have done as you asked and tried to see Mr. Darcy through new eyes, and I admit that he is a great deal more amiable than I would have thought, at least in his letters, but I am not comfortable with spending such prolonged time in each other’s sole company, with nothing to keep us occupied.” Mr. Bennet raised his brows and Elizabeth felt herself blushing to the roots of her hair. “I mean, no estate business or calls to make. We will be quite at our leisure and I fear the proximity will do more harm than good.”

“You may be correct, though of course there is no way to know for certain. It is possible the lack of other companions will force you to converse in ways and on topics you might otherwise not, creating a greater closeness significantly sooner than would otherwise be expected. And of course it is entirely possible that you will meet some of Mr. Darcy’s acquaintance

whilst there; he does have a much broader circle than we do. And you can always make friends anywhere.”

Elizabeth nodded. “True, but is it not also likely the added intimacy will prove overwhelming and lead to a heightened sense of anxiety, making it difficult to become truly friends and leave us on edge and snapping at each other? We barely know one another!”

“True, all true, but we cannot know for certain. If you could, who would you like to accompany you? A sister usually does the job, and you have plenty to choose from, though I’m sure your mother would perform the service if you asked.” He laughed aloud at the look on his daughter’s face.

“I would prefer to take Jane. If anyone could provide comfort and sensible advice during this time, it is she, but I do not know if it is a wise idea.”

He nodded. “In what way, exactly?”

“In every way! Jane is having such a lovely time here at the shore, I would hate to pull her away.”

“Would she not have a lovely time at The Lakes?”

“And she was getting along so well with Mr. Parker and had seen Mr. Bingley,” Elizabeth continued. “As it stands, she will be back in London the week of the wedding. Who knows what will happen then? What if Mr. Bingley renews his courtship and aunt and uncle invite her to stay again, or he decides to follow her here? Margate is a much easier distance.”

“Do we even know if either gentleman will be in town? Mr. Parker is likely to be there, due to his business, but do you know Mr. Bingley’s plans?”

Her shoulders slumped. “No.”

“Is Mr. Bingley not Mr. Darcy’s closest friend? Might endearing your sister to her new brother reap greater rewards in that quarter?”

“I suppose it could. So you believe Jane should accompany me?”

“No! Of course not!”

Elizabeth looked surprised at his vehement response, then smiled when she saw the gleam in his eyes.

“Who will I converse with if my two eldest abandon me to run away to The Lakes?”

Elizabeth laughed aloud. “Oh, Father! We would never abandon you. Mr. Darcy said I could have the family to visit in the autumn, or perhaps over Christmas. What do you think of that? Jane and I could go to The Lakes, then on to Pemberley. In October, you could all join us there?” She grew excited at the prospect and he almost couldn’t resist her broad smile.

“I do not know, child. I must speak to your mother. We will have already been from home quite some time. I will need to wait until after the harvest.” Mr. Bennet was not insensible to the benefits to be reaped from spending a month or more at his wealthy son-in-law’s home. The money they would save on

food alone would be impressive, not to mention the reduced staff.

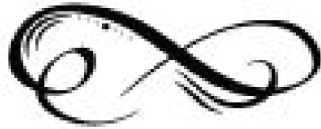
“Please come, father, at least for a little while. I will be so far from home and everything will be so new.”

Her voice was small and Mr. Bennet felt deeply for his daughter. She would be facing so many new challenges, and all because he had asked her to, because he had failed to plan appropriately and allow his daughter to marry a man she cared for, or at least one with whom she was comfortable. Her distress was a sharp point in his otherwise happy manner and he readily agreed.

“Of course, my dear. We will come to you in your new home. Your papa will not abandon you.” He looked at her seriously for a moment and furrowed his brow. “I know you will rise to the occasion, no matter the situation. I have the utmost faith in you.”

Her smile was a little wobbly as she thanked him and reached to give him a hug before saying she needed to see the sea one more time before sundown and practically ran down to the beach in an effort to forget the tumult of her present life.

CHAPTER 13



Darcy read Elizabeth's letter with an increasingly growing smile. She was sounding more like her old self. All would be well. Elizabeth had said nothing about a traveling companion. Perhaps she was warming to the idea of being alone together; or her father had spoken to her. Either way, he was closer than ever to bringing home his bride, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so happy.

On his way home from the club that afternoon, Darcy stopped into a small jewelry store. He wandered around, looking from display to display, hoping something would jump out at him. After Elizabeth's tale of her favorite gift from the uncle who knew her so well, he'd been able to think of little else but doing the same. He would buy her a gift that would suit her perfectly and she would realize how well he knew her, how well-matched they were, and it would have the added bonus of increasing her affection for him. This was a great responsibility to place on one tiny gift, and just when he thought he'd found the right thing, something else would catch his eye. In the end, the pressure of choosing something so

perfect proved to be too much and he left the store in a frustrated huff.

He walked along Bond Street and made a stop at his tailor, as had been arranged, for a final fitting of his wedding coat. He was wearing blue. His sister had assured him that it was fashionable but he wouldn't look like a dandy and the color was very complementary to his complexion. He'd agreed and wondered what Elizabeth was wearing. She hadn't mentioned it in her letters. He hoped they would look well together, then immediately chastised himself for such a dandified thought.

As he was walking to his carriage, he passed a small hat shop that had a display of hair combs in the window. A pair caught his eye and he stepped closer. They had a cluster of small blue flowers—he didn't know what kind, and he thought them very pretty and very like Elizabeth. Simple, beautiful, sweet, not seeking attention but sparkling just the same. He quickly stepped inside and bought the combs and had them wrapped and was on his way home in five minutes, a curious smile on his face.

Before he could become distracted, he closed himself in his study to write a letter to his betrothed.

Dearest Elizabeth,

I hope you are well. I'm so glad you are pleased with going to The Lakes. I think you will enjoy them immensely. I have borrowed a house from a friend of mine, John Lansdowne. He has an ideal place just off the shore of Lake Windermere and

has agreed to allow us the use of it for a month. I have visited it twice before—it is a comfortable house and has a sweeping view of the lake as it is settled on a bit of a rise. There is a small boat that we can use to go out on the water. There is also an island not too far off shore that we could picnic on if you'd like.

In answer to your question, I do enjoy fishing. I'm sure someone as lively as yourself would find it incredibly dull, but I have always found it relaxing. There are no pressing matters needing my attention, no disputes for me to settle or stewards to discuss business with. It is best early in the morning when the day is still and I can watch the forest around the stream awaken. There is a particularly good fishing spot about one and one half miles from the house. It is in a small glade where the water swells. Many of the animals come there for a drink and if you sit very still, the deer will approach the stream without a look in your direction. My father took me there as a boy; I cannot wait to show it to you. I am sure you would find it a peaceful place to escape with a good book.

I cannot wait to show you Pemberley. I know you will love it. There are paths and trails abounding—I'm sure even you will be satisfied with them. We should arrive there in August and you will be able to see it in all its summer glory.

I know it is dull, but there is some business that must be settled. I was speaking with my housekeeper about your imminent arrival and she wished to know if you will be bringing your maid with you. Also, will you be bringing a horse? I shall alert the stables if you intend to. If you do not, I

will have to find you a suitable mount. Do you have any preferences? I believe there is a horse in Pemberley's stables that will suit until a new one can be procured, but I should like you to have a new mount if you do not wish to bring your own.

I still do not know the color of your gown. I am choosing to see it as a small oversight and not a deliberate attempt to be mysterious, though I am sure you will be lovely whatever you wear. Georgiana insisted I wear blue, and so a new coat has been made in that color. I hope it will suit—G is desperately worried that we will clash.

Yours,

F. Darcy



Elizabeth had mixed emotions on reading his latest. She seemed back in his good graces, which was of course a good thing, and though he was a touch high handed, he wasn't too offensive. She decided being her usual lively, impertinent self was the right thing to do. After all, if he had fallen in love with her, it was not because she flattered and flirted with him. He must have seen something he liked and she saw no reason to alter what was clearly working in her favor.

Dear Mr. Darcy,

I can assure you I would never attempt to be mysterious, and if I were, I would probably not be very successful at it! I

did not tell you the color of my dress because in my usual fashion, I waited until the absolute last moment to choose the fabric. The style came easily enough, but the color was very contentious. My mother and I could not agree, not a terribly unusual occurrence, and I was being stubborn as I often am. Please consider yourself duly warned, sir! I can be terribly mule-like when it comes to the color of my gowns! You should be pleased to hear that we finally settled on a light blue, so I am sure we shall look fine together. Mother says it matches my eyes and refuses to believe me when I tell her they are more green than blue. She has her heart set on five blue eyed daughters and will not hear a word otherwise. Though Mary's have been positively hazel since she was three, but you did not hear that from me.

Now, about this horse business. I am happy that you wish me to begin my new life with a new horse, but I must tell you that I am no horsewoman and beg you not to go to any expense on that front. I'm sure whatever docile creature you have in the stables will do. I am really not very skilled and a fine animal would be wasted on me.

I do not intend to bring my maid. I share her with my sisters Jane and Mary, and I am sure they would not appreciate me taking her from them. Perhaps your housekeeper has a suggestion? Maybe one of the housemaids can be trained up for the position? Forgive me if I am overstepping, but I have noticed that promoting from within has always done well for the spirits and loyalty of the staff.

Now, for my favorite topic: The Lakes! I cannot tell you how I look forward to it. I'm sure your friend's house will be lovely and a picnic on an island sounds like perfection. I have been meaning to ask you whom you intend to accompany us. I had thought to ask my sister Jane, but she is needed by our parents here. My sister Mary would possibly like to go, but I wanted to speak with you before I invited her. Had you intended to invite your sister? I do not know if she is yet out. How old is she?

And might I remind you, sir, you never told me your age! I do not like to be kept in ignorance on such a subject. And I still do not know your favorite meals. And, most grievous of all, I do not know your given name. I am embarrassed to admit it, but I do not, and I would be mortified to ask my father and admit to my ignorance. If it was ever mentioned in Hertfordshire I have forgotten, and your aunt and cousin always called you 'Darcy'. I know it begins with an 'F', but that is the extent of my knowledge. So in two weeks' time, I am to marry a man whose name and age I do not know, and whom I shall likely feed inedible meals because he will not tell me if he prefers venison to mutton. For shame! I must insist you rectify these mistakes, at once, sir!

Impertinently Yours,

Elizabeth Bennet



My Dear Elizabeth,

I will wait upon you as soon as possible and answer all your questions. We cannot have you walking down the aisle in ignorance, now can we? I shall be right behind this letter.

F.D.

Elizabeth looked up from reading this latest to see her father entering the room, followed by Mr. Darcy.

“Mr. Darcy!” She stood hastily and his letter dropped from her hand. He quickly stepped in front of her and picked it up while she gave a hasty curtsy.

“Hello, Elizabeth,” he said warmly.

She felt her cheeks flush. Smiling nervously, she said, “Hello, Mr. Darcy.”

“Fitzwilliam.”

“Hmm?”

“Please, call me Fitzwilliam. It is my given name.”

“Oh! Oh, of course, Fitzwilliam,” she said shyly.

He smiled. “Would you care to take a walk?”

“My father...,” she looked around, suddenly realizing her father had left them alone. Again. “Yes, a walk would be nice.”

She led him out of the house and down to the shore. They walked along silently for a few minutes before he spoke.

“How are you?”

“I am well. And you? Was your journey pleasant?”

“Yes, perfectly uneventful. We made excellent time,” he replied.

She nodded and continued looking at the ground.

“Is there nothing you wish to say? No questions for me?”

She could tell by the look on his face what sort of questions he had in mind. Would that dratted letter follow her forever?

“No sir, I said I would say no more about it, and I shan’t.”

“Truly?”

“A lady keeps her word, sir,” she said, slightly offended.

“Very well, then. But please allow me to say, Elizabeth, I have the greatest faith in our felicity. We are well suited, truly, and I can assure you I will be the best of husbands to you. You will have no cause to repine.”

She blushed at the ardent look on his face. “Neither shall you.”

He smiled, nodded, and tucked her arm into his.

“Do you have many engagements this week?” he asked.

“Not many, no. We are due at a neighbor’s for tea and cards this evening, and there is an assembly Thursday. I am sure you will not be expected to attend. Where are you staying?”

“At the Dorchester.”

“I’ve heard it’s beautiful inside.”

“Yes, it is.” He paused and looked down at her. “I have something for you.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box.

She took it awkwardly and thanked him.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” he asked.

She smiled uneasily and pulled the top off the small box. Inside were two shining blue hair combs. They were very pretty and not gaudy, thankfully, but neither were they a style she favored.

“Thank you, it’s very kind of you. It really isn’t necessary to buy me gifts.”

“I enjoy giving them to you.” He waited for her to extol the virtues of the gift and by extension, himself, but the words never came. She slid the small box into the pocket of her dress and continued walking as if nothing had just occurred between them.

Darcy was confused.

“I made the mistake of bringing bread for the birds once,” she said. “I was completely surrounded. I had to hurry back to the house.” She laughed as she told the story and he smiled tightly.

Is she really not going to say anything at all?

They continued on in silence, him deciding not to think about the gift anymore and her looking towards the water with a distant look on her face. After a lengthy silence, Darcy spoke.

“Would your mother allow you to stay behind this evening? I assume your younger sisters will remain?”

“I do not know. Kitty was going to accompany us this evening to visit with the daughter of the house. Lydia is not much of a chaperone,” she said awkwardly.

“Your father will not mind. I shall speak to him when we return,” he said decidedly.

She was shocked by his presumption, but quickly dismissed the feeling. Why should she be shocked? Had he not always done what pleased him exactly when it pleased him and expected everyone to go along with his plan? Even his own cousin had been at Mr. Darcy’s mercy. If a colonel in His Majesty’s army and the son of an earl was no proof against his high-handedness, what chance had she? She, merely a Miss Bennet of Longbourn, a small estate in the country. How could she expect him to consider her in his plans? How could she expect him to allow her to make decisions as simple as whether she would stay home or go out?

She took a deep breath and said, “I do not know if my mother can spare me this evening, though I’m sure you would be welcome to join us if you’d like.” *Though they are likely too low for you to suffer their company.*

“I do not desire company after a journey, but I thank you for the invitation.”

Then why do you not stay alone? Why insist on my company? Oh, that’s right! I am no longer ‘company’, but will

soon be simply an extension of yourself. Of course! How could I have been so silly!

She nodded and walked on, stopping to pick up a smooth stone and hurl it into the water. Darcy watched her silently for several minutes, an odd feeling intruding on his notice. He could not place what it was exactly, but Elizabeth seemed unhappy. Why? They had been getting along so well in their letters. He'd convinced himself her attempt to cry off had simply been bridal jitters and maidenly fears. Clearly she was growing more accustomed to him, or so she seemed in her letters. In person, she was still a bit uneasy, but was that not to be expected after a month's separation and the eventful time they were in? She would grow used to his presence in time, just like she had grown used to him in their correspondence. He just needed to continue to show her affection and kindness and she would grow in ease and affection for him.

By now they had turned back and were nearing the path to the Bennet cottage. He caught her hand as she turned away to go up the stone steps leading away from the shore.

“Elizabeth?”

“Yes?”

He squeezed her hand. “Know that I will do anything within my power to make you comfortable—I will do anything for your happiness. You must know this.”

She nodded and smiled just a little, then looked ahead and quickened her pace.

After speaking briefly with her father, Darcy went to his hotel and Elizabeth sat down with a book before preparing for dinner. Mrs. Bennet had invited Darcy to join them, of course, and he had readily agreed. He had spoken with her father. After dinner, the remainder of her family would go to the neighbors for cards while she and Mr. Darcy stayed behind with Lydia. The latter was not in any way a deterrent to the couple spending time alone together, and Mr. Darcy seemed very pleased with his achievement while Elizabeth felt mildly queasy.

She did not know that her father could hardly say no to Mr. Darcy, knowing that his family would be entirely in the young man's power in a matter of months. Mr. Bennet wished for Mr. Darcy to think of his family with affection and ease, as accommodating and kind people, not as cantankerous fathers and difficult relations. Darcy was exactly what he had been looking for. A trifle serious perhaps, but that was not necessarily a bad thing. He had enough money to take care of his favorite well and to take care of his widow if it came to it. He would expose the family to a wider circle of acquaintance and the connection would ensure better marriages for the other girls.

Darcy was measured, intelligent, and not afraid of difficult tasks, something that would serve him well in his marriage and in raising his own children. Bennet also thought it would be very useful once he was gone, since he did not trust Mrs. Bennet to keep Lydia in line. The young girl had improved immensely, but she was still wild at heart, and he knew as

soon as the firm hand was removed, she would revert to her previous ways. He hoped the impression was lasting and that it would not change easily, but he was too realistic to believe that would come to pass.

Mr. Darcy was an answer to a most fervent prayer. He could be nothing but grateful. He hoped his daughter would realize it in time.



Darcy headed to the Bennet cottage shortly after changing for dinner. His plan was to help Elizabeth to know him better and thereby set her at ease about their impending marriage. He was sure that once she felt more comfortable with him, the idea of sharing his life would be one that made her happy instead of trepidatious. He was still insulted she had tried to end the engagement—what man wouldn't be? But he was wise enough to know that what he loved about her was her energy and liveliness and that if she was frightened of him, or of the idea of marriage with him, those qualities would diminish.

So he set about making her easy with him.



Dinner came before Elizabeth was prepared to face her betrothed, but she had no choice in the matter. Time marched on, and so did Mrs. Bennet. She made Elizabeth try on no fewer than three dresses before settling on the first that

Elizabeth had chosen before her mother's intrusion. Her hair was curled, plaited, and woven into an intricate style that was much too fancy for a family dinner at home. After her mother left the room, having given her daughter extensive instructions on how to behave when Mr. Darcy arrived and all the things she *must not* say, Elizabeth accidentally pulled several of the pins out of her hair and Jane had to help her put it back up in a much simpler style.

The two eldest Bennet sisters stepped into the drawing room just as Mr. Darcy's carriage pulled into the drive, leaving Mrs. Bennet only a few moments to glare at and berate her second daughter, though it must be said that she was significantly less strident than she had been in the past.

Mr. Darcy entered the room to curtsy from the five Bennet women present and a shallow bow from Mr. Bennet.

Mrs. Bennet stepped forward to greet him. "Welcome, Mr. Darcy. Please, sit here next to Elizabeth. She looks charming tonight, does she not?"

"Yes, she does." He smiled and sat between Elizabeth and her mother.

"That dress is particularly becoming, don't you think? Elizabeth has excellent taste in colors. She always chooses just the right one to flatter her complexion."

Darcy caught Elizabeth's eye for a moment and she had to bite her cheek to stifle a smirk. Darcy winked at her and turned to her mother. "A talent she gets from her mother, no doubt."

“Oh, Mr. Darcy, you are too kind.” She tittered and began a conversation with Jane, her motherly duties complete for the moment.

Darcy faced Elizabeth and smiled. “How are you this evening, Elizabeth?”

She was still a little startled from his having winked at her. Mr. Darcy, winking! “I am well, Mr. Darcy.” He raised a brow. “Fitzwilliam,” she added quietly.

They spoke of inconsequential things; music, the weather, an opera Darcy had seen while in town, until they were called in to dinner and the conversation continued and included her father and Jane. The two men carried on a lively conversation of books, each a little surprised that they had several favorites in common. Elizabeth watched her betrothed speaking to her father comfortably, a look of ease on both their faces. Her father’s expression was missing its usual wry humor and she knew he was genuinely enjoying conversing with Darcy and was not silently laughing behind his eyes. In that moment, she felt a greater hope than she had felt throughout her engagement. It was not happiness, not exactly, but a feeling that she might be happy in the future, that there was at least a chance it might happen.

She felt lighter than she had in weeks and laughed with her sisters, occasionally chiming in on the men’s conversation. When she made intelligent comments, Darcy would look at her with a certain light in his eyes and smile, and she felt a warmth towards him she had hitherto never felt before.

Soon enough dinner was over and the Bennets left for their card party. Elizabeth led Darcy to the parlor where she sat on a settee near the window. He sat next to her, not too close, and laid his hand beside hers on the seat.

“I enjoyed dinner very much,” he said.

“I am glad. My mother will be pleased. She enjoys hosting.”

“She was a very able hostess and the meal was quite fine, but I enjoyed the company more.”

She smiled warmly at him and he could not resist placing his hand over hers on the cushion.

“Elizabeth, you are lovely,” he said softly, his body turned in her direction.

She blushed and looked down. “You flatter me, Mr. Darcy.”

“I speak the truth. And my name is Fitzwilliam.”

She laughed. “Yes, I’ve noticed you’ve wasted no time at all calling me Elizabeth.”

“What do you mean?”

“Simply that as soon as I accepted your proposal, I was Elizabeth to you. You have not called me Miss Bennet or Miss Elizabeth once. You are very good at the proprieties, Mr. Darcy,” she said teasingly.

“Not all the proprieties, Miss Bennet.” She raised a brow in question and he looked around the empty room, raising his own brow in response.

She flushed again, annoyed at herself for this ridiculous tendency, and answered, "Touché, Fitzwilliam."

He smiled when she said his name and scooted a little closer, moving their joined hands to his knee. "Propriety has its place, but there are times when it should be set aside."

"Really? Like when?"

"When a man desperately wishes to kiss his betrothed."

Her mouth formed a silent 'O' and she looked at him wide-eyed, her mouth going just a little dry.

"Elizabeth," he whispered, leaning closer and closer until looking at him made her eyes cross. She closed her eyes and the next thing she knew there was a warm, soft sensation on her lips, and then it was over.

"Oh," she said after opening her eyes.

He smiled and squeezed her hand. "I am pleased to be your first kiss."

"How do you know you are my first kiss?"

"Some things are evident, my dear."

She flushed in embarrassment and looked away, saying indignantly, "Would you prefer a woman who kissed every man she came across?" He laughed. A deep, happy sound that echoed across the empty room. She stood to leave. "I am glad you are amused, Mr. Darcy. Excuse me." But was stopped by his hand grasping hers.

“Don’t be angry, darling. Come here.” He pulled her down next to him on the sofa and she went grudgingly, her body small and stiff next to his. He couldn’t help chuckling again and turned her chin gently towards him. He stroked her cheek softly as his laughter faded and she eventually raised her eyes to his. He traced his fingers over her lips and looked at her questioningly. “May I?”

She nodded reluctantly and he leaned in, pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth, first one and then the other, before kissing her more fully. She stayed stiff and immobile, refusing to give him the satisfaction of returning his kiss if he was only going to make fun of her.

He chuckled again and said quietly, “My beautiful, stubborn little woman. You are right.” Her eyes snapped to his. “I would not like a woman who kissed every man she came across, but I would like a woman who kissed the one she was engaged to.”

He kissed her again, swiftly, and pulled back to smile at her charmingly, as if he knew a great joke that she couldn’t possibly understand.

“I am not stubborn,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. He laughed again.

“Whatever you say, my love.” He leaned back and crossed one leg over his knee, the very picture of relaxation and comfort, which only vexed Elizabeth more, as she was feeling decidedly tense and uncomfortable.

Taking advantage of his repose, she rose swiftly and crossed the room to the instrument.

“I shall play for you,” she said simply.

“Very well,” he replied.

“Thank you for the permission,” she said sarcastically.

He laughed again, his chest rumbling. Elizabeth began pounding the keys at an awkward volume and kept her eyes on the music. She would not give him the satisfaction of looking at him. Teasing man!

She spent a full forty minutes at the pianoforte, playing songs from memory and eventually taking out the piece she had recently learned and playing it to perfection. She ended with a gentle flourish and leaned back, much calmer and pleased with her efforts.

“That was beautiful,” Mr. Darcy said from his place across the room.

His voice was sincere and his smile genuine, so she responded in kind, “Thank you.”

He rose suddenly and came toward her. “It’s a pleasant evening. Shall we take a turn in the garden?”

She nodded and took his hand to rise, and he placed it on his arm. They walked slowly on the paths near the house, neither saying anything for several minutes.

“What is the schedule for our journey, or is it not yet fixed?” she asked.

“Do you mean the wedding tour itself or the events leading up to it?” he clarified.

“The latter,” she replied.

“Well, as I understand it, you will leave for London in six days. Your father says you will stay with a relative in town, though I did offer my home to your family.” She nodded. He continued, “I believe the week before the wedding will be largely comprised of shopping to complete your trousseau, though that is your mother’s purview. Then we will be wed on the seventeenth at church and there will be a breakfast following.” He spoke clearly in a crisp tone, as if reciting his lessons for his tutor. If he had not stroked the back of her hand and pulled her a little closer, she would not have known he had any affection for her at all.

“And after that?” she asked. Her voice sounded thick and choked to her own ears, but he did not seem to notice.

“We shall remain at Darcy House six days and then begin our journey to The Lakes.”

She could hear the excitement in his voice, though it was subtle, and a small amount of it transferred to her. She had always wanted to see The Lakes; they would be beautiful regardless of who she was seeing them with. Travel was its own reward and she was sure this would only be the first of many trips. She reminded herself that he was a busy man with a wide acquaintance and she would not be required to be at his beck and call. Surely he would have things to do, letters to write, hopefully friends to visit. And her sister coming with her would make it more bearable. But then, he had requested they travel alone.

“Fitzwilliam?”

“Yes, dear?” He smiled at her warmly.

“I shall have to get used to that.”

“Used to what? Being called dear?”

“Well, yes, but I was referring to your smile.”

“Pardon me?” he said, clearly confused.

“I have not seen you smile above ten times in all of our acquaintance.”

“Truly?”

She nodded. “But today alone you have smiled, or at least looked moderately pleased, nearly your entire visit.”

“Shall I flatter you and say it is all down to your enchanting presence?”

“Flattery has its place, but right now I think I’d prefer to hear the truth.”

He sighed. “The truth is that when I met you in Hertfordshire, I had just come away from a difficult family situation that had left me frustrated and angry and a great many other things I shouldn’t say to a lady.” Her face showed surprise and then sympathy, and he gave her a tired smile. “And I’m sure this will not surprise you, but Rosings is not the most relaxing place to visit.”

“I don’t know what you mean. I found it delightful.”

He laughed aloud. “I take it all back. It is absolutely down to you and your lively presence. You make me laugh when I

would otherwise brood, and I find you so wholly delightful I cannot help but smile when I see you, nor be anything but pleased when I recall we are to spend the rest of our lives together.”

He raised her hand to his lips for a kiss and she blushed, then looked away annoyed. “Fitzwilliam, you are making me blush.”

“I know. That is half the fun of complimenting you.”

She tried to glare at him but a hint of a smile came through. “What is the other half?”

“Saying it aloud. It is so strong a feeling in me that if I do not say it, it will surely do me harm.”

She blushed again, but was not annoyed this time. He led her to a small bench under an arbor and they sat together, their legs touching lightly due to the size of the seat.

“What were you going to ask me?” asked Darcy.

“Hmm?”

“Before we got distracted, you sounded as if you had a question for me.”

“Oh, yes, I wanted to talk to you about who would accompany us on our wedding trip. My father said you had mentioned wanting to go alone, but it seemed undecided.”

“And you want to know...?” he asked.

“Do you? Wish to go alone? And why?”

“Yes, I do wish to go alone. Because I would like to be with you without anyone else getting in the way.”

“In the way? How could my sister be in the way? She is the least obtrusive person I know.”

“In the carriage there would be all three of us if your sister came along, but if we went alone, we would have time to talk or rest peacefully. I might take your hand or kiss you without an audience.” He took her hand and kissed it as if to show her what the trip would be like.

She was terrified. Did he wish to kiss her the entire journey? It would take days! Surely that wasn't normal. They would get tired, would they not?

“What are you thinking, my love?” he asked.

“Fitzwilliam, surely you do not intend to kiss me for five whole days!”

He laughed at the look of shock on her face. “This may surprise you, dearest, but I intend to kiss you every day of our wedding trip, and every day after we return to Pemberley, and likely every day after that until I am too old to do the job properly, though do not be surprised if I try anyway.”

She looked at him in astonishment, wondering who this man in front of her was. He was being charming and funny, and completely unlike the Mr. Darcy she knew. Wickham had said he could be agreeable in company, and she had heard him make witty remarks in Hertfordshire in the autumn, but this

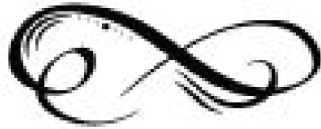
blatant merry making, this *happy* man was not one she recognized.

“I am sorry to shock you, my dear. I should not jest about such things. Forgive me,” he apologized, looking genuinely sorry and a bit concerned by her lack of response.

“I am not offended, but I thank you for the apology. I am merely surprised, that is all. The Mr. Darcy I knew did not speak with such levity. Nor did he flirt so blatantly.”

He smiled. “Perhaps that is because I am Fitzwilliam to you now.”

CHAPTER 14



Mrs. Bennet was in a predicament. Her husband had been lovely of late. Indeed, since the winter, he had been kinder and more solicitous of her needs. She found that she enjoyed his quiet company in the evening when he would sit near the fire with a book while she embroidered. He had ceased mocking her with his high-minded jokes that she did not understand. Even Mrs. Bennet knew when she was being mocked, regardless of whether or not she understood the joke itself. His company had been pleasant, his behavior had been amenable, and they had taken several ambling walks along the shore, often at sundown in what she believed was her most flattering light.

Just two nights ago, she was sure he had looked at her with the same softness in his eyes he had used when they were young and newly married. At the time, she was flustered and blushed and continued on with the conversation they were having about their daughters, but it had unnerved her. That night, she had waited for her husband in her chambers, sure he would come to her. She had worn her most flattering nightgown and left her nightcap off, her still bright hair

cascading over one shoulder and curling at the ends. But he had not come. Her candle had burned low and she had eventually realized that the door between their chambers was to remain closed. With a sadness she had not expected, she put out her light and went to sleep.

No one could blame her for being a trifle aloof the next day, nor for refusing her husband when he asked her to accompany him on a walk. She avoided him the whole of the day and the following one as well, until she found herself, quite to her surprise, missing his company. And so she joined him for a walk along the beach after dinner, as she had prior to her upset.

Now here she was, brushing her hair out and wishing her husband would come to her but surprised at wishing it. It had been years since they had engaged in such activities, but it was not as if they were in their dotage. She would not be forty until October and she fancied herself still an attractive woman.

He should be happy to be received by her! Mrs. Goulding wasn't half as pretty and a good five years older, and Mrs. Bennet knew for a fact that her husband still visited her regularly. And her sister Phillips, two years her senior, received her husband almost nightly, if her complaints were to be believed. Surely she was a great deal more attractive than either of them! And Mrs. Long! She was over fifty if she was a day! Mrs. Bennet still had beautiful hair and color in her cheeks. Mr. Bennet should appreciate what he had and show his wife the respect she deserved, or at least her beauty deserved.

And so Mrs. Bennet went back and forth between indignation and attraction, wishing her husband would arrive and berating him for not coming. At one point she talked herself into believing that he was showing her respect by not coming to her. After all, everyone knew it was dreadfully unpleasant and only something to be put up with by a dutiful wife. But, after she had decided he was being most kind in not importuning her, she felt a niggling doubt in her mind, in the place she tried to ignore as much as possible, telling her that she really *did* want him to come, at least for a little while.

Deciding it was better to feel flattered by his respect for her in not coming, and knowing she would be equally flattered by his unconquerable desire if he did, she climbed into bed but left her hair down, just in case.



Mr. Bennet was in a quandary. His wife had been looking very fetching of late. The sea air brightened her complexion and her eyes were almost always soft and happy now, not frantic and angry like they so often were at Longbourn. She had been less shrill and more patient. She had been a good listener and a fine companion. When he had suffered a headache several days before, she read to him in a soothing voice and placed a cool cloth on his brow. It was quite endearing.

He looked toward the door between their chambers with longing. It had been longer than he could remember since he had lain with his wife, and he was very sorely tempted now.

But the physician had explicitly told him to not overexcite himself or put undue strain on his heart. He had felt winded after a long walk the first week they had been at Margate, and so every day he had added a few steps to his stroll until he was feeling quite healthy. Now, after a full month by the seaside, he felt stronger and more relaxed than ever.

But he knew that nothing compared to loving his wife. It was like a hundred walks along the shore, like climbing a thousand steps. He was not sure his heart could take the exertion and he was not willing to take the risk. But, oh! How he was tempted!

Out of a feeling he was certain was sheer lunacy, he wrote a quick letter to his friend Dr. Withers and asked him explicitly which activities were allowed and which were not. He posted it immediately.



Mr. Bennet had never awaited a letter as eagerly as he did the one from his friend Dr. Withers. The first few lines were notes about his general health, what he should be eating and reminding him to avoid spirits. Then, his old friend emerged. He teased Bennet mercilessly about his predicament and how desperately miserable he must be to have such an attractive wife and be frightened to lie with her. Of course, he ended all of this with the advice that if Bennet felt he could traverse a decent distance without becoming winded, if stairs were not an

issue for him, and if the lying itself were not too vigorous, he could proceed without undue fear.

Bennet stood at the bottom of the stairs with a look of determination on his face. He had been traversing the steps daily since their arrival, but never with such a goal in mind. He placed one foot on the riser and drew himself up. He felt nothing. He did another, then another, and still nothing. Finally, he took the remainder of the steps in rapid succession, only to arrive at the top slightly winded but not unduly out of breath.

Pleased by his efforts, he promised himself he would try again after tea.

Finally, after three long days of walking greater distances and surreptitiously sneaking off to the stairs, Mr. Bennet was ready. Gathering his nerve, he knocked on the door to his wife's room.

Mrs. Bennet was sitting up in bed, her cap securely in place. She had been just about to turn down the lamp when she heard a knock. A knock from the inner door that led to her husband's room. Startled, she called for her visitor to enter, surprised, yet not, to see her husband coming into her room. For who else could it have been? But she had grown so used to his not coming, she was unprepared for his entrance.

"Mrs. Bennet, Agnes, may I come in?" he asked, feeling foolish over his own nervousness and oddly intimidated by the woman before him. She really was very beautiful. When had he stopped seeing her as such and begun viewing her as

merely an amusement to be made sport of? His body deftly reminded him that there were much better things to do with such a woman than laugh at her.

She nodded silently, wondering what he was about and wishing she hadn't put her cap on. She looked so much younger without it. She still had her glorious color, a bright honey shade that reflected light and had started more than one argument amongst her sister and friends on whether it was in fact blonde or a very light brown. Either way, it was much envied and she knew she looked most attractive with it tumbling about her shoulders, her large natural curls winding enticingly down her figure.

He approached the bed slowly, and when he looked down, she quickly snatched the cap off her head.

He smiled at the braid over her shoulder and took her hand in his. "Agnes, may I join you tonight?"

Her eyes widened and she nodded silently, her heart suddenly pounding and nervous flutterings swimming through her middle. She scooted over to make room for him and he climbed in next to her. He extinguished the light, but the curtains were not drawn—Mrs. Bennet liked the sea breeze and the sound of the sea; it soothed her nerves (and she had heard made one look younger), so she had slept with an open window throughout their visit.

Thomas Bennet was thoroughly entranced, and felt himself fully twenty-seven and in bed with his young new wife. The moonlight gave her skin a pleasant glow and the smell of her,

so familiar and yet so long forgotten, was soothing and enticing all at once.

He loved her with a dedication to thoroughness she hadn't felt since they were newly wed, and his own desire to not overtax his heart caused him to move slowly, much to his wife's approval. Everything he did was deliberate. He would not waste time on fripperies. He was determined to make every moment count and Agnes Bennet was the lucky beneficiary of his efforts.

When he rose to leave some hours later, Agnes impulsively grabbed his arm and said one word.

“Stay.”

He turned around and lay by his wife, sleeping next to her for the first time in over fifteen years.

CHAPTER 15



Elizabeth was vexed when she realized she had spoken to Mr. Darcy about a companion for their journey but that nothing had been settled. She had thought to speak with Jane and ask her what she would wish to do. She did not want to deprive her father of all good company, but Jane might like to go. Of course, she might also say yes only because Elizabeth asked her, so she would have to be careful to make it clear she would be happy to take Mary in her place if Jane would rather stay at the shore.

Of course, Mary had never really traveled anywhere, and she did not have Jane's beauty or sweet spirit. It was possible she would never marry, or not for some time. This might be her only chance for such an experience. Of course, she might attend Jane on her wedding trip, but Elizabeth thought it likely that Jane would love her new husband, or at least like him, and a companion might not be as important to her. At least she had two sisters to choose from. She should speak to Jane and ask her opinion about it all. Her sister's level-headedness would be helpful in her decision.

But what if Mr. Darcy said no? It was the custom for the bride to take a companion on the wedding tour, but he would technically be in control of said tour and her sister would be under his protection for the duration. He could decline if he wished. It would be strange and impolite, certainly, and would look very odd, but he did have the right.

Oh! Why had she not secured an answer the night before?

“Mr. Darcy, Miss.”

Elizabeth looked up from her embroidery as the maid announced her betrothed’s presence. She smiled and stood to greet him.

“Fitzwilliam, I’m glad you’re here. There’s something we must speak of.”

His heart sped up just a tiny bit at her welcoming smile and he felt a little like a green schoolboy as he nodded to her sister and went to Elizabeth. He kissed her hand and sat beside her. “What is it, my dear?”

“The wedding trip! We discussed it yesterday but we came to no conclusions.”

“Ah, yes. I believe you know my sentiments. What do you wish to do?” he asked neutrally.

“I believe I would like my sister to accompany us,” she said quietly, looking at her embroidery. She looked up in time to see his face twitch slightly, his mouth turning down in a frown.

Darcy quickly schooled his features and sighed. “Very well. If that is your wish, I cannot deny you. I will make the

necessary arrangements.”

He rose and she impulsively grabbed his sleeve.

He looked down at her and smiled tightly. “I must speak with your father about something. I will return shortly.”

She hated that she felt as if she were hurting him by her answer, even though she knew it was a perfectly acceptable custom for the bride’s sister to accompany the couple. She smiled uneasily as Darcy nodded to Mary and went to her father.

Elizabeth felt unsettled. Guilt and anger fought equally for her attention and she took a deep breath to calm herself. How dare he make her feel guilty for wanting only what every other woman she knew required? Well, not every woman. Charlotte had gone directly to Kent following her wedding breakfast with no one to accompany her to her new home. And when Miss Goulding wed two years prior, she had not taken a companion on their trip to Ireland. Her own Aunt and Uncle Gardiner had travelled alone following their wedding, but they had been deeply in love. *As Mr. Darcy is in love with you*, she told herself.

Oh, dear! Why could she not be selfish and mercenary, caring for no one but herself? If she were, she would be happy to marry a rich man and not care that he was made *unhappy* by her decision to bring a companion on their journey. But no, by some perverse fate, she had to be unhappy she was marrying a man she did not love, and yet still be troubled by the idea of injuring him with her decisions. She was sure it was a curious

error in her own nature that caused her to feel such disparate emotions. What kind of woman cares for the feelings of a man she is unhappy to be marrying? *A Bennet woman, that's who.*

Perhaps she could talk to him. Mayhap they could work something out that would suit them both. Much to her chagrin, she felt a sick feeling in her stomach at the thought of his expression when she had told him she essentially did not want to be alone with him. The way he had sighed and squared his shoulders, as if she were thrusting burdens upon him that he must bear alone. No, she could not live with this uneasiness. She must speak with him.

Her father and Mr. Darcy entered the sitting room together and Darcy resumed his seat next to her. She put her hand on his sleeve and spoke quietly, "Would you walk with me? I need some air."

"Yes, of course."

They walked along the shore, Kitty and Mary walking arm in arm ahead of them. He had not offered his arm and she had not taken it. She looked at him from the corner of her eye, wondering if it had been a simple misstep, or if he had deliberately withheld.

"Fitzwilliam," she said, looping her arm through his. "We must have an awkward conversation."

He looked at her with a mixture of wariness and surprise. "Very well. I am listening."

“I hope you will speak as well. Otherwise it will be less a conversation and more an oration.” She smiled and he returned it slightly.

“You have secured my participation. Now what do you wish to speak of?”

“Our wedding journey. And our impending marriage.” She stumbled slightly over the last word but hoped he hadn’t noticed. “I am from a family of women, sir. I cannot remember a time when I have not had another female near me. Even when I have visited my relations in town, I have been with my aunt or my cousins or accompanied by Jane. The idea of being... alone, with a man, well, it is so very strange. And a bit frightening. I am not saying I am frightened of you, you have been very kind,” she hurriedly added, “but as you said in Kent, it will be a very great adjustment for me. A new name and position, a whole new life, and yours will stay mainly the same, which is why I suppose you never hear of the groom’s brother attending a wedding trip.” She smiled at her joke and he joined her.

“Elizabeth, you do not have to convince me. It is perfectly normal to wish your sister with you at such a time. It is well within your rights to request it.”

“Yes, but it has made you unhappy,” she looked up at him and he looked away, toward the water.

“I thought I was less obvious than that,” he said after some moments had passed.

“Perhaps not to everyone. Mayhap I am coming to know you better.” She smiled again and pulled him along. “Sir, I do not wish discord between us. I am not built for unhappiness. I wished to suggest that perhaps we find a way that will make us both happy.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Well, perhaps you could tell me how you envision our trip progressing, how we would spend our time, and that might help me to feel less anxious about it all.”

“Very well. At first, we shall be in London. Once we have begun our journey, we will progress in the normal way. Coaching inns, stops to change the horses. The inns have already been notified and we shall have satisfactory accommodations. Our servants will travel ahead with the luggage. I had thought that we might like to take the smaller carriage. It is not as spacious, but the windows open more fully when the weather is fine. I had thought you might like that,” he said self-consciously.

She squeezed his arm. “I would. And what about when we arrive. We are staying in your friend’s house?”

“Yes, he has a rather spacious cottage on the southern side of the lake. There is a cook, housekeeper, and under maids, but no butler. I will bring two of my own footmen in addition to the coachman and groom. Of course, your maid and my valet will be there when we arrive. If you wish, you can write to the housekeeper and tell her your meal preferences before we depart.”

“Thank you, I shall.”

He nodded. “We will likely be tired from our journey, so I thought the first few days we might do nothing other than relax. There is a path leading down to the lake’s edge and another wrapping partially around the shore. I thought we could sleep as late as we want, take a walk before breakfast, read on the benches in the garden before dressing for dinner, and walk again as the sun sets. It is a spectacular view from the top of the hill. There is a small boat we could take out onto the water and have picnics on the shore. I hoped you might consent to play for me after dinner some evenings, and perhaps sing.”

He smiled at her as he said it and she unexpectedly colored.

“There is some society, of course, and after a few days of rest we could venture into town and see who is about. There is a concert hall and an assembly room. There will be a calendar of sorts at the cottage when we arrive. You know I am not fond of balls, but if you wished to attend an assembly, I could be convinced.”

She smiled at his flirtation and was happy to see him returned to good spirits. “And how would I do that, sir, for you know I am very fond of dancing?”

His eyes darkened for a moment and he leaned down until his lips nearly touched her ear. “Elizabeth, one kiss from your lips, and I will give you anything you ask of me.”

“Oh.” She blushed and looked down, suddenly discomposed and the skin of her neck tingling where his hot breath had

touched it. "I will have to remember that, sir. If there is ever a time when we disagree, I shall know how to carry the day."

He smiled. "You do that."

They walked in comfortable silence for several minutes before Elizabeth spoke again.

"Well, that settles it. I cannot take Jane. She would be frightfully bored. And Mary would likely not mind spending the time reading on her own, but I cannot think that would be good for her. And of course she would be made uncomfortable by sitting every evening in the drawing room while you watch me play and make that face you make when you are being so frightfully serious." She sighed and looked about casually. "No, I cannot subject my poor sisters to such treatment. We shall have to go alone."

He suddenly gripped her arm and turned her to him a little too strongly. "Are you sure, Elizabeth? You are not teasing or making one of your jokes?"

She shook her head while smiling coyly.

"It is cruel to toy with a man in such a way. Now tell me clearly. Are you saying you will go The Lakes with me alone? No companions, no sisters, just the two of us?"

"And a small army of servants, yes," she replied.

He pulled her to him and planted a swift kiss to her lips, then just as quickly pulled back and placed her hand on his arm and continued walking as if nothing had happened. She smiled and saw his mouth tick out of the corner of her eye.

“You have made me very happy, Elizabeth,” he said quietly, squeezing her hand on his arm.

She placed her other hand on his arm in response, bringing her closer to him. “I would like to make a request.”

“Anything, my love.”

“I would like for Jane and possibly Mary to come to Pemberley when we return. My family will just be returning from the seaside and father must stay at Longbourn through the harvest and mother with him, but he said they might come in the autumn. I propose that my sisters come in August, then return with my family.”

He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed it gently, holding it to his lips for several moments. “Consider it done.”



Though Elizabeth felt apprehensive about having agreed to the unaccompanied wedding tour, she felt a sweet, warm sensation at Fitzwilliam’s happiness in the scheme. She was not blind to the affection of such a man. His was not the calculated flattery or imagined attachment of Mr. Collins. He was a man of sense and education, who had lived in the world. He was intelligent and, as far as she could see, a decent man. She was beginning to think she had a chance at happiness, and she sat at the pianoforte the next morning feeling more hopeful than ever.

“Lizzy! I’ve a letter from Maria! Would you like to read it?” Lydia bounded into the room, waving the paper in the air.

“Read it to me, dear. I must continue my practice.”

Lydia settled herself on the chair next to her sister and read over Elizabeth’s playing as her fingers moved up and down the scales. There was news of Meryton and all its goings-on. Who had hosted a dinner party, who had worn an ugly dress to the party, who had flirted with whom at the party. The milliner had gotten in some particularly ugly bonnets and the pig had escaped into the rose garden again.

Then Maria described in minute detail every moment of the assembly where she had danced every dance and several of them with officers, including Mr. Wickham. He had been engaged briefly to Miss Mary King, an orphan living with an uncle. Miss King had come into an inheritance of ten thousand pounds, become engaged to Mr. Wickham, and then whisked away to Liverpool by yet another uncle, the engagement broken. Wickham had seemingly moved on without any signs of heartbreak or disappointment. No one was terribly surprised; Mary King was a freckled little thing and while Elizabeth and Jane had often said they thought her face fresh and youthful, they knew such was not the fashion.

Maria’s letter told of her dance with Mr. Wickham and how gentlemanly he had been. How he had smiled and complimented and charmed her thoroughly and how everyone would miss him now that the militia had gone to Brighton.

Elizabeth felt decidedly unsettled. Mr. Wickham had been her friend. They were not family and she had not seen him overmuch since his engagement to Miss King, but still, he had

been a friend. She knew her father's points had merit and that was why she had listened to him. She had been willing to give her betrothed the benefit of the doubt, but now, realizing how neatly she had put Mr. Wickham out of her mind while being courted by the man who had taken away his living, she felt slightly disgusted with herself. It was one thing to give Mr. Darcy the benefit of the doubt, it was another to turn her back on a friend.

When Mr. Darcy arrived a half hour later, she was just finishing up a song. She relinquished the instrument to her sister and joined Mr. Darcy and her family outside. They sat in the shade, Mr. Bennet reading a book while his wife and eldest daughter embroidered handkerchiefs. Darcy and Elizabeth sat some distance from them. Far enough for private conversation, but close enough to be properly chaperoned.

“How are you today, my dear?” he asked.

“I am well. And you?”

“Very well.”

He looked at her in that dark way he had looked at her in Hunsford, only now she knew finding fault was the last thing on his mind. She did not know how to respond and looked away. He took her hand where it lay on the bench between them and stroked his thumb over her bare knuckles.

He seemed content to sit and watch the flowers bloom while Elizabeth was growing more anxious by the minute. She was dreading the questions she had to ask but knew it must be done. They had been getting along so well the last two days

and she was fairly certain what she wished to ask would make him angry. Why was he not speaking! *This is Mr. Darcy. Of course he will not begin the conversation.*

She was debating whether it was better to have the conversation here where there was a quick retreat inside, or if they should go for a walk where they would have more privacy should things become heated. Before she could decide, Mr. Darcy rose and asked her parents if they would mind if they went for a stroll along the water. Mrs. Bennet smiled and agreed happily while her father nodded absently, clearly engrossed in his book.

They had been along the shore some minutes before Elizabeth spoke.

“Mr. Darcy, may I ask you a question?”

“Of course, Miss Bennet,” he said her name pointedly and she smiled.

“*Fitzwilliam*, there is something I wish to ask you about.” He nodded and she continued nervously. “When we were in Hertfordshire, we met on the street in Meryton once. Do you remember?” He nodded, his brow lowered and his eyes suspicious. She swallowed and continued on. “I had just met a new officer in the militia. The two of you had a strong reaction to each other and, well, I’m ashamed to admit it, but Mr. Wickham told me about it later, and I encouraged him. At my aunt’s card party, he related a history to me, involving you, and, well, much of it seemed rather, ahem, rather audacious, and I wondered if you might tell me your side of the story?”

She finished rapidly, her stunted question leaving her embarrassed and awkward. She snuck a glance at Darcy, but he was looking directly ahead, his profile impossibly straight and perfect.

“What did Mr. Wickham tell you?” he bit out, his tone barely civil.

She looked around nervously, then said in a quiet but steady voice, “He said that he had been a favorite of your father’s and that the two of you had been childhood friends. You had gone to school together and your father had promised him a living. He said it was done in such an informal way so that when your father passed, you were able to deny him the living and leave him penniless.”

They walked on in tense silence for some time until Darcy spoke. “Did you believe him?”

Elizabeth chastised herself. She was well and truly trapped now and could not avoid an answer to the question she had most wished not to discuss. “At first, I found it hard to believe,” she said hesitantly, “I had not thought you would do such a thing, but then he had such information and was so vehement.” She trailed off, her eyes on the sand.

“So you believed him.”

Feeling utterly wretched and not entirely sure why, she nodded.

Darcy sighed. She felt his whole body tighten through her hand on his arm.

“Will I never be free of that man!” he finally exclaimed quietly.

Stealing a glance at his face, Elizabeth was alarmed by what she saw. He was red and tense, his brows low over his eyes and his mouth set tightly. His jaw clenched so hard she could see it flexing. She had the sudden urge to touch his face, to relieve him of whatever pain he was in and offer what comfort she could. Before she knew what she was about, she had stepped halfway in front of him and her hand was caressing his jaw. His eyes opened wide in surprise and then softened as he looked upon her.

“Tell me what troubles you, Fitzwilliam. Do not carry this burden alone.”

He sighed again, resumed their walk, now with her hand clasped tightly under his on his arm, and began. “Wickham was the son of my father’s steward, an excellent man. He and my father had grown up together, his father had been steward before him, and their relationship was a steady one. My father was Wickham’s godfather. George was always getting into scrapes but when we were children, it was harmless. As we got older, he became more and more unruly, less scrupulous. My father refused to see him for what he was. Old Mr. Wickham had died and my father promised to care for George. He felt loyal to his friend and he was fond of young Wickham.

“Father wished for him to join the church and had planned for him to take on the living at Kympton, a village near Pemberley. Being of an age with him, I knew Wickham ought

not be a clergyman. He performed poorly at university and when my father passed, he left all charade of goodness behind. Not a week later, he swaggered into my father's study and asked what the old man had left for him." Darcy clenched his hand and Elizabeth gasped at the callousness of such behavior.

"My father had left him a thousand pounds and if Wickham took orders, he would receive the living at Kympton when it became available. George scoffed at this, not wanting to be a clergyman any more than I wanted him to be. He said he wished to study the law and asked for the value of the living, which he was given. I sent him on his way with three thousand pounds in addition to the legacy. I know not how he lived, but I can imagine."

Elizabeth shook her head, shocked at Wickham's behavior and at her own stupidity for believing him. Had she always been so gullible? Out of a sense of solidarity and overwhelmed by her own confusion, she briefly laid her head on Darcy's shoulder. She had stood upright again before he could react, but he was touched by the gesture.

"A few years later, the incumbent at Kympton died and Wickham wrote asking for the living, stating that my father had wished it expressly and he knew I would not want to deny his wishes. I reminded him of our agreement and that he had already received his payment, and he returned with such language as I cannot repeat to a lady, but I am sure his anger was in direct relation to his distressed circumstances."

“Four thousand pounds! How could he have gone through such a sum on his own? No family to care for, no house to maintain. It is so hard to believe,” Elizabeth said.

“Wickham has never had trouble spending funds, and rarely on anything useful. He has left debt and ruin everywhere he has ever been.”

Elizabeth stared wide-eyed as Darcy continued. “I thought our paths would never cross again until last summer when he intruded upon my notice in a most grievous way. I had sent my sister to Ramsgate with her companion, a Mrs. Younge. We were sorely deceived in her character and while she had charge of my fifteen-year-old sister, she allowed Wickham access to her. He visited Ramsgate and came upon Georgiana supposedly by chance, but he and Mrs. Younge had conspired all along. He courted her, lied to her, made her believe he was in love with her and she with him, and planned to elope with her. If I had not arrived unexpectedly and surprised them, they would have succeeded with their plan. My sister would be bound for life to that blackguard and he would have her dowry of thirty thousand pounds.” He stopped talking but his body was rigid and his jaw worked, grinding his teeth painfully.

Elizabeth was exceedingly pale and felt a sick feeling in her stomach. A liar, a seducer, a man who did not pay his debts and attempted elopements with fifteen-year-old girls! This was the man she had called friend! The man whom she had just that morning been feeling guilty over abandoning. How could she have been so blind? He had flattered her and preferred her, and she had believed and endorsed him. She had slandered the

good name of her own betrothed on the basis of that cur's testimony. She was such a simpleton! Stupid girl! She had always prided herself on her character judgments, but clearly she was the one whose character should be examined.

She withdrew from Darcy's arm and walked down to the water, her back to him. They had long passed anyone out enjoying the weather and the only people about were some small children chasing a crab several yards away.

Darcy let her alone for a few minutes before standing behind her and placing a hand on her shoulder. "Are you well, Elizabeth?"

She released a sob and dropped her head to her hands, covering her face. Darcy immediately crossed in front of her and rubbed both her shoulders under his large hands while she shook from the strength of her weeping.

"Dearest, please." He tried to press a handkerchief into her hands but she would not remove them from her face. Finally, feeling desperate and seeing no one about, she pulled her stiffly into his arms and rubbed her back, pressing her head onto his shoulder.

Finally, her sobs relented and she said, "How can you hold me like this? Do you not despise me, and rightly so?"

"Despise you? Why on earth would I despise you?"

"I believed him! I *wanted* to believe him, to satisfy my own wounded pride. I could not have been more blind!" she cried wretchedly.

He continued to console her, not knowing what to say and not fully understanding her. “Mr. Wickham is a practiced liar. Even my own excellent father believed him. You are not to blame, dearest. He has deceived many before and I fear he will continue to do so wherever he goes. It is his way.”

She sobbed again, feeling more horrible by his defense of her. “Fitzwilliam, why are you not angry with me?” She looked at him incredulously and began pacing in front of him. “I was so angry with you, with your ridiculous comment! I thought I did not care; I thought the opinion of a strange man should not bother me, but clearly, I have not known myself. Had I been in love I could not have been more blind. But vanity has been my folly! Oh, how vain I have been! How willfully I misunderstood you from the start.”

She continued pacing frantically, speaking to him but seemingly speaking to no one and he wondered if she had forgotten his presence.

“The things I said! I supported him! I *agreed* with him! I thought you proud and disagreeable, and he charming and amiable. Foolish girl!”

“Elizabeth.” She did not look up. “Elizabeth!” He had her attention. “Am I to understand that you believed Wickham because you disliked me early in our acquaintance, due to a comment I made?”

She stood stock still and pale, looking at his serious countenance and rigid posture. She could not but nod pathetically, her face tear streaked and her eyes wide and sad.

“May I ask what comment it was that set you so against me?” he asked carefully. He was terribly afraid he knew the answer, but he needed to be sure. Little did he know how prideful his features appeared at that moment, how unbending his voice sounded.

““She is tolerable I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt me.””

He closed his eyes as she spoke.

“And, ‘I will not waste my time with women who have been slighted by other men.’ Or something like that.” She looked down at her feet, now half wet from pacing too close to the water, and felt a curious numbness.

He rubbed a hand across his still closed eyes. “Elizabeth, I must beg your forgiveness. I should never have said such a thing and certainly not within your hearing in a ballroom. I am sure you realize by now that you tempt me quite well.”

She looked away, surprised by his response. “You are forgiven, sir. Can you find a way to forgive my ignorance and foolishness? My *willful misunderstanding*, as you once called it?”

He walked to her and took both her hands within his own. “Of course, my love. You are not to blame.”

“But I am!” she interjected, not willing to let herself off so easily and feeling horribly—not exactly guilty, but something near to that. She could not let him continue to think her an innocent victim. “I am to blame! I did not question him. If his

information had come from anyone else I would have thought him too forward, but because I wanted to hear ill of you, because I was discarded by you and charmed by him, I listened to him. I was an all-too-willing participant in his plan to slander you across the country.” She dropped her head, beginning to feel exhausted. “Mr. Darcy, I am sorry for what I have said about you in Meryton. It was unfounded and unkind and I apologize. I understand if you do not wish to see me again.”

He had been alternately confused and touched at her speech until the last. “No!”

Her head snapped up at his vehement tone.

“Miss Bennet, Elizabeth, do stop trying to cry off! Do you not understand? I want to marry you. You! I did not choose a woman from among a case at the jewelers. There is not a replacement should this one get lost.” He took her shoulders in his hands again and held her there firmly, his eyes boring into her. “You are mine, do you understand? I have made my decision and I want you. Do stop trying to change my mind.” He spoke fervently, more passionately than she had ever heard him speak.

A smile worked its way across her face, her eyes lightening as she looked upon him, staring at her with such ferocity. Suddenly, she threw her arms around his waist and buried her face in his coat, squeezing him tightly. Stunned, Darcy did not know what to do but return her embrace. He held her to him

and dropped his head so it rested on top of hers, his arms pulling her impossibly closer.

They stood like this for some time until Elizabeth pulled back and looked at him shyly. He smiled at her reassuringly and offered his arm, and they made their way back to the cottage.

CHAPTER 16



“Jane, may I come in?” Elizabeth asked as she rapped on her sister’s door before bed.

“Of course, dearest. Please, join me.” She patted the chair next to hers where she was seated in her dressing gown with a letter open on her lap.

“Who is the letter from?”

“My friend in town, Mrs. Pearson,” Jane answered.

“Is she the one with the very eligible elder brother?” Elizabeth asked, wrapping her shawl around her shoulders and settling into the chair by the open window. The only light in the room was the lamp on the table between their chairs and the pale glow of the moon outside.

“Yes, she is. Mr. Walker.” Jane looked down self-consciously, then coming to a decision, looked her sister in the eye. “She says her brother has asked after me several times and that she has twice taken the liberty of reading my letters to him.”

“Does she?” Elizabeth was slightly surprised with her sister’s proclamation, as Jane was usually more circumspect and modest, but she tried not to show it.

“She hints that he is interested in me romantically and wishes to see me when I return to town if it is possible.” Jane held the letter out to her sister. “Or do I mistake her?” she added.

Ah, there is the Jane I know. Elizabeth took the letter from her sister and read it through twice before handing it back.

“I do not think you are mistaken, Jane. She sounds very much like she would like to have you in the family and that her brother is eager to perform the job.” Jane flushed and looked out the dark window.

“That is what I thought.”

“Do you wish to join the Walker family, Jane?”

“I do not know. He is a very kind man, but as yet my feelings are not any stronger than friendship.” The name Bingley hung in the air between them, unspoken but not unthought. “His sisters are very kind.”

“There is more than one?”

“Yes, he has an older sister living in London. Her husband does business with Uncle. She is very genteel and kind, not unlike Aunt Gardiner, and has the most adorable children.” Jane smiled sadly. “There is another brother as well, but I have not met him. He is much younger than the others and is away

at school. Martha, Mrs. Pearson, assures me he is a lovely boy.”

“Sounds like an ideal family,” Elizabeth said softly.

“Yes, they are,” Jane said distractedly. After several minutes of silence, she asked her sister, “Do you think it is possible to grow to love someone? I mean someone that you do not love after you know them, but perhaps after knowing them more intimately and for a longer period of time, you may come to love them? Do you think it is possible?”

Elizabeth looked at her sister’s worried face, Jane’s color high and her blue eyes unusually bright and wide. She answered carefully. “I think it is possible to grow in love, is that not how we all love anyway? But I do not know that it is such an easy recipe to follow. Time and intimacy alone may not accomplish the task.”

Jane nodded. “Lizzy, would it be very wrong of me to accept Mr. Walker if I do not love him?”

“I do not think it would be very wrong, no. You like him; you respect and esteem him. Many marriages have been based on far less.”

Jane nodded, her eyes meeting her sister’s and sharing an unspoken truth. That was not how *they* wished to marry. Or at least it hadn’t been before their father interfered.

“So you are thinking of accepting Mr. Walker then?” Elizabeth asked.

“I am giving it careful consideration. I can clearly see how it will be, or as clear as is possible with no formal arrangements. His father and family are all kind and welcoming to me. His mother died several years ago and I imagine I would immediately become mistress of his father’s house in London, which will one day be his. It is a large responsibility but one I feel I can take on. He is a good man, of that I am certain, and he knows his own mind, the importance of which has lately been impressed on me.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Do you no longer wish for Mr. Bingley, then?”

Jane looked down, then looked at her sister with her eyes full of tears she refused to let fall. “I am trying, Lizzy, trying so hard to forget him! His sisters are not kind like Mr. Walker’s, he does not know his own mind, he is blown about by whims and fancies and the wishes of his friends. He is not a man full grown!” she declared vehemently, her eyes clearly showing her distress.

“So you still love him,” Elizabeth said quietly, the finality of the words filling the small room.

“I fear it is not something I can control. Would it be wrong of me to accept Mr. Walker, in *every* way,” she looked at her sister significantly, “with my heart full of another man? Is it betrayal? Or is it prudence?”

Elizabeth shook her head, unable to answer her sister. Instead she knelt before her, hugging her tightly and stroking

her hair as Jane quietly sobbed out her sorrows on her sister's shoulder.

They slept together that night, Jane's head on her sister's soft stomach, as they had done when they were children, and Elizabeth's hand wrapped in Jane's hair, each giving strength and comfort to the other.

In the middle of the night, Jane woke and found her sister by the window, looking out towards the sea.

“Are you well, Lizzy?”

“Yes, Jane, I'll be fine.”

Jane watched her sister, then finally curled her legs under her chin and hugged her knees, looking very much like a little girl.

“Do you think you will grow to love Mr. Darcy, Lizzy?”

“I do not know. Sometimes I think I am doomed to a life with a stubborn, intractable, difficult man. Then he is sweet and kind and surprisingly charming and I think everything will be all right in the end.” She shrugged her shoulders. “How are you feeling?”

“I feel terrible for bothering you with my troubles. You have your own more difficult situation to deal with and I selfishly burdened you with mine. Can you forgive me?”

“Dearest Jane,” Elizabeth said, rising and taking her sister's hands in her own, “there is nothing to forgive. We must go through these things together. Is that not what sisters are for?”

Jane smiled and hugged her, then Elizabeth returned to her own room for the rest of the night where she slept fitfully until late the next morning.



The following day was Sunday and instead of attending services, the entire family slept very late and when Mr. Darcy arrived, Mary Bennet was the only family member who received him.

He made stunted small talk with Elizabeth's sister while waiting for his betrothed to come downstairs. Thankfully, she arrived within a quarter hour and whisked him into the garden where she ordered tea. As she poured for him and offered him a small tray of muffins, he couldn't help but think how lucky he was, that he had many more days just like this to look forward to. Even luckier; in less than a fortnight, they would be wed and he would not have to go home alone or even wake up alone. It was not something they had discussed, but he hoped she would consent to share a bed, at least some of the time. He thought he might like to sleep together every night, but he was practical enough to realize such a thing should probably be tried before it was decided upon.

He didn't realize he had been looking in her direction without really seeing her for several minutes until she broke his reverie.

“What has your brow so puzzled, my dear?”

Immediately he brightened. She had never called him that before and seemed quite unaware of having said it herself.

“I was wondering if you snore,” he said.

She laughed and quickly set down her teacup. “What?”

He smiled. “It would seem odd for such a delicate person as you, but one never knows about these things.”

“I don’t know whether to be flattered you think I’m delicate or insulted by your thinking I snore!”

“Why would you be flattered? Are you not often thought of as delicate? I should think it would be quite ordinary by now.”

“You might be surprised.” She arched a brow and gave him that look he loved. “My mother is not as inclined to think of me as such. She says I am far too wild to be considered delicate.”

He scoffed. “As if she—,” he stopped, seeing her brow raised and her eyes a mix of censure and amusement. “I, ahem, I’m sure she’s mistaken. You are all that is lovely and delicate.”

At this, Elizabeth had to laugh. It was a soft, chiming sound, like the wind in the trees in autumn or the church bells at Christmas. Overcome with a sudden rush of affection for her, he blurted, “God, how I love you.”

Her retort about him recovering from his faux pas so nicely died on her lips along with her laughter, and she was left looking into his eyes as he regarded her with an intensity she’d seldom seen. She reached across the table and took his hand in

both of hers, pressing it firmly and stroking his knuckles with her thumb.

The marmalade cat that made himself at home in their garden took that opportunity to mew loudly at their feet, breaking the moment. She laughed self-consciously and released his hand, busying herself with refilling his cup and then her own.

“When are you returning to London? Shall you accompany us on Wednesday?”

“I’m afraid I must return tomorrow.” He was comforted by the slight look of displeasure on her face. “I have much business to tend to before we leave town, and I want to devote the days immediately following the wedding to my new wife.” He couldn’t help it; he verily beamed with pride at the pronouncement that this exquisite creature sitting opposite him would soon be his wife.

She returned his smile. “What a dutiful and attentive husband I am acquiring.”

He smiled at her tease and took her hand again.

“That is something I wished to talk with you about,” she said.

“Oh? About me being a dutiful husband?”

She smiled again and tilted her head flirtatiously. “You are getting better at teasing, Mr. Darcy. I approve.”

He nodded his thanks and she continued, “I wanted to ask you what sort of marriage you wished to have.”

His brows rose quizzically and he sat up a bit straighter. “What do you mean exactly?” he asked, a mad thought running through his mind that perhaps she wished to discuss their sleeping arrangements.

“Well, I mean what sort of relationship will exist between us? Shall we be friends as well as spouses?” She could not bring herself to say lovers. “Meaning, what sort of conversations will we have? What will we confide in each other, if anything? Who will have your first loyalty—your family and friends or me? Do you wish me to come to you with my troubles or to sort them out on my own? What sort of closeness shall exist between us?”

She was in earnest, that was clear to him, and he listened carefully to her words, wondering what had sparked these thoughts and if he should be reading between the lines.

“If I understand you correctly, you are asking if you can confide in me or if I would rather not be bothered?”

“Somewhat, yes.”

“Bother me. Every day, every hour, whenever the desire strikes you. I shall always listen attentively and seek to help in any way I can. You know that I love you, dearest, of course we shall be friends, and confidantes, and any other word you can think of. I desire a true partnership with you, not just a decoration on my arm. And it should go without saying that my loyalty is first to you, always.”

She sighed in relief, her shoulders slumping down from where they had been raised nearly to her ears.

“Thank you, Fitzwilliam. You’ve eased my mind.”

“Dearest, you seem distressed. Is there something you wished to speak about?” he asked, wishing they were already wed so that he could hold her and comfort her as she so clearly needed.

“It is Jane. I cannot betray her confidence, but I would like to ask you about something.”

He nodded.

“It is about Mr. Bingley.”

He leaned toward her.

“What sort of man is he? You know him well, do you not?” she asked.

“He is a good sort of man, kind, generous. But that is not what you mean, is it?”

“Not exactly. Last autumn, Mr. Bingley left the neighborhood without saying goodbye to anyone. He said he would be back shortly but never came back. It does not inspire trust. It is not the most... mature... behavior,” she said.

Darcy leaned back. “Ah. I think I see what you mean. Miss Bennet met Bingley in town again, did she not?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“And I imagine his attentions were just as pointed to her as they had been in Hertfordshire?”

Elizabeth looked at him but did not respond.

“Without betraying his confidence, I can tell you that Bingley is a young man, and with a sister who excels at management and no estate to be responsible to, he has been allowed to remain a young man. I have no doubt that with time and perhaps a steadying influence, he will grow into a very admirable man, one who would make an excellent husband and father, but if you are wondering if he is there yet, I’m afraid I will have to say no, he is not.”

He spoke quietly and Elizabeth understood what he was doing. He was proving his loyalty to her by sharing his private thoughts about his closest friend. He was not breaking a confidence per se, but he was dancing precariously close to the line and she knew he would not have done it for anyone but her.

She squeezed his hand. “Thank you. If I may, one more question about our mutual friend?”

He smiled. “Of course.”

“Do you think he is serious about Jane? And if he is, would he then rise to the occasion and be his own man, like you, or would he continue to be bossed about by his sisters?”

“That is more than one question, Elizabeth!”

She shrugged, not sorry in the least. He sighed.

“Miss Bennet has a particularly serene personality and I believe she would be a steadying influence on Bingley. However, I can see how from a woman’s perspective that may seem like an enormous risk to take. Allow me to say though,

in Bingley's defense, he is not always persuaded by his sisters. The majority of the time their demands fall on deaf ears unless it is something he feels duty-bound to do, and no, not everything falls into that category. And while I think he is not yet ready to be a husband, I do not think it to be too far into the future."

Elizabeth thought on this for a moment and was satisfied at first. After all, in Hertfordshire she had been witness to multiple occasions of Bingley telling his sisters no and doing what he wished to do instead, which, of course, made his desertion all the worse. He could have come back to Hertfordshire. If he was persuaded to stay away, he allowed himself to be.

"Does Miss Bennet doubt his trustworthiness?" he asked, looking curious and slightly uncomfortable.

"Whether she does or not, *I* certainly do."

"And you wield a great deal of influence over your sister."

"Less than you wield over your friend," she said with a knowing look.

His eyes widened slightly. She spoke before he could respond. "I have long suspected you convinced Mr. Bingley not to return to Netherfield and I was angry at first, but my father and I spoke of it and I realized he is his own man. It was his decision to make; he did not have to listen to you. He should have trusted his own judgment, but he didn't. That cannot be laid at your door." She took a deep breath and

looked around before resettling her sight on Darcy. “He is not like you.”

He looked confused and she continued, “Do stop looking so worried, Fitzwilliam! I am not angry with you.”

She smiled and he exhaled gruffly, feeling like he had dodged a particularly nasty bullet. “What do you mean, ‘he is not like me’?”

“I mean from the outside, you have similar situations. You are each young men, have already inherited, and are each responsible for a sister, though yours is much younger. But you are a man full grown, while Mr. Bingley is still in process.”

He was looking at her with a peculiar gleam in his eyes and she returned his stare.

“What?” she asked after several moments passed and he said nothing.

“Come.”

He stood and took her by the hand, leading her to the path that would take them to the shore. He stopped abruptly in a secluded nook at the end of the garden path before it opened to the stairs leading down. He swiftly pressed her into the niche in the wall and placed his arms on either side of her head, leaning down to kiss her deeply.

It was several minutes before he released her lips, and then he pressed his forehead to hers and caught his breath.

“A man full grown, am I?”

She laughed a bit breathlessly. “As you see.”

He smiled and kissed her again, this time more slowly, gently tracing her upper lip with his tongue. She started at the contact and pulled back, then slowly returned her mouth to his. After another minute of exploration, she tentatively traced her tongue along his lips as he had done hers. He moaned and she pulled back again, a question in her eyes, and he pulled her to him, placing one hand behind her neck while the other wrapped around her waist. She placed her hands on his sides and slowly wrapped them around to his back, drawing him closer.

It wasn't long before Darcy withdrew, resting his forehead against hers again, his breathing ragged.

“So that is what a man full grown kisses like. I shall tell Jane to secure one immediately.”

He laughed and withdrew, running a hand through his hair and walking a few steps away from her.

“I cannot wait till we are wed, Elizabeth.”

This reminder of what was to come silenced her teasing and filled her with a sudden trepidation. She nervously smiled and walked toward the shore trail.

“Come, let us greet the sea today.”

CHAPTER 17



Charles Bingley placed the most recent letter from Darcy in the drawer with the others, then leaned back in his chair to think. His old friend wanted to meet him tomorrow at the club. Darcy had sent him a short letter to announce his engagement a few weeks ago and had kindly given him warning when he informed his family, knowing the gossip would circulate town in a matter of hours. Charles had been able to keep it hidden from his sister Caroline for a day or two, then told her after she had a proper meal and the servants were in another part of the house so as not to hear her tantrum.

He'd never seen a person's face become that particular shade of purple before. She trembled with rage and finally threw a small china teacup, watching it shatter on the marble mantelpiece. He stopped her before she threw a figurine in the same direction. After sending her off to be tended by her maid, he had a serious conversation with his brother Hurst. Neither man wanted the responsibility of taking care of Caroline for the long term, and now that her plans to wed Darcy had been thwarted, they agreed it was time to look elsewhere. The season was dwindling to a close and every week there were

reports of friends removing to their country estates. There were still some activities and many would not leave town until the middle or end of the month, but they certainly were not spoiled for choice.

Louisa Hurst had an old school friend who had married a distant cousin of her husband's. They were hosting a house party in the summer and the Hursts had been invited. There would be a great variety of guests, including a few single men, and the neighborhood was known to be prosperous. The two men agreed Caroline would make what she could of the remaining weeks in town before accompanying her sister and brother-in-law to the house party in the hopes of finding a man willing to marry her.

Charles Bingley was pleased with his decision and hoped he was one step closer to gaining Jane Bennet's favor.



Mr. Darcy left for London early Monday morning and Elizabeth spent the next two days at the shore with her sisters. There was a dinner party to attend but otherwise, the Bennet family was alone. A sense of nostalgia had settled over them as they all recognized that soon, their numbers would be diminished. Elizabeth would marry in a little over a week and Jane was sure not to be too far behind her. The Bennet family as it had always been would end, and the sisters would move away, adding brothers and distance to their family.

Tuesday, the girls took one last picnic down to the shore. The five of them sat scattered across two blankets in a sheltered cove not too far from their cottage. Kitty was sketching Jane and Mary where they sat side by side, the sea at their backs, while Lydia braided long grasses and made crowns for each of her sisters.

“Do you think you will have many children, Lizzy?” asked Lydia suddenly.

“Lydia!” exclaimed Jane. “That is not an appropriate question.”

“Why not?” Lydia responded, looking genuinely confused. “We are all sisters here. It is not as if Mr. Darcy were sitting beside us.”

Jane acknowledged her point and four sets of eyes turned to Elizabeth.

“I hardly know!” Elizabeth declared, her cheeks slightly red. “One cannot always predict these things.”

“Maybe you will have five daughters like Mama!” said Lydia.

“Oh, name one after me!” cried Kitty.

Elizabeth had to laugh at this absurdity, but inside she was worried. How many children did Mr. Darcy desire? How many did he expect? What if she had daughters; would he insist on continuing until there was a son? What if the effort killed her?

Jane placed a warm hand on her arm. “You will have a son, Lizzy, I’m sure of it.”

Elizabeth smiled at her sister. “How do you know, Jane?”

“I just know. You will.”

“Shall I name him after you?” Elizabeth teased.

“I think a boy called Jane would seem a little odd, but John would not be inappropriate.”

“Oh, yes, call him John! Then I shall call him Jack and teach him how to dance!” declared Lydia. She pulled Kitty up and twirled her about, the two of them giggling and laughing. Lydia then picked up the crowns she had made and skipped about her sisters, laughing as she placed the crowns haphazardly on their heads. Mary was still wearing a bonnet and they all laughed at the picture of her braided grass crown atop her straw bonnet.

Elizabeth sighed. She would miss this, miss them, these sisters. Jane’s companionship and comfort she would miss the most, but in the six months since her father’s change, as she had come to think of it, she had grown closer to them all. She had bonded with Mary over music and singing and had come to appreciate and value her sister in a way she never could have imagined prior to the change. Kitty had become a dear, innocent companion, one that she would miss after she married. Kitty was still a follower at heart and would likely never be an overwhelming presence, or even a strong one, but there was a sweetness, an honesty about her that Elizabeth could appreciate and knew she would miss dearly.

Lydia, quite surprisingly, had become a great source of entertainment and joy, much like she had been as a young

child before she had been spoiled so dreadfully. She was still exuberant and likely always would be, but she could curb her tongue in public now, a feat neither of her eldest sisters thought she would ever accomplish, and her need to have her way all the time had greatly diminished. Elizabeth thought it due largely to her no longer being out. As angry as Lydia had been, the change had done her good. She was now in a category of her own, almost, and the lack of competition had calmed her. Kitty was not out either, but only Lydia wore the dresses and hairstyles of a young girl and as much as she had balked against it in the beginning, the change suited her.

That evening, the family prepared for their last dinner together before leaving for London in the morning. The following week would be spent at their Uncle Gardiner's home. Elizabeth would have fittings most days for her trousseau and there would be dinners with Mr. Darcy's family in addition to the usual entertainments.

Dinner was filled with laughter and old family stories. Each sister told a tale of how Lizzy had wronged her as a child by stealing her toy, pushing her into a puddle, or talking her into something they both got into trouble for. Elizabeth blushed and defended herself weakly, all the while laughing until her sides ached.

"You always were an unusual girl," said Mr. Bennet with a wink. He squeezed her hand where it rested next to his on the table.

Elizabeth smiled as she turned to listen to her mother at the other end of the table.

“Well, Lizzy, you have done better than I ever thought you would. Well done, dear. Mr. Darcy is a fine catch.”

She smiled proudly at her daughter and sipped another glass of wine, and Elizabeth was not sure if she should feel happy or embarrassed. Her sisters sniggered quietly behind their hands and she decided not to let her mother’s words offend her.

“When you were a little girl,” Mrs. Bennet continued, “you had the most beautiful hair. It curled all around your face and everyone exclaimed about it. Mrs. Goulding was so jealous! I told her not to worry, her daughter’s hair would grow in eventually.” Lydia spluttered and nearly choked on her wine. “You were such a pretty child. And now your hair is prettier than ever.”

Elizabeth stared at her mother, having never heard her speak in such a way about herself before.

“Of course, you so rarely wear it to your advantage. Why you never listen to me, I don’t know,” Mrs. Bennet continued.

There is the mother I know, Elizabeth thought.

She laughed quietly to herself and looked across the table to see that Mary and Jane were doing the same, and soon the entire table was laughing.

“What? What is so funny?” asked Mrs. Bennet. This made Lydia laugh louder and soon Mrs. Bennet joined in, not

knowing why, but not wishing to be left out of what was clearly a good joke.

CHAPTER 18



The limited number of guest rooms in the Gardiners' London house meant that Jane and Elizabeth shared a room, Mary and Kitty shared, and a very unhappy Lydia slept in the nursery. Her young cousins were much too young to share with. The eldest was only eleven years old. It was almost enough to send her into a tantrum, but just before she lost control of her temper, the nurse offered to allow Lydia the extra bed in her room next to the nursery. It was meant for a wet nurse but there was currently no need for one. Lydia jumped at the chance and happily left her young cousins behind.

They had arrived early and decided to make a quick trip to the shoemaker before dinner. Mrs. Bennet declared they had much shopping to do and no time to waste. Mrs. Gardiner had taken the liberty of choosing a few patterns for Elizabeth that she thought her niece would like, but they still needed to be fitted. Her wedding dress had been made in Margate along with a few other pieces, but her mother insisted that the wife of Mr. Darcy must have an impressive trousseau. Mr. Bennet

tried to rein her in, and in the end succeeded a little, but he still cringed at the thought of the bills that would soon be arriving.

Elizabeth made orders for several new pairs of slippers, walking boots, half boots, and a warmer pair for winter. Plans to visit the modiste, the draper, the furrier and glove maker were made for the next few days and Elizabeth already felt exhausted just thinking about it.

Mr. Darcy sent around a card saying he would call Thursday morning if Elizabeth would be available. Mrs. Bennet was torn between telling him there was too much to do to sit around waiting for calls and giving him whatever he asked for to avoid angering him. In the end, it was decided that Elizabeth would stay home with her father and await Mr. Darcy while her mother, sisters, and aunt went shopping for their own apparel.

When Darcy finally arrived in Gracechurch Street, Elizabeth was seated in the front drawing room where her aunt received visitors. Her father was in her uncle's study; he felt that with both doors open and only a small hall between them, nothing untoward would occur. Elizabeth stood and curtsied when Darcy entered the room and before she had fully straightened, he was standing before her and taking her hand.

“Dearest,” he said softly, “are you well?”

“Yes. And you, sir?”

“Yes, very well now you are come.” He pressed her hand to his chest and gazed into her eyes until she flushed from the scrutiny.

“Please, be seated.” She sat on the settee and he joined her, sitting close enough to press his leg to hers and rest their still-joined hands on his knee.

“Was your journey pleasant?” he asked.

“As pleasant as a journey with such a large party can be. And yours?”

“As expected.”

“Fitzwilliam.”

“Yes?”

“You’re staring at me again.”

“I have missed you.”

“It has only been three days.”

“Nevertheless.”

She smiled and shook her head but squeezed his hand within hers.

“Do you have your week all planned out?” he asked.

“Mostly, yes, but some time can be set aside for you if that is what you are leading up to.” She smiled coyly. She quite liked flirting with him. It garnered her the most wonderful results.

He smiled. “That is exactly what I was asking. I’d like for you to meet Georgiana and tour the house, and of course your family should come for dinner.”

“I’d love to meet your sister. Perhaps she could come for tea?”

He looked dubious. “We could accomplish two tasks at once if you came to the house for tea. You could meet the staff and interview your new maid if you like.”

“Very well. When shall this momentous tea take place?” she asked.

“Whenever you are ready. Mrs. Brown, the London housekeeper, has two different girls she would put forward as your maid. You are to choose between them. Of course, if neither of them is to your liking, we can continue the search.”

“Of course, Fitzwilliam, thank you.”

“I love that.”

“What?”

“The sound of my name on your lips. You make it sound so very appealing.”

“Do you not normally find it appealing?” she asked.

“Not particularly. I normally find it cumbersome.”

She laughed. “I like it. It is a dignified name, and not one you will find on every other man in the country.”

“I suppose that is true. Now,” he said, angling his body toward hers, “when shall I get my welcome kiss?”

“Is there such a thing? I have never heard of it. I think you are making occasions up, Mr. Darcy, in order to attain more

kisses. Besides, you arrived before I did, so shouldn't you welcome me?"

"Very well, I shall give you a welcome kiss."

She laughed outright. "Fitzwilliam, you are incorrigible! There is no such thing, I am sure of it."

"Of course there is. You simply have not heard of it before; you should spend more time in town."

She watched him with an amused smile as he leaned closer and closer to her.

"Now, I will welcome you to London and you can welcome me to Gracechurch Street. How does that sound?" he suggested playfully.

She could do aught but smile brightly and shake her head, then lean forward to meet him where he was already tilting his head in anticipation of their kiss.

"There is one for your welcome," she said as she pulled away from a quick peck, "and one for mine." The second kiss was gentle and soft and lasted considerably longer than the first.

Darcy sat back with a satisfied smile. "That is much better."

She laughed and rose, tugging him up behind her. "Come, you should greet my father."



Friday brought Mr. Bingley to Gracechurch Street. The women of the family were preparing to leave, the hall filled with bustling as five women tied on their bonnets and slipped on their gloves.

Mr. Bingley apologized and asked if it wasn't a good time, and Mrs. Bennet said it was no trouble at all, Jane would stay behind. Kitty was sent for and told to stay in the corner to give them privacy. Mrs. Bennet whispered the instructions in her ear but she wasn't as good at whispering as she imagined she was and everyone heard. Jane was mortified, but Bingley was glad of the time alone, even if it came at the cost of a little embarrassment. Mrs. Gardiner sent in tea before the two matrons, the bride, and Mary were off to the shops.

Bingley was very pleased to spend time with Jane Bennet. He had enjoyed renewing the acquaintance while in town and after much deliberation, he'd decided that Darcy was wrong about Jane's feelings for him. If she had felt nothing for him, why had she been so nervous when she saw him again? If her heart was untouched, why did she blush so when he touched her in a dance or kissed her hand? No, he was sure Darcy had been mistaken. His friend was just a man, after all.

And if he was right and his friend was wrong about Jane's feelings, it meant he had left her in the lurch, expecting him to come back and likely being grieved when he did not. Was that why she was so skittish now? Why the ease they had enjoyed in Hertfordshire was so difficult to recapture? Could he blame her? Of course not! He would not want an inconstant lover and neither would he wish one for her.

He knew he might make a nuisance of himself, but he couldn't care. Darcy practically oozed satisfaction when Bingley saw him last, and he knew why. Darcy was marrying the woman he loved and perpetually looked like the cat that got the cream. Bingley wished such joy for himself, and he knew he would have it with Jane. He would call again and again until she saw it, too.



Saturday arrived bright and clear for Elizabeth's tea with the Darcys. Her mother and Jane were accompanying her. She would take tea with Georgiana and Fitzwilliam, tour the house, and meet with the housekeeper. She would then be introduced to the two women vying for the position of her personal maid.

One worked full time in the London house and the other was a regular seasonal maid who had recently undergone training to be a lady's maid. Elizabeth asked that no further information be given to her about them so that she wouldn't make a biased choice, but she had already gathered that the one from the house in town was a generational employee and had been with the family her entire life.

When the carriage pulled up in front of the large stone house, Elizabeth steeled her nerves and took a deep breath. The house itself did not bother her. However, the idea that she would be in charge of said house and its inhabitants was another story. She squared her shoulders and squeezed Jane's hand, then walked in with her head held high.

“Welcome to Darcy House, Miss Elizabeth,” said Mr. Darcy. He was standing by the door and after greeting her sister and mother, quickly took Elizabeth’s arm and led her to the drawing room.

He introduced her to his sister, Georgiana, and sat next to Elizabeth on a settee near Georgiana’s chair. Jane took the chair next to her and Mrs. Bennet sat across from them.

“This is a lovely room, Mr. Darcy.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bennet.”

“The material looks so expensive! Has it recently been redone?” she asked, her hand running over the brocade on the arm of her chair.

“My aunt refurnished it about four years ago, I believe,” he answered.

“Your aunt Lady Catherine?”

“No, my Aunt Lady Constance.”

“Oh, is she your mother’s sister? The daughter of an earl?” she asked eagerly.

Jane’s cheeks were red and she stared at the carpet, unable to raise her eyes, while Elizabeth was silently wishing the floor would open up and swallow her whole.

“No, my mother had but one sister, Lady Catherine, whom you met in Kent. Lady Constance is my father’s sister. Her husband is Viscount Melburn of Broxley.”

Mrs. Bennet's eyes nearly bulged from her head. "Did you hear that, Lizzy?"

Before she could say anything else, Elizabeth clutched Mr. Darcy's arm a little too tightly and spoke. "Forgive me, Mr. Darcy, but might we call for some tea? I'm suddenly very thirsty."

He nodded at her silently and rose to pull the bell and pretended not to hear Mrs. Bennet whispering loudly to her daughters about what a boon it would be to have peers in the family.

Jane tried to shush her to no avail and Mrs. Bennet continued on, ignoring the red face and downcast eyes of Georgiana, until Mr. Darcy finished speaking with a servant and sat back down.

"How often are you in town, Mr. Darcy? Surely you spend the season here," Mrs. Bennet continued in a loud, cloying voice.

"I spend a part of the season each year here, yes, but not all," he replied.

Jane knew the next step in her mother's conversation would be to suggest that he host her sisters or possibly the entire family next season and being the sweet, generous person she was, she threw herself on the pyre to save her sister the same fate.

"Have you seen Mr. Bingley this season?" she asked innocently.

“Yes, I saw him just yesterday, as a matter of fact. He is considering a trip north to visit relations.”

Mrs. Bennet was instantly on the scent of a new suitor and Elizabeth mouthed a silent thank you to her sister.

Tea arrived shortly and a very nervous Miss Darcy poured for her guests.

“Two sugars, please,” said Mrs. Bennet.

Elizabeth thought the ability to request tea in a shrill voice must be a natural talent.

Miss Darcy was so nervous the cup nearly shook in her hand, prompting Mrs. Bennet to say, “Oh, Miss Darcy! Do not worry, we shall all be family soon.”

She gave the girl an exaggerated wink and Elizabeth didn’t know whether to be embarrassed that she had pointed out the girl’s anxiety or happy that her mother was attempting to show this poor orphaned child kindness in her own mortifying way.

“The first time my Lizzy served tea, she spilled an entire cup on Mrs. Goulding’s lap!” Mrs. Bennet tittered and Georgiana looked at her lap, her cheeks ablaze. “These are the most beautiful cakes! Do you have a French chef, Mr. Darcy? Of course you must, you can afford it!”

“Actually, I—” Darcy was interrupted by Mrs. Bennet again.

“Do you have an orangery, Mr. Darcy? If you do not, I must suggest you build one.”

“There is an orangery at Pemberley,” he said gravely, his expression blank.

“Mr. Darcy, did you not say there was a painting of Pemberley you wanted me to see? Might you show it to me now?” asked Elizabeth, her voice a little higher than usual.

“Of course. Come with me, please,” said Darcy.

Georgiana had not spoken more than a dozen words and excused herself to her rooms when the tour began. Mrs. Bennet didn't seem to notice.

Darcy conducted the tour himself. Elizabeth suspected he didn't want the servants to see Mrs. Bennet and spread rumors, or even to know he was willingly marrying into such a family. Or perhaps he wanted to spare Elizabeth additional mortification. Regardless of the reason, he was patient himself and while she did see his upper lip curling in distaste more than once, he was unfailingly polite to her mother. She could not blame him for not being exactly friendly; she was nearly ready to do her mother bodily harm herself and she loved the woman! Mr. Darcy could not be expected to have the same affection for her or to have built up the same level of tolerance for her behavior.

The house was beautiful and Elizabeth had an overall impression of elegance and simplicity, but she was so embarrassed and vexed with her mother that she didn't register half of what she was seeing. By the time the tour was over, she was so tired she just wanted to go home. She pleaded a

headache and begged Mr. Darcy to call the carriage and tell the maids she would interview them another time.

He did as she asked and walked the ladies out to the carriage. He handed Elizabeth in last and stopped her briefly before she stepped in.

“Are you well?” he asked quietly.

“I will be,” she whispered. “Thank you for your patience today, Fitzwilliam. I will not forget it.”

He pressed her hand and with another long look, she was gone.

As soon as they returned to Gracechurch Street, Elizabeth and Jane went upstairs to their room where Elizabeth promptly removed her dress and fell across the bed, hot tears of humiliation running over her cheeks.

“Oh, Jane, please tell me I am imagining things and that she wasn’t as dreadful as I thought she was.”

“Mr. Darcy was very patient,” she answered.

“Oh!” Elizabeth pulled a pillow over her head. “Oh, Jane, if a person could die of mortification, you would be laying me out as we speak.”

“Lizzy! Do not joke about such things!” Jane reprimanded.

She sat up on the bed. “I’m sorry, dear. I’m just so embarrassed! I didn’t know my cheeks could burn so much.” She pressed her hands to her face.

“I know. I’m sure I resembled a ripe apple for much of the afternoon,” Jane agreed.

Elizabeth laughed sadly at such a statement coming from her sister. “Jane, I think you must keep mama far away from Mr. Walker and his family. Mr. Bingley has already met her, but surely keeping distance there as well would be advisable.”

“As much as I hate to say such a thing about a parent, I think you are correct.”

Before they could finish their conversation, a note arrived for Elizabeth.

Dearest,

Would you consider spending Sunday afternoon with Georgiana and me? You didn’t have a chance to speak much and she would dearly like to get to know you. Miss Bennet is welcome, of course. Please come, my love.

I eagerly await your reply.

F.D.

Elizabeth quickly dashed off a reply and sent it with the waiting servant.

“Jane, we shall be free tomorrow!”

CHAPTER 19



When they arrived at Darcy House, Jane and Elizabeth were shown into a back parlor they hadn't seen the day before. The windows gave a lovely view of the garden and the room was papered in a warm green pattern. Mr. Darcy and his sister were standing in the middle of the room, a soft smile on his face while hers was turned to the floor.

“Miss Elizabeth, Miss Bennet, welcome.”

Elizabeth walked to him and took his outstretched hands, allowing him to kiss her hand before speaking.

“Thank you for the invitation, Mr. Darcy.”

He nodded and reintroduced them to Georgiana and promptly called for tea. The four sat and Mr. Darcy engaged Jane in conversation. Elizabeth understood he was giving her an opportunity to converse with his sister and gave the younger woman her attention.

Miss Darcy was tall, taller even than Lydia, and on a larger scale than Elizabeth, again reminding her of her youngest sister who was also on a larger scale than she. Not that

Elizabeth was delicate. That word would better describe Mary or Kitty, but she was slender and only an average height, without any of the pleasant plumpness that characterized her friend Charlotte or her youngest sister. Jane was of a similar build, though ever so slightly softer, likely due to the differences in their activity levels. It had always been a point of frustration and hilarity that her mother would go on and on about how graceful Jane's figure was and how beautifully all her clothes fit her when Elizabeth's figure was incredibly similar and she received nothing but criticism from her mother.

Miss Darcy was exceedingly shy and Elizabeth couldn't help but compare the stories Mr. Wickham had told her to the reality before her. *What a fool I was to listen to that man!* They spoke of the activities available in town and Miss Darcy said how she longed to return to Pemberley. Slowly and with great patience, Elizabeth drew the younger woman out by asking her to tell her about Pemberley and her favorite parts of the estate. Unsurprisingly, she loved the music room best and a sitting room that had belonged to her mother and that her brother had recently had redone specifically for her.

Mr. Darcy suggested another tour of the house, this one more intimate than the one the day before. They had remained in the public rooms with Mrs. Bennet. She had asked so many questions about the furnishings and fabrics and whether any of the art was by well-known artists that they hadn't had time to tour the entire house.

Mr. Darcy took Elizabeth's arm and Jane fell back with Georgiana, easily setting Miss Darcy at ease with her gentle nature.

After looking at Miss Darcy's personal sitting room at the back of the house and Mr. Darcy's study near the library, Darcy led them to the master's chambers. He showed them the sitting room at the end of the hallway that connected to his room first. Georgiana became engrossed in telling Jane the family history of a painting on the far wall and Darcy took the opportunity to speak privately with Elizabeth.

"This is part of my private apartment, but I thought we could use it more as our personal sitting room."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I have my study for business and personal use, and of course my chamber if I want to be alone, and there are a number of drawing rooms for entertaining, though if I want to meet with a friend we usually meet at the club."

"So you have rarely used this room at all?" she asked.

"Correct. I had hoped, though, that we might make it our shared retreat. We will often have guests staying with us, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Bingley are both frequent visitors, and of course Georgiana, and I thought it might be nice to have somewhere to relax without intrusion," he said somewhat tentatively.

"It sounds like a charming idea. If the room isn't needed for something else, it seems like a perfectly reasonable

extravagance.”

He smiled and turned her to the left. “That door leads to my bedchamber. There is also a door in the main corridor that we passed on the way in. Your room is directly across the hall. I took the liberty of having a door to the sitting room installed so that we might both have easy access to it.”

He almost hadn’t told her that he had installed the door himself and let her think that it had always been there, but something in him needed her to know that *he* had put it there—that he expected to use it, and her to as well, enough to make it worth having done.

She flushed and smiled nervously, then looked around. “And where is the mistress’s chamber? Through there?” She pointed to a door.

“Yes. I hope you will like it. The décor is rather outmoded but of course you may change anything you like.” He led her into the room. “I had a few things rearranged last month in anticipation of your arrival. I hope it is to your liking.”

Elizabeth looked around silently, taking in the grandeur of the furnishings and the room itself. It was easily the size of Longbourn’s drawing room and featured ornate furniture and rich draperies. Overall, it was more suited to a woman of fashion than to a country girl, but she found much to be admired in the room. She smiled slightly when she thought how Caroline Bingley would have loved this room and how she would have had the whole thing covered in silk within a week.

“What do you think?” asked Darcy.

“Oh, forgive me, sir, I was daydreaming.” She smiled and walked to the window to see what sort of view she would have.

“There is another set of apartments if you do not like this one. They are not as large, but one does have a nice view of the garden.”

“Don’t be silly, these rooms are lovely.” She spun to face him. “I can imagine it in a nice, soft blue paper. It will be very peaceful.”

He sighed in relief. Recognizing his nervousness, she walked over to him and reached up to kiss him on the cheek.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“For being such a sweet man.”

He raised a brow in question.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said teasingly. “It is much better to be a sweet man than a rascal and you know it. I am glad you care for my comfort. It bodes well for the future.”

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. “I care about everything to do with you.”

Jane and Georgiana joined them and they spoke of wall colors and drapery patterns until Darcy asked if she would like to meet the potential lady’s maids. They went downstairs to Georgiana’s sitting room and soon the two young women were introduced by the housekeeper.

After greeting them both and asking some preliminary questions, Elizabeth asked if she could speak to each woman alone and Darcy offered his study for the interviews.

Lorraine Smith was a temporary maid who had sought out her own training to be a lady's maid. She was born and raised in London, had a very keen eye for fashion, and was clearly eager to help her mistress make a splash on the social scene. Elizabeth liked her and thought she would likely be very good at her job, and she was well qualified, but she thought Lorraine might be unhappy with the quieter life she envisioned them leading in Derbyshire and the subdued wardrobe and hairstyles she preferred.

Elizabeth asked her about this and was surprised to find that she had actually spent several summers at Pemberley as a child. Her aunt and uncle were tenants there and her parents had sent her to stay with them on more than one occasion. She had fond memories of the estate and enjoyed country pursuits but found that town was where more work was to be found, so town was where she stayed.

Elizabeth thought there might be something of a kindred spirit in Miss Smith, and if they wouldn't clash too much on clothing choices, she would make a good maid.

Molly Sanders was twenty-four and worked in the London house. She had acted as Miss Darcy's maid when the regular maid had a family emergency, and she was intelligent and personable. She had been shadowing the same maid off and on for the last several months and hoped to find a suitable

position soon. She had spent her childhood at Pemberley but had moved to London to work in the town house after her father died. She still had family in Derbyshire and looked forward to returning.

Miss Sanders was very sweet and had a motherly quality about her. She reminded Elizabeth strongly of her sister Jane, and that made her wonder if she would be the best fit. Elizabeth was looking for more than just someone to fix her hair and maintain her wardrobe—she was also looking for a friend. She would be all alone in Derbyshire and her maid would be on intimate terms with her; it was imperative they get along and she knew that lifelong friendships of a sort often developed. Or at least they did with those women she knew treated their maids well.

She doubted Lady Catherine's maid felt like a friend.

Elizabeth told both women that she had been very impressed by their knowledge and would take the afternoon to think about it and send them notice tomorrow.

“Did you choose one?” asked Darcy as he walked into the study. Elizabeth sat in a chair near the empty fireplace, staring at a globe on a stand next to her.

“Hmm? Oh, I want to think about it for the day. I'll send them a note tomorrow.”

He nodded. “You seem far away. What are you thinking of?”

“It’s all very strange, isn’t it?” she touched the globe and spun it slightly beneath her fingers.

“What is?”

“This. Us. This house. Me choosing a maid. Just two months ago I had no notion of choosing my own maid, or of even ever seeing the inside of your house. And now we are to be married! It’s just a bit strange, that’s all,” she said quietly.

“Did you truly have no notion of seeing the inside of my house?”

“None whatsoever.” She smiled, and then her expression turned a bit sad. “I was woefully blind, I’m afraid. I had no idea you even cared about me. In fact, I thought you disliked me thoroughly!”

“What?” he cried. “How could you think such a thing? After all the attention I paid you.” He’d known she was a little surprised, but to be completely unaware? It seemed fantastical to him.

She shrugged. “You were quiet and grave and did not smile or flirt with me. You stared and scowled and generally behaved as if I were in your way.” She sighed. “No matter. I did not know you then as I know you now.”

He walked toward her slowly and sat in the chair beside hers, reaching out to take her hand and rub his thumb over her knuckles.

“And do you know me now?” he asked quietly.

“As well as can be expected in the circumstances, I think,” she said to the floor.

“Elizabeth,” he said awkwardly. She raised her eyes to his. “Do you, are you, are you comfortable with the idea of marrying me?” He had wanted to ask the question for some time but had always found a reason not to. It was not like him to avoid introspection, but when it came to his bride’s feelings about their marriage and about himself especially, he often found it better to not think on it too much.

“Yes,” she said simply.

“Yes?”

“Yes, I’m quite comfortable.”

He raised a brow in disbelief and confusion.

She continued, “I will admit that I wasn’t in the beginning. You know I was not expecting your addresses. But I am quite comfortable now.”

“You are?”

“Yes, I am! Now do stop trying to cry off! I am marrying you!” she cried playfully, repeating his words from their walk on the beach the week before.

He raised her hand to his lips and led her back to their sisters, and not a moment too soon. Elizabeth had meant it when she said she was comfortable, for she was. She’d had time to consider and become accustomed to his presence and she was now comfortable with the idea of their marriage.

Beyond that, she couldn't say. And she would really rather he not ask.



Comfortable. Elizabeth had said she was comfortable with him. With the idea of their marriage.

Comfortable. Hmpf.

It was a perfectly innocent word, but not the one he would use to describe his feelings about his impending marriage. No, he would use elated, excited, joyful, pleased to an immense degree, eager, happy.

And yet, she did not seem any of those things. He knew her feelings were not equal to his; her father had warned him of it the night he sought her hand. In many ways it was to be expected. They hadn't spent as much time together as he would like and she was very young. He had a moment of regret that he had not properly courted her, in Hertfordshire or in Kent. Of course, at Netherfield he had been fighting his feelings and thought they were conquerable. By the time he realized they weren't, he was under his aunt's watchful eye. He could never court a woman that wasn't his cousin at Rosings.

But still. Had he pushed to marry too soon? Should he have spent more time in Margate? The few days he had spent with her had changed her demeanor around him immensely. Unless he was vastly mistaken, she enjoyed his kisses and his embrace, and both boded well for the future. She teased him

and smiled at him and seemed to trust him. What was he so unhappy about? Was a content bride not a good thing?

A good thing, yes, but perhaps not enough. Not for him. He had thought all he needed to do to gain her affection was ask for her hand. No woman would refuse him. Now, oddly, he found himself dissatisfied with what he had always expected. He was immensely happy with Elizabeth herself, but alone in his room, surrounded by darkness, he could admit that he wanted more than Elizabeth in his home and in his bed. He wanted more than to make her a Darcy and make children with her. He wanted more than her at his side and across his table.

He wanted her heart.

He wanted her to love him as he did her. To burn for him, yearn for him, long to be in his presence as he longed to be in hers.

Was such a thing even possible? Did women ever feel that way for men? He had never seen it. Could Elizabeth ever feel that way about him? Could he inspire such a fierce devotion in her?

He was terribly afraid he could not.

CHAPTER 20



The wedding was now less than three days away, a fact Mrs. Bennet reminded everyone of as she bustled about the Gardiners' home in a flurry of activity. Gone was the tranquil woman of the last few weeks and in her place stood the Agnes Bennet her children had long grown accustomed to, though ever so slightly less voluble.

She insisted Mr. Darcy would have plenty of time to see Elizabeth after they were married and dragged her two eldest daughters from shop to warehouse to milliners all day Monday. By evening they were exhausted and collapsed in a heap across their shared bed.

Once everything was complete, Mrs. Bennet relaxed slightly, just in time for Darcy to call Tuesday morning. Elizabeth, Jane, and Mary quickly whisked him away to the park for a walk, barely taking the time to tell their mother where they were going.

Jane and Mary walked ahead toward a small pond while Elizabeth and Darcy lagged behind, strolling leisurely on the shady path.

“How are you, my dear?” he asked her gently. Her hand was on his arm and he placed his free hand over hers and held her as close to him as was possible without impeding their stride.

She sighed. “I am tired,” she said softly. She laid her head on his shoulder for a moment, the second time she had ever done so, and he found the action oddly endearing. He squeezed her hand, wishing he could do more, and directed them to a small alcove in the trees where they would be protected from view.

“Will you tell me your troubles, dearest?” he asked once they were secluded.

“I love when you do that,” she said.

“Do what?” he asked, trying to control his elation that she had said she loved something about him, even if it was an unnamed action.

“Understand when I am distressed and seek to comfort me.”

She smiled so sweetly at him he couldn't help but feel moved by the intimacy of it all and he leaned down and gave her a gentle, lingering kiss.

She anticipated his actions and tilted her chin up to meet him. “I love when you do that, too,” she said impishly as he pulled away.

He kissed her once more for good measure before leading her back to the path, too overcome for the moment to speak.

“Fitzwilliam, are you well?” she asked quietly.

He looked at her in surprise. “Yes. Very well.” He saw her confusion and continued. “Forgive me if my silence indicated otherwise.” He could not tell her how her innocent words and sweet affection had done him in or how he longed to hold her tightly to him and kiss her senseless before continuing on to more agreeable pursuits. Instead he said, “I am very pleased to be walking with you, and even more pleased to be marrying you tomorrow.”

“I’m afraid I am not as adept at understanding you as you are me.”

“Truly?” He thought she was remarkably good at sensing his feelings and knowing exactly what would restore him to good humor or how to comfort him when he was upset and soothe his anger before it got the better of him. It was one of many reasons they were perfect for each other.

“Truly. I cannot read you as yet. How will I know what you are thinking?” she inquired.

“Easily. If I am smiling, I’m thinking of you,” he said charmingly.

She smiled and tilted her head flirtatiously. “And if you are frowning?”

“I am thinking of business. Or my Aunt Catherine.”

She burst into peals of laughter. And just like that, she was restored to good humor herself.



That evening, the entire Bennet family plus the Gardiners were due to dine at the Darcy townhouse for dinner. Darcy had invited her family, which she had assumed included the Gardiners, and when the thought crossed her mind that perhaps it didn't, she purposely included them to prove a point. Firstly, that her relations were intelligent, kind, genteel people and deserved respect based on their own merits. Secondly, she was soon to be mistress of that house and she wanted to set a precedent. She would not forego her relations for his sake. It was not right of him to ask it of her and she wouldn't agree to it even if he did.

The Bennets and Gardiners alighted from their carriages in front of the tall imposing structure that was the Darcy home. Mrs. Bennet tittered to her daughters until her husband nudged her and they walked up the front steps.

Kitty and Lydia were joining the family. They were given strict instructions not to speak to anyone unless spoken to and to behave with utmost decorum. Lydia rolled her eyes when first being told, but when her father had swiftly said she would not be going at all if that was her attitude, she deftly adjusted her behavior. She was allowed to wear her hair up for this occasion, though her dress was still one suited for a young lady not yet out—not the lower cut gowns of her elder sisters.

In the end, however, it did not really matter what Mr. Bennet had said to his youngest daughter, for she was so awed with the grandeur before her that she was silent and gaping, much like her mother. Kitty fared no better, staring with wide eyes at everything around her. Even the butler was the

handsomest such man she had ever seen and she couldn't help feeling that her sister was entering into an enchanted world of some kind, where everything was always polished and sparkling and no one ever spoke above a whisper. She half expected to find royalty in the drawing room when she entered, but there was only Mr. Darcy's family.

Darcy met them in the entryway and led them to the drawing room himself, Elizabeth's arm safely tucked in the crook of his elbow. He entered the room with his head held high, his pride in his bride more than evident. Those that knew him realized what he was doing. He had made his choice and would not be gainsaid. Anyone who stood against her stood against him, and he would not look kindly on her being mistreated.

He introduced the Bennet family, beginning with Elizabeth and her parents and ending with the Gardiners. He had been surprised to see them in the entryway, but now was not the time to discuss who was and wasn't an appropriate dinner party guest. There would be plenty of time to discuss that after the wedding. Elizabeth had likely been confused when he said her entire family was invited. It was nothing but a misunderstanding.

The Bennets bowed and curtsied and looked very charming, all done up in their finest clothes, the women all in new gloves and slippers. Mrs. Bennet smiled and looked at her daughters proudly. They may not be as wealthy as the painted peacocks before her, but they were the prettiest ladies in the room, she'd bet her dowry on that.

Darcy introduced his family, beginning with his uncle Lord Carlisle, the Earl, and his wife, Lady Carlisle. He was the brother of Darcy's late mother and the father of Colonel Fitzwilliam, who stood in the corner smiling mischievously. Next was Lord Melburn, the viscount, and his wife Lady Constance Melburn, Darcy's paternal aunt.

Elizabeth curtsied to each and smiled. Lord and Lady Carlisle only nodded, while Lady Melburn graced her with a shallow curtsy. Elizabeth had gathered from Darcy that he was closer to this relation than the others and hoped she would get a chance to speak to the grand lady at some point in the evening.

Lady Catherine was absent, as expected. Lord Carlisle's sons were present, Viscount Linley, the firstborn and heir, then Mr. Michael Fitzwilliam, a rector near his maternal uncle's estate, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam whom Elizabeth had already met in Kent, and who bowed deeply and kissed her hand with a wink, and Mr. John Fitzwilliam, the youngest brother who was a barrister in town.

Elizabeth smiled and greeted them all, then moved on to Lady Constance's children. The eldest son was not present, but his younger brother, Henry, was, as well as Darcy's cousins Angela and Amelia.

"I hadn't realized your family was quite so large," she whispered to her betrothed as he led her away from his relations.

“Only these two families have four children. As you know, Lady Catherine has only one daughter and my own family is just Georgiana and myself.” She nodded and sat on the settee he’d led her to. “My Aunt Gibbons and her husband are not yet here, and they also have only one son and daughter.”

“She is your father’s younger sister, correct?”

“Yes. Lady Constance is his elder by one year. They were all very close when I was young. Aunt Gibbons, her given name is Amelia—my cousin is christened after her—still lived at Pemberley when my parents were first married. She was very close with my mother.”

The pre-dinner hour proceeded without event. The Gibbons family arrived and was treated to the Bennet family lineup while Elizabeth searched Darcy’s aunts for traces of similarities. The Fitzwilliam family was obviously where Georgiana got her lighter coloring. As she understood it, the late Mrs. Darcy had been fair-haired like her brother and his children. But Lady Constance and Mrs. Gibbons, the late Mr. Darcy’s sisters, were both dark haired and blue-eyed, with defined jaws and perfectly straight noses that came to a soft point at the end, more feminine versions of her Mr. Darcy’s.

My Mr. Darcy, when did I start to think of him like that? It is just as well. I am marrying the man tomorrow! I should have begun thinking of him as My Mr. Darcy long ago!

Dinner was smooth and easy, mostly anyway. Lady Constance was acting as hostess for the evening and Elizabeth couldn’t help thinking her ease was flawless and utterly

superior to anything she could do herself. She hoped she could one day be as effortless in turning the conversation from a difficult topic and seeing that everyone had an enjoyable evening, but at the moment she felt far from that ideal.

When the ladies withdrew to the drawing room, Elizabeth was torn between getting to know Darcy's aunts better and containing her mother. Mrs. Bennet had been, so far, oddly quiet, and like the calm before the storm, Elizabeth was making plans that could be quickly enacted should lightning strike. Her aunt reassured her that she would keep an eye on her mother, and Georgiana had led Kitty and Lydia off to her private sitting room at the back of the house.

Elizabeth sat near Lady Constance and Mrs. Gibbons. The former's daughters, Amelia and Angela, joined them. They asked Elizabeth how she had met Mr. Darcy, whether she played and sang and if she would perform for them this evening, what languages she spoke, who her family were, what her place was among the sisters, and more questions than she could ever remember being asked. They were not as rude or overbearing as Lady Catherine, but the sheer number of questions multiplied by the people asking them was enough to exhaust her for the evening.

After what seemed like forever but had actually been less than an hour, the gentlemen returned. The ladies dispersed and Elizabeth found herself sitting alone. Before she could rise to join her sisters, Colonel Fitzwilliam sat beside her.

"How are you faring?" he asked kindly.

“Honestly, I am a bit tired, but well.”

They struck up a conversation easily and before she knew what had happened, Elizabeth was smiling and laughing at the stories he told her, just as she had done in Kent. He was a bit of a kindred spirit and owned a similar personality to herself. She had thought it then and this evening was proving her correct. They lamented on being lost in a sea of siblings, him coming from a family of four brothers while she was one of five sisters.

Darcy watched from near the window where he stood talking to his uncle. The man was going on about some sort of law involving crops or something equally uninteresting to Darcy at the current moment. He was too full of Elizabeth to think of anything else. Her eyes, her hair, her smile—she had been utterly enchanting all evening and he was thoroughly bewitched. Perhaps that could excuse his irrational behavior later, but regardless, it left him significantly less sharp than usual.

Richard was talking to Elizabeth, *his* Elizabeth, and making her laugh. Not polite humoring chuckles, but real, honest laughter. Darcy had never made her laugh like that. They were speaking incessantly, agreeing on nearly everything, and clearly enjoying each other’s company. Would it look strange if he were to pull her bodily away from his charming ass of a cousin?

*Ah, good, there is Miss Mary, come to take Elizabeth away.
I wonder if they shall perform together?*

At Lady Constance's request, the Bennet sisters took to the pianoforte. Mary and Elizabeth played the instrument while all three sang together, the performance even better than the one he had heard in Kent. They finished to hearty applause and Elizabeth was swept up by Darcy's cousin Angela before he could get to her. Without realizing how it had happened, he found himself standing next to Mrs. Gardiner.

"Are you looking forward to your visit to The Lakes, Mr. Darcy?" she asked him.

"Yes, quite."

"Elizabeth is so excited. It was very thoughtful of you to remember how she has always wanted to see them."

He nodded, but did not respond.

"I believe you will go on to Pemberley afterward?" she inquired.

"That is the plan."

"Derbyshire is so beautiful that time of year."

He nodded again. *Good God, she's angling for an invitation already! The register hasn't even been signed yet!*

"Excuse me," he said curtly before walking swiftly away.

Mrs. Gardiner looked a little shocked, but quickly pasted on a smile and rejoined her husband.

Elizabeth watched her aunt and betrothed from across the room, wondering what they were talking of. From her viewpoint, it looked like her aunt was doing all the talking and

that Darcy was doing everything he could to avoid further conversation. She felt a heat building under her skin but told herself this was not the time nor the place to confront him on his rudeness. *You knew this about him, Elizabeth. Do not be surprised by his pride now.* Still, even though she knew she should have expected it, his behavior toward her nearest relations was upsetting.

Deciding to think no more about it at present, she returned her attention to the other guests.

After escaping the scheming of Elizabeth's aunt, Darcy joined his uncle Mr. Gibbons in his conversation with Mr. Bennet. After a few minutes spent debating wine vintages and where to buy them, they were joined by the earl and Mr. Gardiner. Darcy was offended by Mr. Gardiner's effrontery in approaching his uncle, likely for his own gain. Does this tradesman have no shame?

"Here now, Gibbons, Mr. Gardiner says he has a man who can get that port we were talking about at the club," said Lord Carlisle eagerly.

"Really? Do tell, man!" Gibbons replied.

Darcy couldn't believe the gall of the man! He was talking and laughing with his relatives as if he was one of them. How dare he abuse Darcy's hospitality so? He had to admit the Gardiners weren't too awful and they were certainly dressed fashionably, which is likely why his family spoke to Mr. Gardiner as they did. They didn't know he wasn't of the gentry.

But Darcy knew. And he was disgusted by this upstart behavior. He excused himself from the conversation before he said something intemperate. He was getting married tomorrow; he wouldn't allow anything to mar the occasion.

Elizabeth watched Darcy out of the corner of her eye. She could tell by the set of his shoulders and the way his mouth flattened into a thin line that he was angry. What he was angry about she could not say. Then he looked at her uncle, his nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and she knew.

The source of his disquiet was her very own family, her most treasured uncle, her godfather and blood who had been nothing but kind to her the whole of her life. The man who gave her sanctuary when her mother became too much, who always remembered her favorite fruits and got them special for her when she visited, who had told her stories of castles and knights and dragons when she was but a small girl and enamored of her daring uncle. He had fed her thirst for adventure and always treated her with respect and kindness, as if she were a person that mattered and asked intelligent questions and not as an annoying child. Besides her dearest Jane and her father, he was the person she loved most in the world. She could not imagine getting married without him there, and she certainly could not imagine living the rest of her life without his presence.

Suddenly she felt as if ice had dropped down her back. Would Darcy forbid her from seeing them? Surely he wouldn't! But she saw the look on his face. He was paler than

usual and his jaw was clenched, a sure sign he was angry. She saw him excuse himself from the gentlemen and a fear she had never felt before engulfed her. He had been so kind to her parents and sisters that she had come to think better of him. It had never occurred to her he might cut her off from her family. But it was suddenly all so clear. He could not divorce the Bennets, they were entirely too closely related for that to work, but he could cut off an uncle and aunt. He could forbid her from calling on them and bar them from his house, her future home.

At the thought of being kept from her most treasured family, her fear turned to rage the likes of which she had never experienced before. She was giving up everything—Everything!—to marry him. She was subjecting herself to scrutiny and criticism from his family and she expected it would come from many of his friends as well. She was giving up on love—Love!—to be his wife. Because her father asked it of her and because Darcy loved her so dearly—she had thought enough for both of them. But now she questioned even that.

How could he love her, *truly* love her, if he disdained her very roots? How could they spend a lifetime together peaceably with such different ideas of what made a person worthy?

She could not look at him. She wanted to say things, so many things, but she could not say them in a crowded drawing room. She could not tell him how conceited she thought him, how selfish she found his disdain for the feelings of others.

She quickly excused herself and made her way into the hall, relief flooding her as soon as she escaped the stifling room overfilled with his presence.

As suddenly as it came, her rage left her and she was filled with a deep sadness as she moved into a dark corner to have a moment of privacy.

She had been right all along about him. Of course her mistaken assumptions about his past with Mr. Wickham had been proven false, but her impression that he was rude and unpleasant and thought himself above his company was depressingly accurate. He could be kind when he chose to, she herself had been the recipient of his kindness, but that made it all the more deplorable when he was so rude to her relations. He knew better and she knew he could do better, but he simply wasn't willing to take the trouble to be kind to people he thought beneath him, no matter their relation to her. Not even for her sake.

She spared a moment for the irony of it all. She was considered beneath him by many, yet he had offered for her! Why would he do such a thing if he were so concerned about his precious connections? Had he not thought this would happen? That he would be thrown into the company of lowly tradesmen? She feared she had been right when she sent him that first letter. They would not suit. It was too late now; they would be married in the morning. She would be bound forever to a man who hated the very people she loved most and who disdained perfectly worthy people not because of their actions

or behavior, but because of a silly sense of rank and entitlement.

She felt sick and warm all over and had the disturbing feeling that she was about to cry.

She forced herself to calm and took deep breaths, feelings of vindication in being right warring with a desperate desire to be wrong. She didn't want to be right about this; after all, she was bound to him now, there was no escaping it.

She recited a silly poem to herself to lighten her mood. When that didn't work, she recalled moments of her childhood that she found particularly funny or lighthearted: Mary falling in the mud and being so angry about it she pulled Elizabeth in with her and they both dissolved into girlish giggles; Lydia as a baby laughing hysterically while Elizabeth made funny faces for her just to hear the delightful sound; Jane trading her sampler for Elizabeth's when their mother was inspecting their work, knowing hers was better and not wanting her mother to be disappointed in Elizabeth.

Finally, Elizabeth felt composed enough to re-enter the party, but her reprieve was short lived. Darcy entered the hall a minute later and she rolled her eyes at his attempt at chivalry. Would that he understood a true gentleman would not chase his betrothed into the hall because he would not have caused her to escape there in the first place.

He took her arm and led her back to the corner. "Will you not tell me what is wrong?"

“I do not understand, Mr. Darcy, how you can proclaim to love a woman so passionately while at the same time detesting her relations wholeheartedly. How does one accomplish such a feat?”

She was satisfied with the shocked look on his face and quickly gathered her skirts and pushed past him, leaving him wide-eyed in the corner.

He turned and grabbed her arm. She spun around to face him in a swirl of skirts and righteous indignation. Her eyes were ablaze and Darcy felt a moment of fear when he looked at the rigid set of her face.

“What do you mean, madam?” he asked.

“What do I mean? Surely you know you have been less than civil with my aunt and uncle. You have nearly been hostile! What can you mean by it? How can you behave so poorly to my dearest relations?”

Darcy took a deep breath and released it through flared nostrils.

“Your aunt was hinting at an invitation to Pemberley. It was unseemly. Did you ever think that perhaps I was not the one being uncivil?”

“She what? I find that very difficult to believe.”

He huffed. “She commented on the season and how beautiful Derbyshire was likely to be. She clearly wished to see it for herself!”

“Oh? Are you sure she didn’t say Derbyshire *is* beautiful this time of year, not likely to be?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment.

“She hails from Derbyshire, Fitzwilliam! It is her home! Which you would likely know if you had deigned to speak with her more than two sentences before today. She was likely trying to converse with you, but you had to be taciturn with her and assume the worst. Why would she need an invitation to a county filled with her family and friends? And even if she had been hoping for an invitation, which I sincerely doubt, would that be so wrong? I am her niece! She has known me since I was a babe! Is it so unusual for her to want to see where I will live out my days and ensure I am well settled? Is care and genuine interest in another’s life so foreign to you that you see nothing but artifice and manipulation?”

“Manipulation? I am not the one pretending to be something I am not, a lesson your uncle clearly needs to learn.”

She gritted her teeth. “When did dressing fashionably and behaving politely become so offensive?”

He drew himself up tall and a deeper shade of hauteur overtook his features. “You should not have invited them without speaking to me,” he declared.

“I told you how much my uncle means to me. You *knew* he was important. And yet, you still treated him like dirt on your boot.” *Not unlike how your aunt is treating me*, she thought.

“You told me no such thing!”

“Yes, I did! In our letters, I told you about the necklace he gave me and that we shared a special bond. He is my godfather. He is my *family*, Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy was red with anger and didn't know what to say. He stood staring at her, breathing and trying to calm himself, his feelings utterly at war. He had been so happy just a few moments ago; his future seemed so bright. Now, he could not believe she dared to speak to him in such a way; he was terribly offended. And he thought her incredibly beautiful in her righteous anger and felt outrageously attracted to her, all at the same time. But how dare she speak to him thus in his own home!

It will be her home tomorrow. And did you not say you wanted a wife with spirit, not one who would cower every time you frowned? he thought traitorously. He glanced at her in time to see a single tear track down one red cheek as she took a shuddering breath.

Feeling cut to the quick by the sight of her, he wondered if she was correct, and if she was, what did that say about him?

“I, I,” he breathed, unable to settle on any one emotion from the several roiling within him. “My God, Elizabeth!” He pulled her to him and crushed his lips against hers, holding her so tightly his arms ached from the effort.

At first she was stiff against him, her small fists at his chest, but when he didn't let her go after a minute, she pounded her hands against his shoulders. Finally, he released her mouth and looked at her with wild eyes. Her angry retort stopped on her

lips as she saw the fire in his gaze. He was breathing hard, as was she, and his desperation was palpable. Had he always loved her so fiercely?

After a few moments she relented and wrapped her arms about his waist, holding him just as tightly as he held her. She laid her head on his chest, and he kissed her hair and rubbed her back slowly.

“I cannot give up my family, Fitzwilliam. I cannot,” she whispered. “I love them too much.”

In the end, it was the soft sound of her voice gently entreating him that pierced his heart. “Of course not, my love. I will never ask it of you. You have my word.”

She nodded silently, trying to keep the tears at bay. Tentatively, she put her hands on his shoulders and stood on her toes, pressing a gentle kiss on his lips.

“We should return and say goodnight. We’ve likely already been missed,” she said.

“You go ahead. I will call for your carriage.”

“Thank you.”

Before she knew it, Elizabeth was being handed into the carriage by Darcy who gave her hand a quick squeeze before waving them off.



Though she was no longer seething with anger, Elizabeth was far from calm as she prepared for bed that night. She paced back and forth, her nightgown twisting around her ankles, muttering to herself and gesticulating wildly.

“What has you so distraught, Lizzy?” asked Jane from her seat at the dressing table.

“My betrothed and his ridiculous pride, that’s what!” she exclaimed.

“But you’ve been getting along so well!” cried Jane.

“Yes, until I saw his true feelings. I cannot believe his opinion of my family! I’m surprised he lowered himself to offer for me, with my degrading connections! Is he not afraid the smell of Cheapside will rub off when we kiss, or is the Darcy name enough to cleanse me for his exalted society?” She took a shuddering breath, surprised at her own vehemence.

“Elizabeth,” said Jane gravely, “surely he did not call your family a degradation.”

“He didn’t have to say it, Jane. It was written all over his face.”

“Are you sure that’s what he meant? You couldn’t have misunderstood him?”

“Jane! You weren’t there. You didn’t see the look in his eyes or how he spoke so dismissively of the Gardiners.”

“I’m sorry, Lizzy. This must be difficult for you.”

Elizabeth sighed. “It is. But it is done.”

“I’m sure it isn’t all bad. Mr. Darcy is desperately in love with you. If you ask it of him, I’m sure he will take the time to get to know our relations and see their merit. He cannot fail to see their worth if he knows them, surely. His pride cannot be so important to him.”

“You don’t know him, Jane. His pride makes most of his decisions, I fear.”

Jane shook her head. “But he chose you, Elizabeth. His heart *must* be stronger than his pride.”

Elizabeth looked at her in surprise, and her heart lightened ever so slightly.

CHAPTER 21



Elizabeth stood outside the church on her father's arm, her pale blue dress fluttering in the light morning breeze. She took a deep breath and let her father lead her into the unfamiliar building. She would be Mrs. Darcy in less than half an hour. She had a slight urge to take off running down the street, but knew deep down it would do no good. This was her destiny. She could do aught but face it head on.

Darcy stood at the front of the church next to Charles Bingley. His family sat in the pews behind him, whispering quietly as they awaited the bride. The other side of the church was less populated than his. Her mother and sisters were there, as were her aunt and uncle and a handful of people he assumed were acquaintances of her family in town. Comparing it to his own side of the chapel, hers looked rather sparse. His entire family from the evening before had come as well as the cousins that had not been present. In addition, several of his friends from school and the club were there. *Her friends are probably all in Meryton and couldn't make the journey, he thought.*

Suddenly, he wondered if she would have liked to marry from her home. He was slightly abashed that he had not thought of it before. But had not her own father suggested London as the location? Or had it been Darcy, himself? He couldn't remember. He felt like he'd lived a lifetime since that fateful day in Kent. No matter, it was done now and there was nothing he could do about it. He would ask Elizabeth later if she would have preferred marrying in Hertfordshire and if she said yes, he would apologize. Problem solved.

The doors to the church opened and there she was. She was resplendent with the sun shining at her back. Her satin gown glowed in the soft morning light and her hair seemed auburn one moment and brown the next as the light from the stained glass windows danced across her visage. Her face was tilted down and shaded by a bonnet, so it was difficult for him to see her clearly, but he knew she would be lovelier than he had imagined.

The ceremony proceeded in the usual way with Darcy scant noticing anything about the goings on. He only noticed how her hand trembled when he took it in his, and how her voice sounded when she agreed to love him forever, and the light blush that tinged her cheek when he slid the ring on her finger. When all was done, they exited the church to congratulations from the assembled guests and climbed into the carriage that would take them to his aunt's house for the wedding breakfast. She had insisted on hosting it, saying Gracechurch Street was too far from the church and that she would stand in place of

his parents who surely would have wanted some part in the festivities had they been alive.

Darcy was touched by the gesture and had no difficulty convincing Mr. Bennet to allow his family to host the event. Now, he sat across from Elizabeth in a carriage on their wedding day, headed to Lady Constance's home for the wedding breakfast, from whence they would leave for their wedding night. He could hardly wait. He knew the breakfast must be endured, but he did not want to linger overlong and hoped Elizabeth would be in agreement.

She twisted the ring on her finger, watching the light catch on the gold, mulling over the changes in her life. *It is happening.* She had thought about it and knew it would come, and she had grown closer to her betrothed and thought more highly of him, but now that the day was upon her, she found herself overwhelmed and wondering if she'd known what she was about when she'd accepted him.

It is just nerves, Elizabeth. All will be well, she admonished herself. She had to admit to a great amount of trepidation for the days to come. Mr. Darcy passionately loved her, of that she was certain. And while she had no direct experience, it wasn't difficult to imagine that a man with such feelings would often want to be in her company, throughout the day and night. She was nervous about what was to come and nervous about the life she would now lead, and nervous about leaving her family and the only home she had ever known to live somewhere she had never seen.

At this thought, she felt her courage rising. She would not be intimidated! She would not! He was just a man, Pemberley was just a house, and the new would only be strange for a little while.

“Here we are,” said Darcy. Elizabeth looked up in surprise. They had gone the entire way, though it was short, without saying a word. He had silently observed her while she mulled over her thoughts, thinking she was still upset about the evening prior. “I know we did not speak much last night and there is more to say. We will have plenty of time after the breakfast to say whatever needs saying.”

She nodded and he helped her down.



The breakfast was a great success, or so Darcy’s aunt would call it. The same people from the church were there in addition to a few others. A group of musicians played constantly and the food was elegant and abundant. Lydia, Catherine, and Georgiana all escaped to a sitting room on the next level while Jane spent a great deal of time speaking to Mr. Bingley.

He wore a blue coat, a few shades lighter than Darcy’s, and Jane thought his hair was unusually attractive that day. One curl in particular kept falling across his forehead and she hated that she found such a simple thing so endearing.

“It is good to see them so happy, is it not?” Mr. Bingley said to Jane as they stood to the side of the crowd.

Jane raised an eyebrow and glanced at her sister. Elizabeth looked as if she would bolt to the nearest exit any moment and Mr. Darcy looked like he also wanted to leave, but for entirely different reasons. How did Mr. Bingley not notice it? Perhaps he was just making polite chatter.

“Yes, it is a lovely breakfast,” she replied.

“Miss Bennet, do you plan to be in town long?”

“We return to the seaside the day after tomorrow. Why?”

He shifted from one foot to the other. “I had hoped to see you again, perhaps plan an excursion. May I call on you tomorrow? Or would you like to go to the menagerie? I’ve heard the most wonderful things about it and would love to see it with you.”

She couldn’t help but smile at his enthusiasm. “I would love to see the menagerie with you if my mother has no need of me.”

His smile took up half his face and she laughed lightly, feeling her traitorous heart give a little tug in his direction.



They stayed at the wedding breakfast longer than Darcy wanted. It was clear to Elizabeth that he wanted to leave, but she could not bear to say goodbye to her family just yet and she lingered long.

She spent considerable time with Colonel Fitzwilliam, who gladly took her around making sure she knew everyone and

kept her mightily entertained throughout. At one point she laughed so hard she had to stop to catch her breath. Two of his brothers proved almost as jovial and she was incredibly relieved to be gaining such cousins.

She talked for three quarters of an hour with her mother, suddenly missing the dear, maddening woman who had raised her. Mrs. Bennet looked on her daughter with such a softness in her eye and expression that Elizabeth was nearly moved to tears. Her mother had finally shooed her off to spend time with her new family, and Elizabeth didn't miss that Mrs. Bennet dabbed a handkerchief at her eyes when she turned away from the room.

Once Elizabeth found Jane, she could hardly let her go. She was suddenly wishing Jane was to accompany them on the wedding trip, but she could not do that to her sister. She should stay close to the men who were trying to win her. But oh! How she would miss her dearest sister! When the two finally parted, both needed handkerchiefs and Mr. Bingley was quick to offer his to Jane, looking unusually understanding and compassionate. *Perhaps there is more to him than I suspected*, thought Elizabeth.

She went upstairs and spent nearly half an hour saying farewell to Lydia and Kitty, giving them all sorts of advice. Kitty cried when Elizabeth hugged her goodbye while Lydia reminded her to send them souvenirs from The Lakes and to write down everything she saw so they would feel like they were there. Elizabeth promised she would and left tearfully,

after Georgiana quietly gave her a peck on the cheek and wished her well.

The celebration was still going when she came downstairs. Colonel Fitzwilliam and his brother Michael were singing rather boisterously at the instrument with two female cousins Elizabeth couldn't remember the names of, but that she vaguely remembered being told were on Darcy's mother's side of the family. She smiled at their antics and seeing her sister Mary nearby, took her by the arm and pulled her into a dark corner of the hall.

"Lizzy, what is it?" asked Mary in a hushed voice.

"Mary, I want you to do something for me," whispered Elizabeth.

"Of course."

"Keep an eye on father."

"What?"

"I suspect something may be wrong, with his health. I don't know what, but I have long noticed some changes and I can't help but suspect that he turned his household on its head for a reason." Her sister's eyes were wide. "Just promise me you'll watch out for him. Write to me if he looks pale or sleeps more than usual, or if anything else out of the ordinary occurs. Will you do that for me?" asked Elizabeth.

"Yes, of course," replied Mary.

"Promise!"

“I promise!”

Elizabeth pulled her sister into a crushing hug. When they pulled apart, they shared a resolute look and linked arms before walking back into the party.

Elizabeth joined her father where he stood next to several of the other men discussing some sort of hunting. She linked her arm with his and leaned her head on his shoulder, a gesture that made two of the older men smile fondly. He excused himself and sat with her near a window where they stayed close and conversed about all manner of things silly and important for a quarter hour until Mr. Bennet said, “Shall you be well, my dear?”

She smiled wanly. “Yes, Father, I shall.” She sighed and returned her head to his shoulder. “I am very tired today, that is all. Do not worry for me.”

“It is a father’s prerogative to worry for his daughters,” he replied. “Now tell me the truth. How are you faring?”

Quietly, she said, “Some days it is very hard. I confess today has been trying. But I believe that some good rest and time to become adjusted to each other is all that is needed.”

“Truly?” he asked.

“Yes, truly. He is a good man, I think. He will be kind to me.”

“Of that I have no doubt. I could not have let you marry him if he was anything less,” said Mr. Bennet in his soft, deep voice. “But that does not mean it will not be a difficult

transition for you. I have looked at the calendar, and if all goes well with the harvest, we will come visit you in late October or early November if it suits.”

“Oh, Father! Of course it suits. It will be perfect! How long will you stay?”

He smiled at her enthusiasm. “I cannot say. It will depend on the weather and how long it will be wise to stay from home.”

“I wish you could stay for Christmas, but I know it will be difficult to travel in the colder weather.”

“We shall see. Now I believe there is a man over there desperate to steal you away but hesitant to interrupt us. Why don’t you put him out of his misery?”

He smiled and kissed her cheek and she did the same, trying not to cry when he escorted her to Mr. Darcy’s side and they said what felt like their final goodbye.

As they were leaving the party, she pulled her father tight for one last embrace and whispered in his ear, “Write to me, Father. You must promise.”

“I promise, dear girl.”

His eyes were suspiciously shiny as he stepped back and let her husband hand her into the carriage, giving up his rightful place to another. His heart was full of prayers that he had not sent off his favorite daughter to a life of misery just to save the others. *God forgive me.*

The party continued after the couple had departed but Mr. Bennet had no stomach for it. He went to the library and sat near the window with a book he had read to Elizabeth as a child. He got no further than the first few pages when he let his grief take him and shuddered as a sob tore through his body. He let his sorrow have its head for several minutes before pulling himself together and wiping his eyes. He stayed near the window, looking outside but seeing nothing, his mind filled with a bright-eyed little girl, her chestnut ringlets tied in a shiny blue bow, proudly showing him the flowers she had picked or the letters she had managed to write or the wobbly curtsy she was learning to master.

“My darling girl, be well. Be happy. Find your courage and learn to love him. You’ll be better for it.”



Elizabeth was tired. In fact, she was exhausted. The last week had been nothing but travel and shopping and dinner parties and anxiety. Now, it was all over and the truly exhausting part was to come. She now had to live with Mr. Darcy. *All the time.* In the same house with adjoining bedchambers. She felt like she was having an attack of her mother’s nerves and had the strangest desire for smelling salts.

Why was she so upset now? Had she not made peace time and again with the idea of marrying Mr. Darcy? *The idea of doing something and actually doing it are not the same thing,* she thought.

Now here she was, sitting in her new room in her new house, brushing out her hair. She was worried about so many things. Would she be a good mistress to the Darcy properties? Would she like his family and friends and would they like her? Would she like Pemberley? Must she be presented and if so, when? What was wrong with her father and if she wasn't there to watch him, who would? Was it possible for him to sink further into whatever was plaguing him and be seriously ill before anyone noticed? Would she ever see him again? She swallowed down a lump at the thought and tried to remind herself that nothing was certain. He may be perfectly well and live many years more.

Her maid left at her request and she wondered if she had made the right decision there. The most immediate concern was for her wedding night. They arrived early in the evening and neither had wanted food. Darcy requested a tray in their sitting room some time later, but she knew not when that would be. When would he come? How would he behave when he did?

Stop thinking about this, Lizzy! She chided herself. *You'll know soon enough.*



Darcy was a nervous wreck. He and Elizabeth had had hardly any time to talk. First they'd been at the church, then the carriage was quick and silent, then the breakfast was bustling with family and friends, all who wanted to congratulate him

and meet his new wife. They had barely spoken two words to each other! He'd hoped there would be time to speak about their quarrel the night before, but there wasn't. She had seemed reluctant to leave her family and he couldn't blame her. The family would be returning to the seaside soon and a few days later they would be off to The Lakes. It would be months before she saw them again and she was facing a great many changes in the interim.

He thought she had seemed happier lately, well, except for last night, but otherwise, she had seemed quite happy to be in his company and enjoyed his kisses. He could hardly wait to make her his. His hands kept clenching and unclenching at his sides and he ran his fingers through his hair as he paced his room.

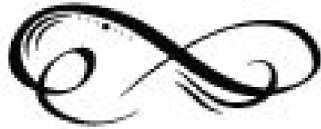
He'd never been with a maiden before. He didn't want to frighten her and he knew he must be gentle, but he was so overwhelmed with every conceivable feeling that he was afraid he would lose control of himself and hurt her. What if it was so bad she didn't want to do it again? What if she cried?

"Pull yourself together, man! Just be calm, be patient, be kind and gentle with her. The rest will come," he recited the advice his uncle had given him a few days prior in what had to have been the most awkward conversation they'd ever had. But despite its having been incredibly uncomfortable to speak of such things, he was glad for it. His uncle had given him good advice and he meant to heed it. "I will not rush. I will not demand. I will entice. I will lead her, surely and steadfastly, and all will be well."

He quit talking to himself and walked through the door to the sitting room and onward to the door to her chamber. Taking a fortifying breath, he reached up and knocked.

“Come in,” he heard her say quietly.

CHAPTER 22



Elizabeth stood between the vanity and the bed, as if she had been walking between the two and somehow froze on the way. She wore a silky robe that came to her ankles under which he was sure was an enticing nightgown. Her hair was loose around her shoulders and the lack of petticoats was obvious in the way the gown clung to her figure. Her eyes were wide and watched him warily, and her hair hung in long curls down her back.

She looks skittish, like a colt that might bolt any minute. He took a step toward her and she leaned away a tiny bit, but didn't move her feet.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

They had eaten at the wedding breakfast and he had instructed his housekeeper to have a late supper ready for them to eat in their rooms later, but he wanted to say something.

“No, I am well, thank you,” she replied.

What was wrong with her? She seemed suddenly so scared and quiet. This was not the Elizabeth he knew. Perhaps she

was still upset about the night before? Should they discuss it?
Now?

“Elizabeth, I have wanted to tell you all day, but there never seemed a moment, or any real privacy, but I have wanted to tell you that I am sorry for upsetting you last night. Especially as it was the night before our wedding.”

She looked up at him warily, unsure of his motives.

“Are you sorry we quarreled, or sorry about your behavior?”

“My behavior?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Yes! You know what I mean, Fitzwilliam, please don’t make us go through it again. You were rude to my relations. I want to know if you are sorry about that or if you still think they are beneath your notice and only said I may continue to see them because men agree to things that they later regret while they are kissing women!”

How does she know such a thing?

His confusion must have shown on his face for she said, “Remember? You said that you would give me anything I asked for if I kissed you.”

She smirked and he flushed red.

“Are you saying you were not sincere in your affection last night, but were only acting a part to manipulate me into doing something you wanted?” he cried.

She flushed. “No. I am merely reminding you of something you said to me. I was sincere in my affection, as I always am. You were very... compelling.” She finished quietly and looked down before raising her head again to glare at him. “That does not mean I am not also upset with you.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. This was not at all how he had envisioned his wedding night proceeding.

“What do you want from me, Elizabeth? Please, just tell me.” He sighed in exasperation.

She clenched her teeth and finally bit out, “I want you to be kind to my family. I want you to get to know them and learn to respect them on their own merits, of which there are many. I want them to be welcome in our homes and for you not to restrict me from going to theirs. That is what I want.”

“Done. Now may we put this behind us?” he said quickly in clipped tones. He’d almost said, “Now may we get on with it?” but he stopped himself before making such a foolish blunder.

She sighed and shook her head. This wasn’t going well at all. This day had been wearing, as had the week leading up to it, and the night was to be filled with new and possibly painful and definitely strange experiences. She truly did not wish to begin in such an inauspicious manner.

“Fitzwilliam, might I beg a reprieve?” she asked tiredly.

“A what?” he cried, shock evident in his tone.

“I am exhausted, it has been a long day, and I would very much like to not begin our married life in a quarrel or with harsh feelings between us. It does not engender warmth.”

He huffed and looked to the side, knowing she had a point. He also knew that he agreed with her; he did not wish to begin tempestuously either. But how had they gotten here? Things had gone terribly wrong.

He heard his uncle’s voice in his head. *“How you handle this night will long define your relationship with your wife. A man who is warm and loving will be welcomed by his wife with open arms. A man who is quick and cold will be met by dread. Which do you want to be?”*

Was she already dreading this part of their relationship before it even began? He purposely gentled his tone and forced his rigid posture to relax somewhat. *Entice, do not demand.*

“Elizabeth, I know it has been a trying time lately, for you especially. I propose we start over. How does that sound to you?”

“Start over?” she questioned.

“Yes. Why don’t you lie down and rest for a bit, and I will return in an hour or so. Will that suit you?”

She looked toward the window where the sun was nearly hidden and then looked back at him skeptically. “You will return in an hour?”

“Yes, if you wish it.”

“Very well. I will see you in one hour.” She stood waiting for him to leave so she could climb into the very comfortable-looking bed, but he just looked at her expectantly.

Finally, he took her hand and guided her to the edge of the bed. She climbed up onto it and he tucked the covers around her before placing a gentle kiss on her forehead.

“Sleep well, my love,” he whispered.

She snuggled into the blanket and within a few minutes was fast asleep.



A short time later, Elizabeth woke just as her dressing room door closed. She noticed a tray with a fresh pot of tea near the empty fireplace and rose to refresh herself and make a cup. She was just taking her first sip when the door to their shared sitting room opened and Fitzwilliam stepped in quietly.

“It’s all right, I am awake,” she said from the settee. She smiled at him shyly and he returned it.

She was grateful, really. She knew he did not need to give her time to adjust, he did not need to be patient with her or have tea sent up. But he did these things because he was a good and kind man and while she was wounded from the events of the previous day, she decided not to let it overcloud her good judgment.

So he was proud. What of it? Now he was also her husband and she should focus on his good qualities and hopefully, with

time and a little effort, his pride would wane.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked her softly, afraid to startle her.

She felt her heart soften a little more.

“Yes, quite well. Thank you for the time. It was very restorative,” she said the last quietly, hoping he understood her meaning.

He looked at her softly but kept his position near the fireplace.

“You are welcome.”

“Would you like a cup of tea?” she asked.

“No, thank you. I am well.”

She replaced her cup and stood, looking around before settling her eyes on him. She supposed this was the part where she was supposed to welcome him to her bed, but she had no idea how to go about such a thing. Should she turn down the coverlet for him? Plump his pillow? Climb in first and hold out her arms? It all seemed utterly ridiculous!

“What—what should I—what do you wish—” she was flustered and incoherent and making no sense at all. “You must think you’ve married a dunce, Mr. Darcy.”

He smiled and took her hand, coming a little closer. “I think no such thing.”

She had so many questions: What he expected of her, what she should expect of him, what the protocol was for this entire

affair. Would he sleep with her after? Should she invite him to stay? Or ask him to leave? Which did he expect? Which did he *prefer*? Should they speak? Remain silent? Wouldn't that be terribly awkward? To be silent for half an hour altogether? Suddenly she was filled with apprehension. Did it take half an hour? Less time? More time?

“Dearest, what troubles you?” He rubbed his thumb along the back of her hand, inadvertently making her more nervous.

“I, oh, I have so many questions!” she blurted. Her eyes widened in shock at her admission and he laughed lightly. “Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive.”

She fidgeted nervously, glancing between him and the floor repeatedly, her face getting pinker by the moment.

“Really, Fitzwilliam, it isn't necessary for you to laugh at me so! You have me in a very delicate position! You could be gentlemanly about it,” she said with a pout.

He stopped himself from making a joke about the *delicate position* he'd rather have her in and sat on the settee, pulling her down beside him.

“Now, tell me about these questions you have,” he said.

“I couldn't possibly! It's unseemly!” she cried.

He raised a brow. “More unseemly than me being in your private chambers in our nightclothes?” The line between her eyes appeared as she frowned. “Elizabeth, our roles have changed now. I would like us to be free with each other—

especially here. To speak, to act, to share whatever we like. These are our private rooms. You have my word that nothing you say to me here will go beyond these walls.”

“And you will not mock me?” she asked suspiciously.

“I will not mock you. I promise.” He suppressed his grin at the adorable look of resolve on her face. “Now, what is your first question?”

Taking a deep breath, she decided to forge ahead. “How long does it take?”

Darcy flushed and spluttered before saying, “It depends. Sometimes it may be rather quick. No more than a few minutes. Other times, the act could stretch into hours.”

“Hours!”

“Well, including all the activities, not just the portion where—it can be different each time.”

She nodded. “Will it always be here? Do you expect me to come to your room sometimes?”

His eyes took on an interested glow. “Whatever you like, my dear. I am perfectly amenable to you coming to my rooms whenever you like.”

“And do you want to... sleep with me... after?” she asked quietly.

He pulled her closer to his side and she snuggled into him, seeking solace in a form of affection she was familiar with. And from this angle, he couldn't see her face or how often she

blushed during this very awkward conversation. She hated how he made her anxious and yet she wanted to be close to him at the same time. Were all men so maddening?

“I believe in the beginning, it would be nice to sleep together. I cannot bear the idea of ever leaving this room, now that I have seen you in such a state.” He touched her hair and ran a hand down the length of her arm while she blushed. “In the future, we may want to sleep separately. I think we can decide as we go. I will certainly not impose my company on you if you’d rather be alone. I hope you know that.”

“Of course. I would never think it of you,” she said quietly.

“Good.”

“I heard,” she hesitated and fiddled with the lapel on his dressing gown, “I was told that perhaps it happens more than once in a night, especially in the beginning, and that might be why you would wish to sleep with me. Is that true? Can it occur more than once in a night?”

He shifted. “Yes, it can, and yes, it likely will be like that, especially in the beginning, but I would not want to sleep with you merely to have you near for convenience’s sake.” He shifted so she could see his face. “Elizabeth, I love you. With all my heart. With everything I am. I want to be near you, for no other reason than to bask in your presence. Don’t you see that by now?”

“Fitzwilliam,” she whispered. She felt overwhelmed by his words and reached out a hand to touch his face softly. She ran her fingers over his nose, along his jaw, and traced his lips

lightly, all the while keeping her eyes trained on his as they grew blacker by the second.

Slowly, he bent his head to hers. His lips were surprisingly soft and tender. He had kissed her before, but this kiss was different somehow. She felt it in her toes, if such a thing were possible, and quickly realized the difference between this and every other kiss he'd given her.

This time, he had no intention of stopping.

CHAPTER 23



When Elizabeth woke a little after dawn, she felt terribly awkward. Fitzwilliam was in her bed, sleeping with one arm outstretched and taking up an inordinate amount of space. She saw her robe lying on the floor and quickly put it on, wincing a little as she walked. He had been gentle and kind and patient, just as everyone thought he would, but she had been right about it being a little painful, though thankfully not too bad. It was, nonetheless, so very strange.

She tiptoed to her dressing room and saw the tub being filled and sat gingerly at the dressing table to brush her hair while she waited for the remainder of the water to be brought up. The two maids carrying the buckets were quick and efficient, nodding in her direction but not looking at her. She must remember to learn their names.

Her maid, Molly Sanders—chosen because of her motherly, Jane-like qualities, bustled in and poured a few drops from a small bottle into the steaming water.

“Are you ready, Mrs. Darcy?”

“Yes, thank you, Sanders. What was that you added to the water?” She was helped out of her robe and into the steaming water.

“Lavender, madam, to ease the muscles.”

Elizabeth sank into the water slowly. “Very thoughtful, Sanders. Please come back in a quarter hour to help me wash my hair.”

“Yes, madam.”

Elizabeth sank down and leaned her head back on the towel that rested on the tub’s edge. The copper bath was one of the refurbishments Darcy had seen to before her arrival. She must remember to thank him.

What an odd night it had been! Her skin flushed just thinking about it, but she told herself the hot water had something to do with it. They had kissed for an incredibly long time, longer than she thought was even possible, and he had touched her in places she had never thought anyone would touch. Her feelings about this new activity were rather mixed. Many of the things her new husband had done with her—and to her—body had been pleasurable, but it had all been so new, and so very surprising, that she spent half the time overcoming her shock. Just as she got over the newness of a sensation enough to enjoy it, he was shocking her with something even more intimate.

The feel of him on top of her had been indescribable and she felt both profoundly close to him and a little bit scandalized. She told herself this was nothing to be concerned

with. After all, a lifetime of modesty was not done away with in a moment.

She wondered if she would have felt differently about it all if she loved him as she had always hoped to love her husband and, as she was realizing, he deserved to be loved. Would she have leapt into his arms as soon as he entered her chambers? Would her shock have been replaced with excitement? Would she have relished every moment in his arms, without worry or confusion? She could not know, of course, but for the first time since her engagement began six weeks ago, she wished she did love him.

Not in the general “I want to marry a man I love” way, but in an “I wish I loved *this* man” way. *Perhaps I will grow to love him*, she thought. *It is possible, surely. I already like him significantly more than I used to.*

Afterward, they had eaten some fruit and cold meat laid out in the sitting room. He had then accompanied her to her bed. She was unsure if he was going to sleep with her or if he wished to lie together again. In the end, he had climbed into the bed, cuddled her close and stroked her hair, and fallen asleep rather quickly. Elizabeth had lain awake, wondering if she would even be able to sleep with this man in her bed, clinging to her so. She eventually fell asleep with her head on his chest and his arm wrapped tightly around her.

She hadn't heard any sounds from the bedchamber and thought Darcy was likely still asleep. She scrubbed her skin, frowning at the small swirl of red drifting off her intimate

places. She was also surprised to see small red marks on her décolletage and looking in the mirror, she saw two on her neck as well. She could not fathom what these marks were until a memory niggled its way to the front of her mind. She was fourteen and sneaking a biscuit from the kitchen. One scullery maid was assisting the other with tying a scarf around her neck so Cook wouldn't see her "love bites." She hadn't known what they were talking about and dismissed it, but now she wondered. *Love bites...*

"Are you ready for me to wash your hair, Mrs. Darcy?" asked Sanders.

Elizabeth opened her eyes and leaned forward. "Yes, let's."

Sanders removed the braid and before she could say anything, Elizabeth sunk down into the water to soak her hair, blowing bubbles out of her nose.

Sanders had been bending to retrieve a bucket of water to tip over her head and the look of surprise on her face made Elizabeth burst into laughter.

"It's quite all right, Sanders. I shan't drown! Save the fresh water for the rinsing. It would take buckets of it to wet it to the scalp. This way is much more efficient."

Her maid quickly removed the shocked expression from her face and began washing Elizabeth's hair, scrubbing her head in the most delicious way. After she was rinsed, Elizabeth leaned forward to allow Sanders to scrub her back and Elizabeth rubbed her fingers along her neck and rotated her sore

shoulders. She thought they were likely in such poor condition from the odd angle she slept at last night.

“Would you like me to rub your shoulders, madam?”

“Are you good at it?” Elizabeth asked. Mary had tried to rub her shoulders once and she winced through several minutes of torture before telling her sister she was better now and to please stop.

“My sister says no one’s better,” said Sanders proudly.

“Very well then.”

Elizabeth leaned forward and pulled her hair over one shoulder and Sanders proceeded to work out the knots and soreness from her neck and shoulders. Elizabeth nearly sank into the water from the sheer pleasure of it and sighed contentedly more than once. A maid of her own was a glorious thing indeed.

After she was dried and her hair combed out, Elizabeth wondered what she should do. Normally, she would sit by the fire to dry her hair, or in summer, as it was now, she would sit by an open window and read for a bit. Once or twice she’d even snuck outside to let it dry in the sun, a wonderful but improper way to dry thick hair such as hers.

She looked toward the window and saw that it had started to rain, making sitting in front of an open window impractical. The fire hadn’t been lit when she’d left her room, but if the rain brought colder temperatures, it might be lit now. She didn’t want to wake Fitzwilliam by ordering one done,

however. Who would have thought such a simple thing as drying one's hair could be so complicated? Marriage was already requiring adjustments and suddenly she wished he had slept in his own room to spare her this ridiculous decision making.

“Shall you sit in front of the fire to dry your hair, madam?” asked Sanders.

“Is there one lit?”

“The one in your chamber is bright as can be,” said the maid cheerfully.

“Then yes, I will. Do you know if my husband is awake yet?” It sounded strange to say the words. *My husband.*

“Yes, madam. The master is in his dressing room.”

“Thank you, Sanders. It usually takes about half an hour to dry, and then I shall need your help dressing. I believe I'll wear the new pink gown today.”

“Yes, madam. I'll have it pressed and ready.”

Sanders opened the wardrobe and removed the dress while Elizabeth tightened the belt on her soft blue dressing gown and went into the bedroom to dry her hair. She sat by the fire, absently running a comb through her hair, turning her head from side to side while her thoughts wandered.



Darcy awoke slowly and wondered where he was. The crown above this bed did not match the one in his chamber and then he remembered yesterday had been his wedding and he was in his wife's chamber. *My wife*. Just thinking it gave him a deep feeling of satisfaction. He reached out to his side, searching for her, but met only a cold sheet. There was a brief moment of panic when he wondered if it had all been a dream. He sat up and looked around the room, then heard Elizabeth's laughter coming from behind the dressing room door.

A smile he wasn't aware of slowly worked its way across his face. He was married. To Elizabeth. To a woman he loved in a marriage of genuine affection, not a calculated union of convenience. His relief was immeasurable, his joy boundless. He rose and went to the dressing room door, his intention to see his wife, but he heard her maid's voice and what sounded like water being poured into a tub and decided to follow his wife's example and bathe. He would give her privacy for now; he could suggest bathing together at a later time when she was more accustomed to his presence in her intimate life.

He was incredibly cheerful and his valet stifled more than one smile as he watched the master of the house grin like a fool while bathing, combing his hair, and getting dressed. He'd barely been able to stop long enough to be shaved.

Darcy reentered his wife's room with a spring in his step. She was sitting before the fire with her hair around her like a curtain, much of it still damp, and a comb in her hand. Her expression was blank as she stared into the flames.

“Good morning, dear.” He placed a swift kiss on her cheek. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Hmm?” she asked, suddenly surprised at his presence.

“I asked if you were hungry. There is breakfast in the sitting room.”

Just then her stomach released a loud growl and they both laughed.

“I suppose that answers the question. Come.” He held out a hand and she followed him into the room between their private chambers. A selection of breakfast items was laid out on a side table and she quickly filled a plate and sat across from Fitzwilliam.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

She flushed. “Yes, I did, thank you. And you?”

“Better than ever.” He grinned, of course.

She nodded and looked down as he winked at her, her face impossibly red now.

“What shall we do today?” she asked a few bites later.

“Whatever we like. There is no set schedule. I thought in the days to come it would be nice to give you an in-depth tour of the house, and of course you’ll want to meet with the housekeeper and cook, but otherwise, we are at our leisure.”

She nodded. She felt as if she was doing a lot of nodding lately. He looked entirely too satisfied with himself. She would have been irritated by it if he weren’t being so charming. She

shook her head, another thing she was doing a lot of these days. Would she ever fully understand her husband?

“I would like to meet with the housekeeper and cook tomorrow, if I may,” she said.

“Of course you may. You are the mistress of the house; you may do whatever you wish.”

She smiled and he returned it. He seemed utterly at ease and almost annoyingly happy. She never thought she would say it: Fitzwilliam Darcy—Man of Merriment. She almost made herself laugh with the thought. Why was he so much more comfortable than she was? Did he often have breakfast with women in his private sitting room? Had he been married before?

“Am I your first wife?” She was sure she was, but she wanted to double check.

He choked slightly on his tea. “Pardon me?”

“I’m sure I would have heard if I wasn’t, but it suddenly occurred to me that I never asked you before and I wanted to know.”

“Yes, you are, of course. What on earth would make you think otherwise?”

“Well, you seem so comfortable. As if you’ve done this a hundred times before. I just wondered if perhaps you had.” She shrugged and took a sip of her tea.

“If you’d like to know why I seem so at ease, it’s because I have done this a hundred times before.”

Her head shot up and she looked at him with worried eyes.

He really should not enjoy this so much. His features softened into an odd mixture of tenderness and mischief. “I have been imagining this morning, and last night, and yesterday, for months. Your place has always been here, across the table from me, in bed next to me, living with me. You belong here, Elizabeth. How can I be anything but pleased that you have finally come home?”

She stared at him, unable to speak, feeling unexpectedly touched. He found her hand on the table and kissed it tenderly. She squeezed his hand in return.

“I have been meaning to ask you,” he asked softly, “are you well this morning?”

It was impossible to mistake his meaning. “I am a trifle sore, but nothing overwhelming.” He looked relieved. The desire to tease could not be resisted. “And you, sir? Are you well?” He looked at her in surprise. She pressed on, “You were very... active last night. You did not sustain an injury?” She looked at him sincerely, her mouth slightly twitching in the corner the only hint that she was teasing him.

Immensely pleased to see her playful after such a serious day and night, and on such a subject, he smiled and joined her game. “I assure you, Mrs. Darcy, your husband is not in such poor condition that one night of activity will render him lame. I am fit for activity again as soon as my lady may accommodate.”

“Are you now?” she asked in a playful tone. “What a lucky lady I am, to marry a man of such strength and stamina.”

“You have no idea, Mrs. Darcy.”

At this he rose and pulled her from her chair, her surprise mounting as he bent down and picked her up, her feet flying from the ground as she shrieked.

“Fitzwilliam! Put me down this instant! What are you doing? Are you trying to hurt yourself?”

She kicked and even hit his shoulder more than once, but he did not release her until they were in her chamber and he dropped her into the center of the freshly made bed. She yelped as she landed and he quickly plopped down next to her.

“See? I am perfectly fit.” He smiled boyishly and she couldn’t help but laugh at the picture he presented.



Finally, when the sun was high in the sky, Elizabeth was dressed in her new pale pink gown and awaiting her husband who had promised her a detailed tour of the house.

“Sanders, do I look different to you?” she asked her maid after she latched a delicate bracelet on her wrist.

“Different, Mrs. Darcy?”

“Yes. I fear I am walking strangely. What do you think?” She walked a few steps away and turned back. “Do you notice anything amiss?”

“No, madam, other than looking a bit careful, you seem the same as yesterday.”

“Careful. Hmm. Thank you, that will be all. I’ll ring when I need you.”

The maid curtsied and disappeared, leaving Elizabeth wondering what exactly a person looked like when walking carefully. Like the way Jane walked when she sprained her ankle three years ago? Surely she wasn’t limping! Or perhaps it was similar to how she walked when she fell out of a tree in Sir William’s orchard when she was fifteen and landed on her backside. But of course she hadn’t really seen herself walk then, either. She would describe the way she moved then as careful, though.

She tried to see herself in the large mirror in her dressing room, but the room was of such a size and the mirror in such a location that she couldn’t make out anything useful. She decided to move it into the bedchamber where there would be more space and wider angles. She grabbed the mirror on either side and lifted, but it would not budge. She considered calling a footman, but how would she explain what she was doing? In the end, she tilted the mirror and braced it against her hip while leaning back and pulling with all her might. She had to stop once, but she did eventually get it into the bedchamber and placed in the corner.

So settled, she walked away from the mirror, looking over her shoulder at herself the whole way. She adjusted the mirror

and her direction and tried again. She didn't look very different, just strange with her head turned round.

“What are you doing, Elizabeth?”

She jumped and her hand flew to her chest. “Fitzwilliam! Do you not make noise when you walk?”

He raised a brow and gestured toward the mirror. “Did you move that yourself?” he asked.

“I didn't want to call a footman and it wasn't too heavy.”

“Hmm.” He walked toward the mirror and lifted it, making another face at her when he realized its weight. She shrugged sheepishly and he shook his head at her.

“Are you finished? Shall I return it for you?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” she replied, grateful to get him away from the topic of what she was doing.

He lifted the mirror easily and walked into the dressing room with it, reappearing a moment later. “Now, what exactly were you doing? Watching yourself walk? You're not trying out some ridiculous new sashay, are you?” he asked worriedly.

She laughed. “No, of course not! I was merely observing something.”

“What were you observing?” he inquired.

“Nothing of consequence. Now, where shall we begin the tour? The guest wing?”

“Why won't you tell me?” He continued to question her.

“Tell you what?”

“What you were doing,” he replied, slightly annoyed at her avoidance.

“Must you know everything that I do in the privacy of my own rooms?” she asked, now irritated herself.

A hurt look ran across his features before he straightened his shoulders and said stoically, “Of course, madam. Forgive me for intruding on your privacy. Shall we?”

He opened the door to the hall and she stepped through, noticing that he looked steadfastly over her head and refused to look at her face.

“Fitzwilliam,” she said softly. He finally looked down when she put her hand on his arm and met her worried expression. “Have I hurt you?”

He released a breath and had a moment of struggle with his pride, but then decided he would risk speaking to his wife. “Forgive me, Elizabeth. You have every right to privacy. It is only my overzealousness to be close to you that wants to know everything, and I admit it stung when you did not want to tell me.” He shook his head. “It is a very strange thing—being in love with a woman.”

He looked at her and she felt something inside her soften a bit further.

“I want to give you everything, share everything with you. I have never been in such a situation before. I’m afraid I do not always handle it properly,” he said.

“I think you handle it beautifully most of the time,” she said, and reached up on her toes to kiss his cheek. “I apologize for being thoughtless. I did not realize your intent.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. I invaded your rooms, not the other way round.”

“Nevertheless,” she said. She placed her hands on his chest and played with the lapels of his jacket. Did she feel his heart speed up beneath her hand? “Dearest, can you keep a secret?” There was definitely a quickening beneath her palm now.

“Of course.”

She looked around the deserted hallway to ensure they were alone before speaking quietly. “I was trying to look at my walk.”

“Your walk?” He looked utterly confused.

“Yes. I felt like I was walking differently and I wanted to see if it was noticeable to others. That is all.”

“Why would you be walking diff —” He stopped and looked at her flushed face and downcast eyes. “I see. It seems I have more to apologize for today. My intrusion now seems doubly rude. You were only trying to examine the damage I caused and then I had the nerve to question you.” He shook his head in disgust and looked away. “Forgive me, my love. I will not intrude again.”

“You are forgiven,” she said, smiling sweetly at the look of relief on his face.

“I did not mean to injure you. Are you very sore? Would you rather we rest instead of touring the house?” he asked contritely.

“No, I’ve had enough of my room for the day. I’d like to stretch my legs. Shall we tour the guest rooms? We didn’t see them when I visited before.”

And so they were off. He told her stories about the rooms and who usually stayed in each and when they were last changed. She made mental notes of the furniture and which coverlets looked like they should be replaced soon. She was pleasantly surprised to find that the rooms were beautifully done but were not garish. *This is true elegance*, she thought. *Where beauty and comfort are the goals, not the display of wealth.*

When the tour was complete she said, “There is one room I have not seen yet.”

“Which is that?”

“Yours.”

He hesitated but a moment. “This way.”

He took her arm and led her rather swiftly through the halls so she was practically skipping to keep up with his long strides.

He opened a door and led her in, saying, “My lady’s wish is my command.”

She stepped into his bedchamber and looked around, curiosity getting the better of her. There was a leather chair by

the fireplace and a soft fur rug in front of it. She noted the door she presumed led to his dressing room and another that led to a balcony outside. She opened it and looked out, the rain preventing her from exploring further.

“It extends to the sitting room that direction.” He pointed to his right and she looked obligingly, her eyes catching sight of the bed.

It was covered in a deep green counterpane with curtains of a similar shade pulled tight to the posts. There was a small table on either side with a lamp. She quickly looked away and noted the round table in the center, presumably for dining in his chambers and another chair in the corner. Altogether, it was rather sparsely furnished and she wondered if it was by design or if he hadn't really noticed it.

“You do not have much furniture,” she observed.

“No. I do not like clutter.”

She nodded and walked to the other side of the room, feeling the plush rug beneath her slippers and sliding her hand along the smooth wood of the table.

“May I?” she asked, reaching for his dressing room door.

“Of course.”

She stepped inside the small room. It was similar to hers in that it was surrounded by wardrobe doors that she was sure were filled with elegant clothes, but the style was rather different. Hers was done in pale, light colors while Darcy's was a rich blue.

“I’m surprised it isn’t green to match your chamber,” she said as she looked at the oddly-shaped chair in the corner she assumed was for being shaved in. She had seen an advertisement for one once.

“I do not like too much of the same color. It becomes monotonous,” he said.

“You do not like clutter and neither do you like single color schemes. What else shall I learn about you today?” she asked playfully. “Do you have a bathing tub?”

“Yes, it is through there,” he replied, gesturing to a door in the corner. “You may look if you wish.”

She opened the door and stepped onto the cool marble. The copper tub gleamed against the pale floors and a small window let in a thin ray of light.

“Mr. Darcy!” she exclaimed. “That tub is enormous!”

He smiled. “Yes, I ordered it when we became betrothed. It only arrived a few days ago. Do you like it?”

“I think I might drown in it! Thankfully mine is smaller. Is your old one in my chamber now?”

“No, I wanted you to have a new one as well. The tubs that were in our bathing chambers have been moved to guest chambers.”

“Ah. I’m sure the guests will appreciate it! Most only offer a hip bath. This is quite luxurious.” She ran her hand over the lip of the smooth copper appreciatively. “Tell me, why is this one shaped differently?”

Her tub was higher on one end than the other, allowing the user to lie back. This one was high on both ends with a dip in the center, presumably for entering the tub.

“This one is designed for two people. That is why it is so large,” he said simply.

Her eyes widened. “Two people! But why would two people want to bathe together? It hardly seems efficient.”

He chuckled at her innocence. “When one is bathing with another, efficiency is generally not on one’s mind.”

“Oh,” she said, suddenly comprehending and blushing a light pink. “And have you had many inefficient baths, Mr. Darcy?”

He was taken aback by her question, but answered. “No, actually I have never tried it. But I am convinced it shall be enjoyable.”

She blushed brighter. “Thank you for showing me your rooms, Mr. Darcy. I believe I would like to see the gallery again. We went through it so quickly last I was here.” She bustled out of the room quickly and he ambled behind her, a small smile on his face.

Dinner was a subdued affair. It was their first meal downstairs. They ate in the small dining parlor next to the music room rather than the large dining hall which would have felt cavernous with just the two of them. This table comfortably seated six and could be expanded to hold twelve if necessary.

“Do you like the room?” he asked her after catching her looking around for the third time.

“Yes, very much. The paper is particularly pretty.”

“My mother chose it shortly before she died. The paper came in after the funeral but my father did not hang it. I found it a few years ago and had it put up. It suits the room admirably, don’t you think?”

“Yes, it does. And how perfect that you can have such a pleasant reminder of your mother on a regular basis,” she said.

“Yes,” he said plainly, looking at his plate.

“What shall we do the remainder of our time in London? We leave in five days, correct?”

“Yes. Did you want to do any shopping? It might be a good idea to order a new coat and fur lined boots. We have no plans to return to town before winter.”

“I suppose I could. I imagine I have enough new gowns for some time, but of course I will need more now that I have married such an important man.”

“You certainly shall. Important men never like to see their wives in the same dress twice.”

She laughed. “You are getting very good at teasing, Fitzwilliam.”

“I have an excellent teacher,” he replied and took her hand on the table. She blushed unexpectedly and looked down.

“Are you ready to retire, Elizabeth?”

She looked up and recognized the look in his eyes. “Yes, Fitzwilliam. I’m ready.”

CHAPTER 24



Bingley collected Jane at the Gardiners early the day after the wedding. Mary and her Aunt Gardiner accompanied them as chaperones. Jane was grateful her mother was too tired from the wedding to want to do the job herself.

It was fairly early in the day and the menagerie wasn't too crowded. She held Bingley's arm as they walked around and looked at the animals, commenting on their size or coloring and whatever else came to mind.

"I've always thought it interesting that the male animals are more colorful and showy than females. So different from the way people behave," Jane mused.

"It truly separates us from the animals," said Bingley. Jane gave him a quizzical look. "Our women are so beautiful," he said softly, looking directly at Jane.

She blushed and moved on to the next exhibit. "How are your sisters?"

"Louisa is well. She just informed me last week that she is expecting a child this Christmas."

Jane smiled brightly. "That's wonderful! Please give her my congratulations."

"I shall. She and Hurst plan to leave for his estate shortly before attending a house party in July. They will remain in the country for the rest of the summer. She hasn't yet decided if she will return to town for her lying in."

"Will Miss Bingley accompany them to the country?" she asked. She leaned over to look at a small monkey of sorts sitting in the bottom of a cage.

Bingley moved closer. "That is undecided. It depends largely on what I do this summer."

"Oh?" she asked distractedly as she moved around the cage to get a closer look.

"Yes. I usually spend a large portion of the summer at Pemberley with Darcy, but obviously, this summer is not usual."

Jane sent him a small smile of understanding before returning her attention to the primate.

"I was thinking of visiting the seaside," he said uncertainly.

Jane straightened and looked at him seriously. "Whereabouts?"

"I had considered Margate. Your sisters said how beautiful it was and I would like to go where I have acquaintance in the area." Jane nodded with what he thought was a disappointed expression and he stepped toward her. "Miss Bennet, I'm saying this all wrong. I would like to see you this summer, and

since you are in Margate, thither I will go. Would you allow me to call on you there?"

She studied him for a moment before speaking. His jaw was slightly tense and his nostrils were flaring a bit with the strength of his breath. His shoulders were straight but rigid and the tips of his ears had gone red.

"Will your sister accompany you?" she asked, and moved to look at a lizard-like creature in another cage.

"I am undecided. I would be able to entertain if I had a hostess, but I do not know that the town would suit her."

"Have you asked her opinion on the subject?" Jane asked.

"Not as yet. I had thought I would wait for my plans to be fixed before asking her what she wished to do," replied Bingley.

"What if she wished for you to accompany the family to the house party?" she asked as she moved to yet another cage holding a red exotic bird. Her voice was light, but her shoulders were tense and her eyes strained.

"I have no desire to go to the house party. Caroline will go there, looking for a husband, but what I am looking for is soon to be in Margate," he said warmly.

"Oh," she said softly, her cheeks flushed and her eyes wide.

"Miss Bennet, I want to call on you. My intentions are entirely honorable. If you do not wish for my attentions, I beg you tell me now and save us both the mortification of me following you about unwanted," Bingley said fervently.

Jane looked at him in shock, stuttering over her response. “I, I, Mr. Bingley, I do not, that is, I rather like, I mean,” she stopped and took a deep breath. “I would be pleased to receive your call in Margate, Mr. Bingley.” He beamed at her and she added, “*Without your sister.*”



Dearest Jane,

I know you are wild with curiosity so I will put your mind at ease. I am well. My husband is very well, too, and very kind to me. Do not worry for me, dearest. Mr. Darcy is very gentle and attentive and I have great hopes for my felicity in this marriage. It is still all very new and strange, and I suspect it will take me some months to become accustomed to living with a man such as he, but it is not overtaxing and I find myself enjoying his quiet company and wry humor. We are proving good companions and I can't help but think that bodes well for the future.

I wish I could have met your friend Mrs. Pearson before we leave for The Lakes, and especially her brother Mr. Walker. I could not visit anyone the day after my wedding, but believe me I very much wished I could—if it had been another day, of course.

I was glad to hear you enjoyed visiting them before you returned to the seaside. She sounds a very kind friend and Mr. Walker an amiable man. Are you still confused there, dearest? Do you know what you will say should he offer his proposals?

Know that I am with you in spirit if not in body and that you are welcome to join us wherever we are if you find yourself in need of respite.

Where is Mr. Pearson's estate? If it is not too far from Derbyshire perhaps you could see your friend when you visit me—but of course I am getting ahead of myself. We have not even settled the dates for your visit and I am already planning your life! Forgive me, dear sister.

I am wild to know what Mr. Bingley means by saying he will go to Margate. Shall you choose him, then? Oh, dear sister, what a choice you have before you! Only you would have two amiable, handsome, wealthy men chasing after you. Perhaps it is as Mama has always said. You could not be so beautiful for nothing!

I can hear your voice in my mind telling me to stop teasing you, so I will desist now. Take care of your heart, Jane. I will support you no matter your choice.

We leave for The Lakes tomorrow and I am all excitement to see them, though I confess to some nervousness over the journey itself. I will be in a confined carriage with Mr. Darcy for days. Do join me in praying my tongue does not run away with me. It would be awful indeed to be trapped with an angry Mr. Darcy for so many days at once.

Give my love to my sisters and parents and scratch the ears of the marmalade cat in the garden for me. I must close and check my trunks for the journey. Here is the direction of where we shall be. I will write you when we have arrived safely.

Your sister,

Elizabeth Darcy

P.S. If you want Mr. Darcy to speak with Mr. Bingley, all you need do is ask. I'm sure he would be happy to oblige.

Elizabeth pressed her seal into the wax and was just placing it on the salver when she felt strong arms encircle her waist. She smiled and leaned into him.

“To whom are you writing, my love?” Darcy asked.

“My sister Jane. May I ask why you are sneaking up on me in such a way?” she responded, closing her hands over his arms.

“I wanted to see if you'd like to take one last walk in the park before our journey. I imagine you will not like the confinement.”

“You are beginning to understand me, Mr. Darcy.”

“As I should, Mrs. Darcy. What kind of husband does not endeavor to please his wife? And is not understanding her needs the first step in meeting them?”

“While that may be very sound indeed, I do not think it the usual way, though I am happy to be the recipient of your efforts.” She smiled happily and he kissed her neck, reveling in the freedom to do so.

“You make me very happy, Elizabeth,” he said.

“How long do you suppose it will last?”

“What? My happiness? Decades, I should hope,” he said, somewhat surprised at the question.

“No, I didn’t mean that. Of course I want you to be happy always. I meant this joy you feel in kissing me, especially in public rooms of the house.”

He shrugged. “I cannot explain it, but kissing you like this pleases me tremendously.”

“Perhaps it is the novelty of being able to do what was forbidden only a week ago?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” he answered as he continued to kiss her neck, seemingly unperturbed by her words.

“It is all so very new and exciting. Surely I will become commonplace soon enough.”

“Never!” he said vehemently. “There is nothing common about you, my sweet.”

“You say that today. Mayhap after nearly a week in a carriage, you will feel very differently.”



The first day in the carriage was easy enough. They played a simple word game Elizabeth had learned with her sisters, slept a bit, and read from their individual books. Darcy told her that they would travel the longest distance in the first days while they still had the stamina for travel. Once they had been on the road three days, they would slow their pace and see a few sights before arriving at The Lakes in a week’s time.

Elizabeth found this plan agreeable and spent the first day pleasantly engaged with her husband. She could not say she loved him yet. Circumstances had been too strange, emotions too raw, and her own nature too distrusting to love him so quickly, but she did feel a soft sort of tenderness toward him. It was a warm feeling that filled her with a gentle sensation when he was near and made her fondness for him grow rapidly. He was a good man, she had realized that long ago, but the longer she was near him, the nearer she was to him, the more obvious it became. And the more ridiculous she felt for her previous bad opinion.

Never one to focus on mistakes of the past, she brushed it aside and focused on today, on her growing respect for the forthright man who would be her companion throughout her life.

The morning of the third day, Elizabeth awoke to find she had begun her courses, a very inconvenient thing to have happen while traveling such a long distance. She grumbled at her ill luck and lamented the absence of her maid, who had gone on ahead of her to prepare the cottage where they would be staying. Grateful it had at least begun while she was at an inn and not on the road where she would have had to ask her husband to stop and the whole thing could have been mortifying, she gathered what she needed and prepared to leave. She asked the maid at the inn for some sleeping powders, knowing it would all be so much simpler if she could rest through it, then stepped outside to await her husband.

Darcy collected his wife and led her to the carriage, happy to be on the way and that much closer to their destination. Today would be their last day of hard travel. He was enjoying being in Elizabeth's constant company, but he missed spending nights with her. They could not share a bed in an inn; it was unseemly. It would be especially awkward for Elizabeth who was so new to such activities and still very shy with him. The last week had taught them much about each other and acclimated them somewhat to the marriage bed, but it was all still quite novel.

After the first day, he no longer came to her during the day. He limited such things to the evenings after his complete mortification at witnessing her examining herself for injuries at his hand—well, at his *something*. He had barely been able to restrain himself, but the anticipation made the nights that much sweeter.

Now, he was denied even that. She had sat next to him the day before and laid her head on his shoulder while she slept, which had been sweet torture to him. He had stroked her hair and stolen a few kisses, but nothing more. This was to be their last day in such close confines where he was able only to look and barely touch. The distractions of the next few days seeing the sights should help occupy his mind, and he imagined there would be plenty of places to steal a kiss or two and hopefully more. The first night of the journey, they had both been exhausted and knew they had an early morning, so he had kissed her goodnight and left it at that. The second night, he had hoped for a little affection before retiring, but she had

practically fallen asleep at the table and he could not bring himself to demand anything of her when she clearly needed to rest.

Now, he was beginning to think his notions about showing affection in a carriage were a bit silly. So what if it wasn't entirely proper? He was quite sure people did all sorts of improper things all the time. He'd been very improper prior to their wedding. But since they had wed and he had full access to her person each night, it seemed greedy somehow, selfish, to demand affection from her every hour of the day, and there was something in Elizabeth's demeanor, some intuition that made him stop, but he tried not to think about that. Perhaps he was overly concerned and she wouldn't be as scandalized as he had feared. This was Elizabeth after all.

The ride started easily enough. They discussed the books they had been reading and whether the night had been comfortable at the last inn. At the first stop to change horses, Elizabeth refreshed herself—not an easy thing to do in a busy inn—and stretched her legs, walking slowly around a small herb garden behind the main building. She mindlessly watched a maid gathering vegetables into a basket while she rubbed her lower back slowly, trying to ease the tension. Traveling was rigorous enough on the body without the added trouble of courses.

Darcy asked if she wanted tea and she said no; the sooner they reached their destination the sooner she could get a hot brick and lie down. She had hoped they would be at the cottage before this started, but clearly it was not to be.

“Are you ready to depart? The carriage is awaiting us,” came Darcy’s voice from behind her.

She sighed and removed her hands from her back, lifting her face to catch a few rays of the sun before returning to the covered carriage.

“Yes, I am ready.”

Darcy followed her into the carriage, sitting beside her instead of across. She didn’t worry about the change. She had just taken a sleeping powder at the inn and thought she would drift off soon. Her husband would make an admirable pillow.

“May I rest my head on your shoulder? I should like to sleep,” she said.

Surprised, he said yes and she curled up next to him and he wrapped an arm around her, his hand resting on her lower back. Suddenly having an idea, she asked him, “Fitzwilliam, would you mind placing your hand just here?” She moved his hand to cover the sore spot on her back. “The heat of your hand eases my soreness.”

“Of course. I didn’t realize you were in pain. We could have stopped longer at the inn,” he said kindly.

“No, it isn’t necessary. A little rest will help immensely. I will feel much better when we reach the inn tonight and I can have a hot brick.”

He nodded, wondering what the problem was. She had been fine the day before. She was tired, certainly, but traveling had that effect on everyone and she had not gotten as much sleep

as usual the last week. *Another thing I am responsible for*, he chastised himself. *I must take better care of her*. But this was not merely fatigue; she had said she was sore. Was it the carriage? He thought it was very well-sprung, though not as well as the larger one. Had he made a mistake in choosing this conveyance?

Just as he was working himself up into a fit of worry over his wife, she made a slight noise and burrowed her head into his chest. She was asleep already. He leaned himself back into the corner and pulled her so that her head was on his chest and her body between his and the backrest of the carriage. He kept his hand pressed into her back as she'd asked and placed a kiss on her head before closing his eyes and joining her in slumber. *Sleep is a much better idea than fretting like an old biddy*.

Several hours later, Elizabeth was still asleep but Darcy was awake. He'd opened a book and held it in one hand while the other gently stroked his wife's back. He was surprised she was sleeping so long, but if it brought her relief, he supposed he should be glad. The sun was dipping toward the horizon and it would be full dark in less than two hours. They wouldn't be driving much farther. Would she be able to sleep this night?

Suddenly a smile broke across his face before he even realized what he was smiling about. Elizabeth would be very well rested when they reached the inn this evening. Surely after sleeping half the day in the carriage, she would be able to stay awake later into the evening. Why hadn't he thought of it before? It was the perfect solution! Sleep in the *carriage*, remain awake at the *inn*. What a stupid man he was! But in his

defense, he had never taken a long carriage ride, or any carriage ride for that matter, with a woman he was in love with or even mildly interested in. With this new solution in mind, and happy thoughts of being alone with his wife occupying his attention, he continued reading contentedly, not understanding more than one word in five.

Elizabeth was groggy. Her mouth felt a bit sticky and there was motion around her. She was pressed against something warm but slightly scratchy and it was.... Moving? Where was she? *Ah, I am in the carriage with Fitzwilliam on the way to The Lakes.* She stiffly tried to sit up and touched one hand to her head.

“Are you well?” Darcy asked.

“Yes, I just felt dizzy for a moment. Probably from all the motion,” she said.

“And you haven’t eaten much all day. There are some biscuits here. Would you like some?”

“Yes, please.”

She nibbled on the biscuit she’d chosen from the tin and looked out the window.

“It’s nearly dark. Will we be stopping soon?” she asked.

“Less than a mile now,” he replied.

They pulled into the drive of a rustic looking inn. There were roses to the left of the entry and she breathed in the fragrant scent gratefully. It was comforting after so many hours in the carriage. They had been driving with the windows

closed to keep out the dust. Once they slowed their pace, they would be able to open them, but for now, she was happy for a bit of fresh air.

They were shown to a suite of rooms including a sitting room where Darcy ordered their supper be served as soon as it was available. Elizabeth walked to the large window overlooking the back garden and threw open the sash.

“A servant can do that. You needn’t bother yourself,” said Darcy.

“It’s no bother. I need the air.”

She leaned slightly out the window and took several deep breaths, willing her headache to recede and her aches to subside. She excused herself to freshen up and went into her room, once more lamenting the absence of a maid. Luckily the owner had sent someone up to help her change out of her traveling clothes. Wearing a light day dress and having the chance to bathe quickly from a basin did much to liven her spirits and she rejoined her husband with more energy than he had seen from her all day.

The meal was quite good for an inn and she ate the roast beef and vegetables with relish. The bread was particularly welcome as it had just come out of the oven. Darcy watched it all with a small grin, thinking her renewed spirits and returned appetite suited his after dinner plans.

When they were through, she asked if he would accompany her on a short walk to stretch her legs and he readily consented. When they returned, the fires were lit in the

individual bedchambers and Elizabeth walked toward hers, saying she would ring for the maid to help her prepare for bed.

“That isn’t necessary, Elizabeth. I can help you,” said Darcy.

Stopping in her path with her back still to her husband, she said, “I already told her I would ring for her later. It will only take a moment.”

“Surely I can manage a few buttons!” he exclaimed, thinking she was trying to spare him an unnecessary duty.

“You really needn’t bother, Fitzwilliam. I shall join you here when I am ready,” she said quickly as she made for the door. She was through it and had closed it soundly behind her before he could think of a response.

Has she just run from me? What on earth is going on? Annoyed but trying not to let it overtake him—he had learned something from their first awkward day together—he went into his room and changed into his nightshirt, loosely tying his dressing gown over it. He had a sip of brandy and returned to the sitting room, staring out the window at the darkness while he awaited his surprisingly changeable wife.

Had he offended her in some way? He went over their conversation in the carriage, over dinner, on their walk. There was nothing out of the ordinary. She had asked him about the book he was reading; he had told her. She had asked him about something being discussed in parliament that she had seen him and her uncle and father reading about in the broadsheet; he had told her what he knew of it. She had asked him about the

plans for the morrow, and again, he had told her. What had he possibly done to offend her? Was she even offended? Was she nervous that he would try to lie with her at an inn? *Ah, that must be it*, he thought. She had been raised a modest lady and they were very newly married. The thought of such intimate activities in what was so public a place must be unnerving to her.

Well, he should set her mind at ease. He had not planned as far as that. Yes, he had wanted to kiss her and hold her a bit, and perhaps feel certain assets under his palms that he had recently become acquainted with, and he wasn't *completely* sure he would be able to stop himself from going any further, but he wasn't *planning* it. He could restrain himself. He would restrain himself.

The door to his right opened and Elizabeth stepped out, a dark grey dressing gown covering what looked to be a very serviceable plain white nightgown beneath. He frowned. She had been wearing silky, soft, enticing gowns each night of their marriage. They hadn't stayed on her long, but he had certainly appreciated the picture they created. Were these her travel things? The last two nights he hadn't seen her as they had not talked after dinner but gone straight to bed.

"Do you think they have chocolate here?" she asked. She was settled into the chair by the fire, looking at him expectantly.

"I'm sure they do. Shall I ring for it?"

"Please."

The maid arrived shortly and he requested chocolate for his wife and port for himself.

“Are you looking forward to seeing the ruins tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yes. I haven’t seen them since I was a child.”

“It will be nice to be out of the carriage for a little while,” she commented absently.

“Yes, it will.”

“It’s too bad you didn’t bring your horse. You could have ridden part of the journey at least,” she offered.

“Then you would be alone in the carriage,” he responded.

Was it his imagination or did she look like that idea wasn’t particularly bothersome? He walked toward the fireplace and sat in the chair in front of her, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. She looked at him in surprise.

“Elizabeth, are you well?”

“Why do you ask?” she said. She scooted back in her chair and looked aside nervously.

“You seem distracted. You slept half the day in the carriage. You —” he gestured aimlessly with his hands. “Forgive me, you just don’t seem yourself.”

She sat up a little straighter. “Traveling is tiresome. I thought a sleeping powder would help me rest so I took one at the first stop. There is nothing wrong with me.” *Nothing that won’t be over in a few days.*

“Sleeping powder!” he cried. “Why would you—if you were tired wouldn’t you sleep on your own?”

She shrugged and looked away uncomfortably.

“Ah, I see,” he said grimly.

She startled and looked up. “You do?”

“Yes. Forgive me for intruding on your rest, madam.”

He withdrew and stood looking out the window, his back to her. She was utterly confused about what had just happened. She stared after him for a moment, then decided to ignore the problem. Her sisters often behaved similarly. They would get in a snit about something, not tell anyone what it was, then huff off to pout until someone came to find them and cajole it out of them. Well, she wanted no part in such games. If he wanted to act like a child, she would not participate.

After several minutes of her sitting in silence and him staring out the window—what was he looking at, anyway?—her curiosity got the better of her. Fitzwilliam did not usually pout and he was normally nothing like her sisters, so she thought it right to ask him of his troubles.

“Fitzwilliam, is something troubling you?” she asked carefully.

Only the realization that my wife of nine days is already tired of me. “No, I am perfectly well,” he said flatly, still facing the window.

“Truly?”

He turned to face her. "I am as well as you, Mrs. Darcy," he said with a slight nod in her direction and what she could swear was a mocking look in his eyes.

Elizabeth sat motionless at his words, stunned that he would speak to her in such a way. "What are you implying?" she asked.

"Nothing, my dear. Absolutely nothing," he replied. She was sure his tone was mocking her now.

"Please don't call me dear when you are angry with me. It ruins it," she said somewhat sharply.

"As you wish, madam," he said as he turned back to the window.

A few minutes passed in silence—neither spoke nor moved. Finally, Elizabeth could take it no more.

"Is this how it is to be then? You will take offense at some imaginary insult and will not tell me why you are angry, but will stand at the window and sulk? How long is it to last? How frequently does this happen? Should I take to carrying a book with me at all times in case you decide to shut me out at an inopportune time?"

He whirled around, his face pinched with the anger that had finally come to the surface. Though it was the slightest bit frightening, she felt triumphant at forcing a reaction from him. She had never been able to abide stoicism.

"Me? I am the one being silent? *I* am withdrawing? That is a rich tale you weave, Elizabeth."

“What are you talking of?” she asked, confused and irritated. Her head was starting to pound again and the cramps in her lower back were getting stronger. She squinted her eyes to relieve the pressure in her forehead, unknowingly making herself look incredibly angry.

Frustrated, tired, and disappointed, Darcy decided to end her games here. “Is my company so tiresome you had to send yourself to sleep to avoid it?”

“What?”

“I see clearly now why you have been avoiding me, why you won’t come near me. Why you are wearing that!” He pointed to her nightgown and she clutched it to her chest.

“What are you talking about? I’m not avoiding you!” she exclaimed. Her hand rubbed her temple and her eyes closed against the pain in her head.

“Are you not? Then why have you become a different person on this journey? The first day you were my Elizabeth. Then yesterday you were tired and silent. I thought it was just fatigue, but today you hardly spoke three words. You were happy to let me do all the talking while I prattled on, ignorant of your growing disdain.” His voice grew with each accusation and before he knew what he was about, he had worked himself up into a frenzy.

She gasped at his outburst and stood to face him. “If I was avoiding you, would I have asked to cuddle with you in the carriage? If I was avoiding you, would I have eaten with you and specifically asked for your company on a walk? If I was

avoiding you, sir, would I have come out this evening to sit with you despite the pain in my head and the ache in my back? You spoiled, hateful man!”

Elizabeth clamped a hand over her mouth, shocked by her own words, and ran from the room, shutting her door with a thud, the lock making a clear snick as it latched into place. He could hear her sobbing from the sitting room and wondered what he had done. He stood there, wondering when he had become intemperate and volatile. Just a few hours ago he had held her while she slept in the carriage. He had led her peacefully through the garden. They had eaten a pleasant meal together and he had so looked forward to spending the evening with her in his arms. Is that what this was about? Had he become a spoiled child who threw a tantrum when denied a treat? Was he hateful as she had said?

He paced and ran his hands through his hair, all the while hearing Elizabeth’s muffled sobs through the door. It sounded like she had buried her head in a pillow but he had always had keen hearing. After several minutes the sobs subsided and there was a knock at the door. He answered to find a maid there with hot chocolate for his wife and port for himself.

The young woman bobbed and said, “The missus says to tell the lady that she’ll have what she requested shortly and one of the maids will bring it up. Sir.” She bobbed again and was away before he could question her further.

Taking a sip of the port to fortify his nerves, he took up the chocolate and rapped on the door.

“Elizabeth, your chocolate is here.” There was no reply. “Dearest, please open the door. I’m sorry, my love. I didn’t mean to upset you. Please open the door and let me talk to you.”

Elizabeth debated whether or not she should let him in. She was very angry with him, and he was being very difficult. But they were also very newly married and she did not want to set a dangerous precedent. Her parents often argued and then would be silent, her father locked in his bookroom and her mother ignoring him whenever they were in a room together. She did not wish such a marriage for herself. She would hear her husband. Even if it took more patience and humility than she currently possessed.

He stood there for what felt like ages before he heard soft footsteps and the click of the lock. She pulled the door back and stood behind it, using it as a barrier between them. He stepped in slowly and placed the chocolate on the table by the bed.

“Elizabeth, I —” he looked at her, her eyes red and her cheeks wet, and felt himself the worst sort of brute. “God, Elizabeth, I am so sorry! I don’t know what came over me! I didn’t mean it, truly. I was just—please, my love, forgive me?”

She looked at him warily, not sure what to believe or that she even understood what was happening. She’d never seen a lovers’ quarrel before and this was more than they’d experienced in their courtship, which had been far from smooth. He’d actually raised his voice to her!

“I hate to see your tears. Please, let me make it better,” he pled.

“How do you plan to manage that?” she asked skeptically.

He looked dumbfounded for a moment and she found it irritatingly endearing. “I will start by apologizing profusely.”

“I believe you’re well on your way there.”

He took a small step toward her, a contrite look on his face. She responded with a step closer to him.

He made up the remaining distance and tentatively took her in his arms. Her arms hung limply by her side, not returning his embrace.

“Will you forgive me for being a brute?”

“Of course.” She brought her hands up to rest lightly on his elbows, not prepared to go further just yet.

“I am so sorry, my love. You are right. I was being spoiled. I didn’t get what I wanted and acted like a child. Forgive me.”

“You are forgiven, Mr. Darcy. I apologize for calling you hateful. It was unkind. Forgive me?” She looked up at him, completely drained and wanting nothing more than for them to make peace and go to bed with her chocolate.

“Of course. This whole thing was my fault.”

He held her a little distance away from him and observed her while she played with the lapels of his dressing gown. Finally, she spoke.

“Can you tell me why you thought I was avoiding you? And what offense you have taken at my dressing gown?” she asked, confused.

He flushed. “You have been quiet. It is unlike you and you have also usually worn... different types of gowns to bed and coupled together I thought you were trying to put me off.”

He flushed a bit and looked around self-consciously and she understood it cost something of his pride to make the confession.

“Oh. I see. Well, since we are being honest, I *was* trying to put you off,” she said to the floor.

He stiffened beneath her palms and his hands clenched where they held her elbows.

“You see, I have not been feeling well because, because my time is here,” she said quietly.

“Your time?”

“Yes. My courses. Are you familiar with such things?”

“Oh, I hadn’t realized. Naturally you would, I don’t know why I didn’t think,” he trailed off, embarrassed.

“Yes, well, I shall feel better in a few days, but for now, I ache in my middle and have a headache and not much patience I’m afraid.” At his dismayed expression, she added, “It is not always so painful. Most are not so bad, but I think this one is exacerbated by the travel and perhaps all the excitement of late.”

He nodded. "I feel dreadful, Elizabeth. What a terrible husband I've been, and we've only just begun!"

"Do not say such things," she said firmly but kindly. Her hand stroked his cheek as she continued. "I could have told you earlier and avoided this misunderstanding. I was embarrassed and didn't know how to have such a conversation with a man, let alone one with such intimate access to my person." She blushed at her speech but held his gaze.

He placed his hand over hers on his cheek and smiled at her lovingly. "Is there anything I can do for your comfort? Anything you require?"

"I have asked for everything I need and hopefully the servant will bring it soon," she replied.

"Oh, that reminds me, the maid said they have what you requested and will bring it later this evening."

"Very good. It is a most inconvenient time to be without my maid!"

"That was also my idea because I wanted you all to myself. Is there no end to my selfishness?"

"Stop it, Fitzwilliam! I didn't know this would happen. If I had, I would have asked to keep the servants with us. You must understand that I am no child who needs everything done for her. If I need something, I can and will say something. You mustn't take care of me like an infant. All right?" she said firmly.

He smiled. "All right." He kissed her hands one at a time and asked, "Does that often happen? It arrive unexpectedly?" Darcy liked to be prepared and if they would need to always travel with his wife's maid in future, he wanted to know.

"It is not completely unexpected. It is once a month. The exact day varies, but not by more than a few days. I thought it might begin at the end of our journey and I was hoping it wouldn't happen until we arrived, but it was not to be."

"Forgive my impertinence, but how long does it usually last?" He flushed as he asked and she would have laughed at his discomfort if she hadn't been so uncomfortable herself.

"Usually four or five days."

"At least you will be able to enjoy The Lakes right away then."

"Yes, that is one happy turn."

There was a rap on the door and Darcy left her to the maid's attention. He paced back and forth in the sitting room, disgusted with his own spoilt behavior, relieved they had reconciled, disappointed that his lovely wife was unavailable for the immediate future, and feeling a tendril of hope that it would all be well once they got to The Lakes.

CHAPTER 25



The Bennets arrived at Margate without much trouble. The house was just as they left it and even the marmalade cat was awaiting them in the garden. All but Mrs. Bennet were subdued, thinking how they were one person less on this journey. Mrs. Bennet could speak of nothing but her daughter, Mrs. Darcy, and how well that sounded and how much pin money she would have and how many grand parties she would now attend. Her other daughters nodded and smiled and agreed where necessary, but even Lydia was quiet. Who would sneak her biscuits now that Lizzy was gone?

Mary entered the room she had shared with Elizabeth, now her room alone. She sat on Elizabeth's bed forlornly and looked around, wondering what she would do now without her sister's lively conversation or her assistance in practicing music or the faces she made at the table when no one was looking.

Mary was joined shortly by Jane, who sat beside her and placed her arm around her younger sister.

“I feel quite lost without Lizzy,” said Jane. “What are we to do now?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Mary replied.

Kitty poked her head around the corner and knocked lightly on the frame. “May I join you?”

“Of course,” said Jane.

Mary scooted over and the three sat on Elizabeth’s bed, their absent sister’s scent and sense all around them.

“I feel like she will come in at any moment and tell us to get off her bed,” said Kitty.

“She would likely drag us outside to walk on the shore,” said Mary.

“Do you suppose she will drag Mr. Darcy about like she was always doing to us?” asked Kitty.

“I doubt it. Mr. Darcy doesn’t strike me as the type to be dragged anywhere,” said Jane.

“Can you imagine her trying, though?” said Mary with a smile.

Kitty laughed and stood, doing an impression of Elizabeth when she wanted to go for a walk and everyone refused to go out.

“What are you doing in here?” said Lydia as she walked into the room.

“Talking about Elizabeth,” said Jane.

“Kitty thinks she may try to drag Mr. Darcy on walks like she does all of us,” added Mary.

Kitty again made her annoyed-Elizabeth face and Lydia immediately put on a stoic expression, drawing herself up as high as she could go and pushing out her chest, her back tight and her gait stiff. “Now, Elizabeth, you know proper young ladies do not run about the countryside,” she said in a deep voice, impersonating Darcy.

“Oh, but Mr. Darcy! The sun is calling me! I must greet it!” Kitty said in an exaggerated characterization of Elizabeth.

Jane and Mary laughed.

“Nonsense!” cried Lydia in her deep voice. “The sun shall await a time convenient to me. Do you not know that I own half of Derbyshire and all must obey my command?” Though exaggerated, her impersonation was alarmingly accurate.

Jane was laughing silently now, holding her stomach and turning pink.

“Oh, might I walk all of it?” Kitty said with batting eyes and a flirtatious smile. “I am a very great walker, you know.”

Lydia patted Kitty’s head and smiled condescendingly. “Of course, my darling, anything for you. Just give me a kiss first.” She puckered her lips out and leaned forward, making Mary laugh so hard she fell back on the bed howling.

Kitty was still playing her part and blushing and looking down coyly. Jane joined Mary in her uncontrollable humor until finally Lydia and Kitty broke down into fits of giggles

and the four of them ended up in a heap, shaking and crying, they laughed so hard.



Mr. Bennet took a quiet walk on the shore by himself, his mind full of reflections of the days past. Elizabeth had sent him a short note that arrived just before the carriage pulled out of Gracechurch Street.

Dear Papa,

I know you are worried, but do not be. All is well. Fitzwilliam is very kind to me and I will be fine. Take good care of my sisters and watch out for Jane. She is conflicted about the men in her life and needs patience and understanding.

I will write more soon. Don't forget you said you would write to me in return. I have not forgotten your promise!

All my love,

Lizzy

P.S. I think Mr. Bingley may be more than first appears—don't discount him just yet.

He fingered the note in his pocket and stared out at the horizon. He prayed his daughter would not have a marriage like his had been. He wanted her to always be able to respect her partner in life. Mrs. Bennet had never asked, not once, how

her daughter was faring, how she felt about Mr. Darcy, whether or not they got along or had similar dispositions or hopes for life. No, all she could think about was pin money and carriages and houses in town and country.

A moment later he chastised himself. Mrs. Bennet was a silly creature, yes; she always had been. She was not blessed with intelligence, but she had no malice in her. She meant no harm to anyone and loved her daughters in her way. Unexpectedly, his plan to fashion his daughters into marriageable women had had a similar effect on his wife. She had always been trivial, but she had not always been shrill nor had she complained so much.

No, if he was honest, he had to admit that his sarcasm and disdain for her lack of abilities had created a chasm between them. As it grew, so did her grievances. Before long she was complaining loudly and calling for her salts. Could it have been him all along? Did his withdrawal of affection and respect lead her to become what she had—shrill and ridiculous?

He had to admit the evidence pointed to that being true. Since he had given her a modicum of guidance, shared the burden of raising five daughters with her, and showed her sincere and gentle affection, she had complained less, been less grumpy and irritable, and embarrassed the family significantly fewer times than she had before. She had, in fact, become pleasant company again. She wasn't the smartest woman and never would be, but she sometimes made amusing

observations and she had a good sense of humor if the topics weren't too complex.

She did take good care of him. He felt a wash of shame come over him as he realized that she always had, even after he had begun ridiculing her in front of her own children and mocking her to her face and others. She made sure his favorite dinners were served on Sundays, and when there was a dish he didn't like, there was always a small serving of something he preferred brought just to him. She gave him gifts that he liked and used; fine handkerchiefs with his monogram, a new tooled leather saddle for his birthday three years ago, and his favorite, the painting of his mother and sister, painted a year before the latter's death, restored and framed after it had been damaged by a leaky roof.

When had he become such an ass? When did the honest affection of a beautiful woman cease being enough for him? He shook his head and gazed out at the sea. He was doing better now, and he would continue to do so.

Hopefully, his Lizzy would escape the trap he had fallen into, one largely of his own making. Firstly in choosing an ill-matched partner, then in behaving badly towards the one he had chosen. He was certain she could love Mr. Darcy if she only let herself. Failing that, they could at least have a solid friendship. That would be a lot better than many had in marriage.



When the Darceys arrived at the cottage, it was late in the day and they had been traveling since eleven after touring a castle early that same morning. Elizabeth was dirty, tired, sore, and desperate for a bath. Before she even toured the house she escaped to her room to wash her hair, which hadn't been scrubbed since they left London six days ago. She was so relieved to see her maid she nearly hugged the woman.

Once her trunk was delivered, she locked the doors to her chamber—she did not want to risk her husband coming in at an inopportune moment—then she slid into the tub. She immediately dunked her head and blew bubbles in the water, inordinately happy to be getting clean. As Sanders washed her hair, she closed her eyes and truly relaxed for the first time in several days. Her courses had finally ceased a few hours ago and she knew she would be spending the evening with her husband, ready or not.

Spending time in a close carriage with him had been an interesting experience. As she feared, they had clashed and suffered awkward moments, but as her father had said, being alone together had forced them to converse on topics they otherwise wouldn't. She felt they had learned each other a bit better, but she was also slightly weary of his company. Not horribly, as she was admittedly exhausted and cross from her physical state, but she did not know him very well yet and she still felt a little strange being alone with him. They would be married a fortnight tomorrow and that simply wasn't long enough for her to feel completely at ease, especially since half that time had been spent traveling.

Perhaps it is not Fitzwilliam at all, she thought. Maybe I just need to be alone altogether.

She had not enjoyed a solitary walk since several days before the wedding, and she had arguably gone through the most tumultuous time of her life in the last month. Surely she was entitled to a little air and privacy? Deciding it would be better to have some time to herself to regain her equilibrium before snapping at her husband, she dismissed her maid and told her to tell Mr. Darcy that she would meet him in the dining room for supper after her hair had dried.

She stepped out onto the balcony off her bedchamber and looked at the sun glowing orange as it set and breathed in the clean air gratefully. She made herself comfortable in a lounge chair and leaned back with her eyes closed.

She fell asleep quickly and finally awoke when she heard muffled voices in a nearby room. She sat up and looked around, suddenly wishing Fitzwilliam was with her. *What a changeable creature I am!*

“Good, you are awake,” said Fitzwilliam as he stepped onto the dark balcony.

She looked around groggily. He was arranging dishes of food on a table to her right. A few candles were lit, but most of the light was provided by the moon.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Supper. I took the liberty of having it sent to my room.” He nodded in the direction of a door on the other side of the

balcony. “After I saw you were asleep, I thought this would be better.”

She looked down and saw a small, soft blanket was draped around her. “Thank you,” she said, pointing to the cover.

“You’re welcome.”

He continued to fill the plates in silence before eventually handing her one and sitting down across from her with the other plate. She nibbled slowly, still waking up.

“It’s very peaceful here, isn’t it?” she said after some time.

“Yes, very. That is one of the reasons I thought it would be a perfect location for a wedding trip, besides you having wished it, of course.”

“Have you been here many times before?”

“Only twice. Once while at Cambridge and then with my father six years ago. He was a close friend of Mr. Lansdowne, Sr.”

“It was very kind of him to share it with you.”

“He is a kind man. I hope to introduce you before we return to town. The family has an estate in Staffordshire, not fifty miles from Pemberley.”

“And what is fifty miles of good road?” she asked with a smile.

“When there is money enough to make traveling easy, it is as nothing,” he rejoined.

They both chuckled lightly and continued with their meal. Elizabeth stole glances at Darcy between bites. She was having the oddest sensation. She felt the most peculiar desire for her husband's presence. She wouldn't call it missing him, exactly. Indeed, that would be absurd. But she did feel it had been a horribly long time since he had held her. They hadn't even kissed properly since beginning the journey. Once she told him she was on her courses, he had touched nothing but her hand and that only slightly. She didn't know what to make of it. Did he think she was somehow more fragile at this time? Or perhaps he found it all revolting. She certainly didn't enjoy it. But surely he knew she wasn't going to slap him if he kissed her, didn't he?

She studied him, and while she was staring at his freshly washed hair and the way it fell over his forehead just so, he looked up at her. His face was friendly, but his eyes were filled with such trepidation, such longing, that she felt her heart reach out for his.

Wordlessly, she set her plate and glass of wine aside and scooted in next to him on the chaise lounge. He was surprised, but made room for her by opening his arms. She placed her head on his chest and snuggled close to him, one hand over his heart.

"Can we see any more stars here than we can in Hertfordshire?" she asked.

"A few, but not many," he said in a soft voice.

"Show me?"

“Of course.”

They lay back and looked at the stars, Darcy pointing out the constellations he knew and the dimmer stars that could not be seen further south. They spent an hour lying together and talking, watching the night sky.

“What would it be like to go there?” she said suddenly.

“Where? To the stars?”

“Yes. I should like to see a star up close, I think. Or perhaps the moon. Do you think we shall ever go there?”

“No, of course not!”

“Not ‘we’ you and I, ‘we’ mankind. Do you think we will ever make the journey?”

“It must be quite far. I should think it would take a very long time. And of course there is the small problem of not being able to fly.”

“Don’t be impertinent, Mr. Darcy. That’s my job,” she said as she jabbed him in the ribs.

He laughed and hugged her closer.

“Maybe someone will find a way to fly one day,” she wondered aloud.

“Like a bird? Perhaps someone could design wings, I suppose. Though I imagine our arms would get very tired,” he said.

“Maybe the wings wouldn’t have to move, but only glide. Like a kite.”

“I have seen a hot air balloon that can take a man into the sky, but it is hard to direct and quite dangerous.”

“Really? I should like to see that,” she said, her voice filled with interest.

“If I hear of one nearby, we shall go see it,” he said with a kiss to the top of her head.

“Thank you, Fitzwilliam,” she said feelingly.

“You’re welcome.” He suspected she meant more than just the balloon, but he didn’t want to fish for information.

“What is your favorite constellation?” she asked.

“My favorite? I don’t know that I have one.”

“How can you not have one? That is like not having a favorite color.”

“I do not have a favorite color.”

“What?” she exclaimed. “How is that possible?”

“It’s quite easy, really. I simply do not have one,” he replied.

“You are a queer creature, Mr. Darcy,” she said fondly.

“What is your favorite constellation?”

“I think Cassiopeia.”

“Why?”

“The story is so tragic. And who would like to sit upside down half the year? Plus it is easy to find in the sky.”

He chuckled and pulled her closer, kissing her hair again. She rubbed her hand along his chest, snuggling closer.

“Would you like to know something strange?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I feel like I miss you. Is that not absurd?”

“Not so absurd,” he said quietly.

“But we have been together nearly every moment for a fortnight!”

“Not *every* moment.”

“Most moments.”

“Well, it is possible to miss certain aspects of someone or something. Like I have missed holding you this week,” he said softly. His voice was gentle and a touch unsure.

“Then we are in accord because I have missed being held by you.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. It is a very enjoyable sensation,” she said with a teasing smile. She leaned up and placed a quick kiss on his cheek. “You are very warm and there is something about your arms that I quite like.”

“Is there now?” he asked with a raised brow.

“Mhmm,” she nodded. “Something about them makes me feel safe and loved.”

“You are safe and loved,” he replied, pulling her closer. She sighed contentedly and returned his squeeze, so close she was half on top of him now. “Elizabeth?”

“Yes?”

“Are you still in your time?”

“No. I have just finished,” she replied softly, her voice full of promise.

“Will you come to bed with me?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“No,” he said forcefully. She looked at him in surprise. He sighed and closed his eyes, trying to find the right words to say. “Elizabeth, I know you believe certain things to be your duty and that lying with me is one of them. But *I* do not want to be a duty to you. I would like our coupling to be joyful and desired by both of us. If you do not want to be with me in this way, please do not pretend for my sake. I would ask you to promise me, for the rest of our lives, that you will never allow me to take you when you do not truly wish it. I could not bear to be resented for such a thing. Please, promise me.”

“Very well. I promise,” she said gently.

He sighed and closed his eyes, resting his forehead on hers.

“Fitzwilliam?”

“Yes?”

“Will you come to bed with me?”

He looked up and saw her eyes sparkling at him and her teasing smile about to break through. “Gladly.”



Elizabeth noted something different about their lovemaking that night. He was as tender and gentle as he had been every other time, but there was something else there. A closeness, a sense of togetherness that had not been there before.

It would be some time before she realized that the change was not with them, but within herself. Did Fitzwilliam even recognize it?



Darcy felt that he was going slightly mad. He had run the gamut of every possible emotion in the last week and he was looking forward to a month of relaxation now that they had finally arrived. His marriage was in many ways more than he had ever hoped for. Elizabeth was delightful. Her arch manner, the way her eyes twinkled just before she teased him, the way her lips parted just so when she was surprised. He could not get enough of looking at her, touching her, having her. He almost felt intoxicated, so enamored of her was he.

But there was something in the way of his complete happiness. He did not like to dwell on it, and he wasn't completely sure, but he felt that Elizabeth herself was not as enamored as he. He especially noticed it in their most intimate moments. At first, this did not bother him. Indeed, he was so overwhelmed by his own feelings he barely registered hers. Everything was so new—especially to her—he knew there would be a period of adjustment, that she would take time to become accustomed to his physical presence. When he thought

about her position, how she was the physically weaker of the two, younger than he, and completely inexperienced, he could understand how a woman might feel vulnerable in such an intimate situation—that she would need to trust her partner deeply.

To that end, he had been kind and loving with her. He had been affectionate for the fortnight they had been married, at least to the extent he could be once her wretched courses had come, and when he lay with her he had been tender and gentle, assuring her of his devotion in every touch to her soft skin and every kiss to her sweet lips.

But despite his trustworthiness and utter devotion, she had not responded as he thought she would. He was mature enough to realize people did not always behave the way he wished them to, but he had such hopes with Elizabeth that he thought, just this once, his faith might not be mislaid.

She wasn't cold to him, quite the contrary. She often touched him throughout the day, leaving a tingling sensation on his arm or shoulder or wherever she had placed her hand. She laughed and teased and sparkled for him without reservation. She never turned him away and accepted each of his kisses if not always enthusiastically, at least happily. He truly had nothing to complain of. He had heard stories from other men of wives who locked their doors at night and turned their faces when their husbands leaned in for a kiss. His Elizabeth would never do such a thing, he was nearly sure of it.

What was truly bothering Darcy, as much as he hated to admit it, was that her personality was not coming through in their lovemaking. If he was honest with himself, and Darcy always was, he had dreamt of her teasing him and raising that impertinent brow as she slowly slid her nightgown off her shoulders. Or sitting in the center of the bed, surrounded by white downy blankets and pillows, wearing nothing but a smile as she waited for him to come to her. Or playfully tormenting him with innuendo and suggestions throughout the day, culminating in fervent coupling that night.

But none of that had happened. She had consented to him coming to her every night she was not indisposed, even Sundays. She had consented to him sleeping in her bed afterward. She had consented to being completely bare with him, something she had been embarrassed to do but had agreed to after gentle encouragement and assurance of his affection and the dimness of the light.

As he sat being shaved the morning of the second day at The Lakes, Darcy berated himself. She simply needed time to become accustomed to the marriage bed. As her confidence grew, so would her comfort. Or perhaps it would be the other way round. Anyway, he was sure he was worrying over nothing. So Elizabeth had not met his mind's imaginings within a fortnight of being married. Was that really something to complain about? They had plenty of time—they had a lifetime together. He smiled at the thought.

Perhaps he could lead. If he was more playful with her, then mayhap she would reciprocate. Only, the problem was Darcy

had never excelled in being playful. *Fortune favors the brave, old man.*

He would try. If it meant making Elizabeth more comfortable and making their marriage more enjoyable, he would do anything—even if he was likely to make a fool of himself in the process.

CHAPTER 26



The cottage at The Lakes was everything Elizabeth had hoped it would be and then some, though as cottages go, it was rather large. It was comfortably furnished and thoughtfully laid out. There was a lovely view from every window. Everywhere she looked, she was greeted with beauty.

The morning of their second day, she toured the house on her own, quietly leaving the room while Fitzwilliam was in his dressing room. Her mind couldn't help but wander to her new husband and how he had arranged this lovely trip. It really was very thoughtful of him to remember that she had always wanted to see The Lakes and to secure such a nice place to stay. Away from nearly all of society, they would become accustomed to each other in private, without family or society pressures and obligations. She was very grateful for his foresight and his kindness and generosity towards her.

And he truly was very patient with her. She could tell he was befuddled by her sometimes, but she didn't always know how to make sense of her own thoughts and feelings, let alone explain them to him. She felt badly about it and tried to be as

receptive as she could to his affection. She was affectionate herself in turn, not holding herself back when she wanted to touch him. She had always been a very tactile person, always wanting to touch things and regularly laying a hand on the arm of the person she was speaking with. Her mother had chastised her for this habit and told her not to flirt with everything that stood on two legs. At the age of twelve, she had not understood what her mother meant, but by sixteen she comprehended fully and learned to keep her hands to herself.

With Mr. Darcy, she did not hold back. If she was excited and happy about something, she smiled at him brilliantly and squeezed his hand or touched his arm or gave him a swift kiss on his cheek. The last always made him smile and sometimes blush, and she thought she was on the right track there. This thought made her pause as she wandered onto a terrace at the back of the house. Did he need more encouragement from her? Was that partly to blame for the quizzical look she sometimes saw?

She could do that. She was a very warm person, after all. Being affectionate with her husband would not be difficult. She would start today.



At breakfast, Darcy asked her what she would like to do that day.

“If you are tired, we could simply relax here, perhaps take a stroll. Or if you are feeling energetic, we could take the small

boat out onto the lake.”

“If you’re feeling up to rowing me about, I would like to take the boat out,” she replied.

He smiled and assured her he was up to the task and they were soon off.

The lake had few occupants as they were already in a rather quiet location and the hour was still early. Elizabeth put on her straw bonnet and lace gloves and took a parasol to protect her from the sun. Darcy smiled when he saw her in her simple white dress with small yellow flowers on it.

“You look like sunshine, my love,” he said.

She smiled softly in response and blushed a lovely pink color.

“Come, the boat is ready,” he said as he led her to the dock and onto a small rowboat with three benches. Oars stretched across the narrow center bench and a hamper filled with food rested in the bottom. A blanket lay rolled up and stuffed under the wider front bench.

She stepped into the boat gingerly and a footman pushed them off, wishing them a good day on the high seas, to which Elizabeth laughed gaily. Darcy rowed them leisurely for some time, and finally headed toward a small island not too far away.

“Do you want to go ashore?” he asked.

“Yes, let’s. I’ve never been on an island,” she said.

He smiled at her anticipation and pulled as close as he could to the shore.

“I’ll have to pull it in the rest of the way,” he said once the boat had dragged the bottom.

She nodded and watched in fascination as he steadied the boat and stepped out, careful not to rock her. She held onto the sides and he gave her a grin and a wink before heaving the boat toward the shore, leaving Elizabeth duly impressed. He stopped a dozen feet from the bank. He could have pulled it farther, but he didn’t want to push it back out through the muck.

“Will we picnic here?” she asked.

He agreed and she passed him the blanket and hamper. He came back for her and she wrapped her arms round his neck while he held her to take her across the shallow water and onto the shingle.

“How strong you are, Mr. Darcy,” she teased as he stepped carefully across the rocky lake bottom.

“Nonsense. My lady is as light as a feather,” he said playfully. Her laughter was his reward and he smiled brightly at her.

She reached one hand down to touch the water and neatly flicked a bit of it onto her husband.

“What are you doing, wife?”

“Nothing, husband,” she said mischievously.

He took two more steps and she flicked him with water again, this time onto his face.

“Elizabeth,” he said warningly.

“What?” she said innocently.

He loosened his grip and pretended to drop her, catching her just before she hit the water.

“Fitzwilliam Darcy! Don’t you dare drop me into this water!” she called laughingly.

“Oh? You don’t want to refresh yourself in the cool lake?” he teased.

She laughed again. “No! I would like to remain dry. Do not —” he pretended to drop her again and she screeched and kicked her shoe into the water, sending a spray of water into his face.

He spluttered and closed his eyes at the assault while Elizabeth tried to hold in her laughter, which was impossible to conceal when he was holding her and feeling every repressed shake of her body reverberate across his chest.

“Forgive me, Fitzwilliam. I did not mean to get you *so* very wet,” she apologized brightly, her eyes twinkling.

He gave her a rueful look. “I will repay you for that, madam,” he replied, but before he could finish the final words, he stepped onto a slippery rock and lost his footing.

For a wild moment, they flailed in the air, her clinging to him tightly, him waving one arm frantically for balance while

the other clutched his wife. They both fell in with a spectacular splash.

Elizabeth's cry quickly turned into laughter as she put herself to rights. They were both soaked through from the waist down and half-covered in muck. Darcy had the disadvantage of being on bottom and the entire back of his shirt was wet and dirty as well as some of his hair. His hat floated a few feet away. Darcy scowled as he stood and placed a hand on her elbow to steady her. She scooped up his hat as they walked the remaining few feet to dry land and handed it to him with a sheepish expression. She could not contain her laughter when he looked at the poor muddied hat with an expression of disgust and dismay.

He eventually laughed with her and they pulled the bits of leaves and other debris from each other as they stood on the grassy shore, dripping and cold.

“We'll have to sit in the sun to dry out,” she said.

“We'll never dry in all these layers.”

He removed his jacket and waistcoat and hung them on the low branches of a nearby tree. Thankfully, the day was sunny and warm, so they would dry quickly. Elizabeth removed her shoes and stockings, placing the former in the sun and the latter over a branch. She then shimmied her petticoat out from beneath her skirts and hung it up as well, followed by her damp bonnet. It had thankfully kept her head dry, and much of her torso was dry but for a few splashes, luckily, but she still did not enjoy the feeling of her wet skirts across her legs. She

quickly laid out the blanket and lay back on it, turning her face to the sun and closing her eyes.

“Are you going to join me?” she asked.

He swiftly lay down beside her in a similar position.

“You may as well take off your shirt. It’s wet and can’t be comfortable.” She looked over at his wet linen and grimaced. He looked doubtful. “No one will see you. This island looks deserted.”

He looked around and pulled his shirt over his head, leaning back on the blanket next to his wife in nothing but his breeches. Elizabeth smiled at him and closed her eyes, reveling in the warmth of the sun. They eventually flipped over to dry their backs and turned their heads to face each other, smiling and talking about silly nothings.

Elizabeth opened the hamper and began doling out food while Darcy poured them each a cup of wine from the cask. They ate the cheese and bread in relative silence until Elizabeth leaned over and popped a grape into Darcy’s mouth. He smiled and returned the favor and soon he had his head in her lap while she fed him small bites of strawberries and more grapes. When they’d had their fill of fruit, he closed his eyes as she ran her fingers through his hair, humming softly.

Eventually she stopped humming and began exploring her husband’s shoulders and neck. She ran her fingers over his skin lightly, noticing how it felt warm from the sun and was slightly lighter than the skin on his face. Her hands drew circles over the tops of his shoulders and dipped down to his

arms, feeling the gentle firmness of his muscles and tracing the outline of a triangle on the outer edges of his arms. She idly wondered if such muscles were from riding or if her husband was an avid swordsman. Somehow, the latter seemed to fit him and the thought was not displeasing.

She continued her explorations down his chest and across his ribs. He was very broad, her husband. His waist was narrower than his chest, but only barely. His ribs stood high off the ground and rose and fell steadily with his breaths. His chest was covered with soft, dark hair, not so much that he felt furry but not so little as to call it a smattering. She ran her fingers through it and felt his heartbeat beneath her palm.

She had never touched him so blatantly. When they were together intimately, he was always touching her, moving over her still body. Afterwards, she would often rest her head against his chest until they fell asleep. But it was always dark and she never felt as free or able to touch him as she did now, nor had she felt such a desire to do so.

His hair stopped just below his breast except for a dark line that traveled down his center. She traced it for a moment until it disappeared into his breeches and continued on with her discoveries. His shoulders were hot to the touch and solid beneath her hands. His ears were surprisingly soft and his hair seemed in need of a cut. She had touched it many times before, but always in the heat of passion. She was enjoying this slow assessment of her husband's form.

Darcy was also enjoying it—immensely. He had begun to drift off to the soothing feeling of his wife’s nimble fingers in his hair and her sweet voice humming a tune. Then those same fingers began a new circuit around his shoulders, arms, and chest, once even drifting dangerously close to his hips. She could not know what she was doing to him. He had chanced a peek at her, finding she was all curiosity and studiousness. It was clear it was not an erotic game she was playing but rather a curious woman’s investigation into the male form. Of course, he was happy to broaden his wife’s mind in any way he could, but if she didn’t stop soon, he’d hardly be able to hold himself back from doing some investigating of his own.

Taking a deep breath, he slowly opened his eyes as if waking from sleep. He didn’t want to discourage her explorations or push for more than she was ready for, but he would not be able to remain still much longer.

“Do you think our clothes are dry now?” he asked.

“Most likely,” she said. He sat up and she rose to grab her stockings and petticoat off the branch she’d hung them on. “These are dry. Shall we head back?”

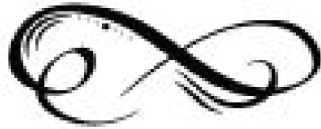
He looked at the sky and the grey clouds in the distance that were moving their direction.

“That’s probably best.”

Within an hour, they were returned to the cottage and requesting baths. Elizabeth stood in the sitting room while she waited for the water to heat, remembering something her husband had said about baths when he’d given her a tour of

the London house. She thought of joining him in his bath, but did not feel bold enough today. But soon, she would. It would be a perfect goal. She would aim to surprise him in his bath within the week. If that was not encouragement, she didn't know what was.

CHAPTER 27



Dinner that evening was a lively affair. They teased each other about their escapade on the lake's small island and laughed until their sides ached.

Elizabeth shocked Darcy quite happily when she said, "And of course I alone received the pleasure of seeing you lying in the sun without the encumbrance of your shirt." Her eyes gleamed wickedly and for a moment, he couldn't breathe as his heart took off at a gallop.

"I daresay it wasn't as enjoyable as seeing your bare legs through your wet dress," he said calmly before taking a sip of his wine.

Her mouth dropped open and she flushed before grinning and laughing softly. When the footman came in with dessert, she gestured him to her side and whispered something in his ear. The young man nodded and left the room, dessert still in his hand.

Darcy looked at her quizzically and she stood, her chin out but her cheeks slightly flushed, giving away her nervousness.

“I’ve asked for dessert to be served on the terrace outside our chambers. I thought we could eat it after changing into more comfortable attire, if that suits you?” she asked, her voice steady but for the tiniest shake.

There is my bold Elizabeth. “Yes, it suits me very well.” He rose and offered his hand, pulling her close and kissing her knuckles before leading her down the corridor.

As he prepared for bed, though the sun was only just setting, he smiled to himself. His plan had worked. He had been playful and carefree with Elizabeth today and look what had happened! She had all but requested his presence in her private chambers. He had hoped for positive results from his campaign, but never that they would happen so soon. He would not question his good fortune. He was already wearing comfortable breeches, not the incredibly fitted ones that were so in style in town, and he changed his shirt for a loose linen one and dismissed his valet for the night, telling him he would ring for him in the morning.

Darcy padded out to the terrace in bare feet and settled into a chair by the table where dessert had just been laid. He poured two glasses of wine and looked at the sunset while he waited for his wife.

Elizabeth had her maid take off her light summer dress and let down her hair. Sanders pulled a tiny section from either side of her face and braided it, then wrapped it around her head to hold the rest of her hair out of her face but still maintain the look of tumbling, riotous curls.

“Which nightgown, madam?” asked Sanders.

Elizabeth looked back and forth between the gowns, trying to decide between a soft rose and a deep blue.

“Which do you think will look better at sunset?” Elizabeth asked with a glance at the window.

“I think the rose, madam, but the blue would be best in moonlight.” Sanders had a light flush to her cheeks but was otherwise the picture of professionalism. Elizabeth couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled forth.

“I shall wear the rose, then.”

Dressed and brushed and recently bathed, Elizabeth stepped out onto the terrace and saw her husband sitting in the light, watching the sunset intently. She approached him quietly, sliding her hands around his shoulders and hugging his back as she leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Hello, darling,” he said lowly. Then he reached around and pulled her in front of him and into his lap before she could do more than gasp in surprise.

She instinctively hung onto his neck and cried out, “Fitzwilliam!”

Before she could say more he had covered her mouth with his and she responded as he wished her to, with fervor and hunger. He leaned over her, kissing her with relish before pulling back and settling himself into the chair so she was above him, all the while never releasing her lips.

She pressed her breasts into his chest and got as close as she could, her arms wrapping more tightly around his neck, one hand playing in his dark curls. Her legs had been over the side of his chair and as he moved, she was at an awkward angle. To steady herself, she went up on her knees, his head tipping back as she leaned over him, her hands coming to grip his jaw and wrap around to the back of his head. He ran his hands up the back of her leg, skating beneath the silk of her gown and ghosting over her thighs. He tried to nudge her legs apart and the movement made Elizabeth reach one knee to the other side of the chair so she was effectively straddling him, his form sinking lower as she towered over him.

He was so thrilled by this development he could hardly breathe, but he was thankful he had worn the looser breeches.

Elizabeth was enthralled by the feeling of power she had as she knelt over her husband. She could feel how much he enjoyed what she was doing. His heart was pounding against her chest and his hands trembled when they touched her. The evidence of his arousal was obvious beneath her and his breath was ragged in her ear as she kissed his jaw and then further down his neck. She felt something overtaking her, she knew not what, but just as she was about to question her actions, Fitzwilliam called her name and captured her lips in another kiss and all rational thought fled as she felt and followed and in turn led her husband.



The sun finally down, they sat side by side on the lounge chair, Elizabeth half on his lap so they would both fit. Darcy was nibbling on a biscuit filled with strawberry jam as she sipped a glass of water, half-wondering what had come over her not an hour before.

“Are you well, wife?” he asked gently.

“Quite well, husband. You?” she returned with a smile.

“*I am ecstatic,*” he said with a seductive smile that had her blushing to the roots of her hair.

Before she could respond, her stomach rumbled and Darcy laughed, suggesting she eat her dessert. The staff had brought a trifle as well as a tray of fruit, cheese, and biscuits. They were very well prepared, these servants.

She smiled and popped a small chunk of cheese in her mouth and washed it down with a sip of wine.

Darcy had a brief image of drinking wine from her mouth and eating off her delectable body—he thought her back might make an especially fine plate—but he shook his mind free and focused on the present.

Elizabeth had requested his presence, then had returned all his passion as she rode him to glory. He had never felt better.

“Dearest?” she asked some time later after they were both full and the tray held nothing but crumbs.

“Yes, love?” he asked, smiling at the endearment.

“Would it be utterly ridiculous to go to bed? It has been a long day and I think I am still tired from the journey.” To illustrate the truth of the matter, she released an enormous yawn and stretched her arms above her head, her robe slithering delicately over her skin.

“Of course not. I’m rather tired myself. Would you like to sleep in your chambers or mine?” he asked, not even considering they might sleep apart.

“I have never slept in a man’s chamber!” she said brightening.

“I should hope not!” he cried in mock indignation.

She smacked his arm and all but dragged him into his room. They curled up in the center of the bed, the open terrace door letting the sounds of the night and a light breeze blow gently into the room. She rested her head on his chest and he held her close, sighing in contentment before drifting off, only to waken and repeat the events from the terrace twice more before morning.

CHAPTER 28



Bingley took care of what business needed doing in town, and eight days after Darcy's wedding, was on his way to Margate. He had arranged a room at the same hotel Darcy had stayed at when he visited. He wasn't sure how long he would stay, but he vowed he wouldn't leave without Jane's agreement to marry him. Nothing but her absolute refusal could cause him to depart sooner. Maybe they could even marry at the seaside. They could go on to honeymoon nearby, perhaps in Ramsgate or Brighton, and avoid excess travel. But Jane would probably not wish to marry without Elizabeth there, and he knew the Darcys would be visiting The Lakelands through the end of July.

He shook his head of his fanciful ideas and told himself to focus on getting Jane's agreement first. Everything else could be sorted out later. After checking his appearance for the fifth time, he made his way to the Bennets' little blue cottage.

"Mr. Bingley! How nice to see you!" called Mrs. Bennet from the front garden where she was snipping flowers with a small pair of shears. She held a basket over one arm and

waved to Bingley with the other. "I shall be in momentarily. Jane is around the back with her father."

He thanked her and made his way around the side of the house, thinking that Mrs. Bennet really was an uncommonly pretty woman, especially for her age. It could only bode well for his future with Jane.

"Mr. Bingley! You are welcome to Margate," cried Mr. Bennet as he came around the corner.

Jane turned to face him and blushed, greeting him softly. She thought he looked happy and nervous, or maybe it was just her imagination.

Bingley joined them for tea. Mr. Bennet invited him into the discussion they were having on a book Bingley had luckily read while at Cambridge.

"Do you think Reginald should have yielded to his friend?" asked Mr. Bennet, referring to the protagonist in the story.

"His friend's judgment was sound, and he was certainly in possession of more information, which Reginald should have taken into account. But I cannot think it good to so wholly surrender your own judgment, regardless of the closeness of the relationship." He looked at Jane as he said the last, his eyes serious and steady.

"I must agree, Mr. Bingley," said Jane. "While it is good to acquiesce to a friend, especially when they are in need, acting against our own judgment for someone else's sake, I think, would rarely lead to a good end."

The couple smiled at each other and Mr. Bennet leaned back with a grin. His little Jane was going to be quite all right.

Mrs. Bennet joined them then and invited Mr. Bingley to stay for dinner, to which he gladly agreed, as he would each night for the next several days.



Mr. and Mrs. Bennet were happier than they had ever been. Well, perhaps they had been happier in the first blush of love, when she was seventeen and he seven and twenty, but this was different. That had been heady and passionate, full of big dreams and starry eyes. But now, both quite settled in middle age, they knew one another better. And while Mr. Bennet still did not think he had chosen *wisely*, he was beginning to think he had not chosen *badly*, either. If he took the trouble to look, he was able to find attributes worthy of affection in his wife. The two were often found taking walks along the shore at sunset, or she would read to him as he rested his eyes in the shade of the back garden. She put flowers in his room and he complimented her regularly, telling her how the sea air was making her complexion positively glow and what a good job she had done in dressing their girls and (almost) maintaining the new budget.

She basked in his praise and thrived on his attention, not wondering about the cause of his change in behavior but only grateful for the result. Such was her nature.

Jane watched her parents with a wary eye. She couldn't help but feel all of their camaraderie would end soon, and she waited, sadly prepared to comfort her mother when it did. She didn't mind attending her mother, and she was moderately pleased that others found her presence comforting, but she did have her own pursuits and her mother did have three other daughters at home. Jane simply didn't understand why *she* should always be the one to give consolation. Surely it was a skill that would benefit her sisters? Was it not something everyone would have call to do at some point or other? For the first time in her twenty-two years, Jane felt resentment at always being the responsible, comforting one. Sometimes, she thought it might be nice to just be Jane, without having to tend to those around her. The thought was so foreign it left her very unsettled.

She told herself she was worrying for nothing. Her mother had been remarkably calm this entire journey. It was only her own innate sense of responsibility, and perhaps an inability to trust all the new ideas and feelings she was experiencing, that made her anxious for the future. Sometimes, though she would never tell him this, she wished her father had never begun his mission to educate and civilize his daughters. She saw the benefits, and was beyond glad not to be mortified by Kitty and Lydia in public any longer, but she could not be happy that her own ideals and beliefs had undergone such a radical change, and were undergoing it still. Her rational mind told her it had been likely to happen at some point regardless, but she could not be comforted. Just for a little while, she would be unhappy

about it. Then she would smile and go about her day, thinking of it no more.

After all, she could not change the world.



Mr. Bingley proved to be a constant suitor. He came to the cottage most mornings shortly after breakfast. For a fortnight, he accompanied Jane on slow walks by the shore and organized outings for the entire family to visit nearby gardens and ruins. He even hired a boat for the afternoon for all four Bennet sisters, which could have only ended in disaster and, in fact, did. After four dripping, disgruntled girls made their way back to the cottage, Bingley returned to his hotel with a silly smile on his face he could not remove, no matter how hard he tried.

Somewhat to his own surprise, he dearly wanted to join the Bennet family. Yes, Mrs. Bennet was louder than she ought to be and was entirely too in awe of status and wealth, but the latter described more than half the women he knew. Her other embarrassing behaviors had been tempered of late and she was not cruel, something he couldn't say for many other women of his acquaintance or even in his family.

The Gardiners were amiable and intelligent people and he could picture many nights spent in entertaining dinners full of lively conversation. Mr. Bennet was a congenial fellow, though a bit dry for Bingley's tastes; he was a more straightforward man. He didn't manipulate those around him

or pretend to feelings he did not have. Despite their differences, Bingley found the older man's company stimulating and enlightening, and he enjoyed playing chess with such a skilled opponent.

The Bennet girls would make excellent sisters, Bingley decided. They had been great fun on the water. Even after the boat tipped and they were all sprayed with sea water, they had laughed and maintained their spirits. It was only as the wind picked up and they were cold and shivering that they had become grumpy. Even then, they weren't half as bad as Caroline on an ordinary day, without the inducement of a near-dunking.

He knew they had small dowries, but he intended to copy his friend Darcy and suggest Jane's portion go to her sisters. With both he and Darcy as connections, surely the other three would find decent husbands. Even if only one of them married, supporting two women would not be terribly difficult.

He shook his head to clear his imaginings. He had not proposed yet and Jane had not accepted. He could kick himself for not proposing at the Netherfield ball last November as he had thought about. Just as he was about to whisper the sweet words into Miss Bennet's ear, his sister had approached demanding his assistance with some problem or other. The moment passed, and now here he was, having chased his love to Margate, desperately waiting for a sign that she would be amenable to a proposal.



“Good morning, Mr. Bingley,” said Jane sweetly as Bingley joined her on the terrace after breakfast.

He smiled at her widely. “I have news,” he said with restrained enthusiasm, tapping a letter against his palm.

“Oh? From your sisters?” Jane asked.

“From Louisa. She tells me Caroline has met a gentleman at the house party. He has shown an uncommon amount of interest in her and asked Hurst about her situation. My brother says he believes a proposal is imminent.”

“After so short a time? Is that wise?” Jane asked, concerned.

“Normally, I would say no. But Caroline seeks an advantageous match, not a romantic attachment. I believe she would be comfortable with being nothing but friendly with her husband.”

Jane shook her head. “I know it is the way it is often done, but I cannot imagine doing so. It must be very strange to live in such close quarters with someone you know so little of.”

He shrugged. “Probably, but everyone has different expectations and they will come to know one another better soon enough. And he is not a total stranger. They have met at dinners and balls in the past, but nothing ever came of it. He is a friend of Hurst’s, which relieves my mind in terms of his suitability. I would not agree to marry my sister to a stranger, but a respected friend is another matter.”

Jane nodded. "Your care does you credit, sir."

He looked away. "I wish I could agree, Miss Bennet. I feel I should have done much more long ago." He looked down, a chagrined expression on his face. "I am not naturally forceful. I can manage my servants and take care of my business, but I do not like to force issues with those who should know better, and I do not like to practice strategy on people."

"I believe you're saying you are honest, Mr. Bingley," said Jane with a soft smile.

"Perhaps. Caroline would call it otherwise," he said quietly.

"I think it is refreshing," said Jane. "Who wants to constantly worry whether others are trying to manipulate us or force those who would rather not into good behavior?"

"You are wise, Miss Bennet. Strategy is best left to the chess-board. I prefer my interactions to be simpler."

She smiled and he took her hand in his.

"For example, when I admire a woman, she will know it by the way I hold her hand, and have eyes only for her." He looked at her meaningfully and she blushed scarlet. "I will be straightforward in my addresses, but patient and in tune with her desires. She will know how cherished she is by how I give her all of my time, all my attention," he kissed the back of her hand slowly, "all my heart."

Jane gasped, her breath coming rapidly.

"Miss Bennet, say the word and I will cease speaking this minute," he whispered urgently.

She swallowed loudly, but said nothing, her eyes wide and her lips parted.

“Miss Bennet, Jane, I must tell you how much I love and adore you. I loved you in Hertfordshire, but that was as nothing compared to what I feel for you now. I promise to treasure you above all else. Will you do me the very great honor of being my wife?”

Jane’s heart practically leapt out of her chest, and she wanted to fall into his arms, but she forced herself to stop and think rationally for a moment. She closed her eyes, feeling his hands tighten around hers. Could she rely on him always? Would he be able to stand his ground against his sisters and officious friends? Would he be a true head of the family, or would she be constantly prompting him to lead and exhausting herself in the process?

An image of Mr. Walker came to mind. He was more like Mr. Darcy: dependable, predictable, reliable, and very in control. And yet, she felt nothing when she thought of him. No butterflies in her stomach, no hitch in her breath, no gooseflesh on her arms. He was pleasant and good company and nothing more.

Finally, after Bingley was sure he had aged five years, she slowly opened her eyes and smiled angelically at him.

“Yes!” she cried.

The word was barely out of her mouth before he stood and pulled her up with him, embracing her and spinning around. They laughed together and Jane felt tears of joy on her cheeks.

He tenderly wiped them away with a handkerchief and she laughed nervously.

“I must go to my mother,” she said.

“I’ll go to your father,” he replied.

Smiling at each other again, they went into the house.

CHAPTER 29



Mid-July, Mrs. Bennet sat down to write a letter to Elizabeth. She had put a note on her husband's previous letters, but this was the first she had written on her own. Her daughter had been married a month and she thought it would be a good idea to inform her of what to look for if she became with child. If she was anything like the Gardiner women, she would be in the family way before the end of the year.

Mrs. Bennet told Elizabeth that her courses would first seem late before she would realize they were not coming at all. She may feel overly tired and want to sleep more than usual. Certain smells and foods could turn her stomach, and she may even be sick. Mornings could be particularly bad for some women, but her experience had always been sporadic throughout the day. Her breasts would likely grow fuller and heavier and would be more tender, possibly painful.

Eventually, her appetite would increase and she would notice she was becoming fuller all over, not just in her middle. Mrs. Bennet told her that with three of her five pregnancies,

she had enlarged primarily over her legs and bottom before her belly grew at all. Her skin would likely change, too, taking on a more milky appearance and her cheeks would eventually fill out, though likely not for some time.

She also told her the signs of a miscarriage, which she had thankfully only experienced once, and informed her that a drop or two of blood was nothing to be concerned about, but perhaps it was a signal to relax a bit more and run about a bit less. If there were painful cramps, call the midwife.

Mrs. Bennet paused in her writing as she remembered the painful miscarriage she had suffered between Kitty and Lydia. She had been sure it was a boy. Everything in her told her it was so. Her sister told her she had thought so before, but Mrs. Bennet knew this time was different. Alas, it was not to be. In her fourth month, she had been gripped with terrible pains, the like of which she had only experienced when delivering her girls. The midwife was called, and within a few hours, Agnes Bennet was no longer with child.

The tiny babe had been buried in the family graveyard at her insistence. She had not looked at the half-formed child, but the midwife confirmed what she had known all along. The child had been a boy. She called him John, after her grandfather, and wept bitterly for weeks.

Her next pregnancy was very careful and though she knew in her heart the babe was another girl, she did not want to take any risks. Lydia became a much-prized infant after a deeply-felt loss.

Mrs. Bennet sighed and pulled herself together to finish her letter. Elizabeth would be more successful than she had been, she knew it. She was fortune's child, that girl. To be so wild and still catch such a man as Mr. Darcy, she had to be very lucky. There was no point at all in giving her tips—she did not need them.

Agnes Bennet looked down at her own traitorous body. The sunlight from the window above the desk where she sat illuminated her clearly and she sighed. Her bosom was lower than it had been, and her midriff was almost painfully flat. She would not flush with new life or swell with a child ever again. Lydia's difficult birth had made sure of that.

She sighed once more. Her daughters would do better than she had. She knew it.



After a fortnight of glorious weather and excellent company, Elizabeth sat in their private sitting room, finishing her breakfast and looking over her letters. Darcy had gone for a morning ride and she was enjoying a few moments to herself. She had learned her new patterns well enough now to know that while she needed this time to remain equable, she would begin to miss him after an hour or two spent in solitary pursuits.

She opened the letter from Jane, nearly shrieking when she read of the engagement. She was thrilled for her sister. She

experienced many thoughts and feelings but was surprised by the lack of one she had been expecting. Loss.

Elizabeth had been sure Jane's marriage would remind her of the sacrifice she herself had made and that she would be both happy for her sister and a little sad for herself. But she did not feel so. Yes, she was happy for Jane, but to her very great surprise, she was glad her sister would *also* have a good marriage with a man she esteemed.

Choosing not to dwell overlong on that thought, she opened the letter from her mother. Slightly shocked by the content and its delivery, she was surprised at how helpful and informative it was. There was no talk of lace or advice on how to keep her husband happy—just womanly advice from mother to daughter, and good advice at that.

She knew not what to make of it, but sat down immediately to respond.

As she was writing, she thought about having a baby. Specifically, having a baby with Mr. Darcy. Of course, she had known for some time that if she had children, he would be their father and the likelihood of having them was extremely high. But still, it was a very different thing to think about after the wedding than it had been before.

She found herself wondering what their children would look like and presumed they would surely all have curly hair, since both she and her husband did. His was less so than hers, but she would be very surprised at a straight-haired child. Just as Jane and Bingley would likely have angelic blond children

with sweet dispositions, the Darcy children would likely all be dark and either very mischievous or very serious. She found herself laughing at the picture.

She placed her hand over her abdomen and felt its flatness, wondering what she would look like swollen with child. What would it feel like to have a babe growing inside her?

“What are you doing, love?” Darcy asked as he wrapped his arms around her and placed his hands over hers.

“I was thinking about having a baby,” she said absently.

He stiffened and turned her to face him. “Are you?” he glanced down to her belly. “Are we going to...?”

“Oh, darling, I’m sorry! No, I’m not with child. I didn’t mean to mislead you. I was just thinking about the possibility.”

He nodded, his expression slightly dazed. “What do you think of the possibility?” he asked quietly, holding her close enough that she couldn’t see his face.

“I think it would be lovely. And a little frightening. And exciting.”

He pulled back and looked at her.

“But I think I would also miss this time when it is just the two of us,” she added.

He smiled. “Truly? I will miss it, too,” he said, pulling her close again and resting his head on her hair. It was some time before he realized she had called him darling for the first time.

Elizabeth caught their image in the mirror hanging across from the table. They looked so very right together, so content in each other's presence, and suddenly she was struck with a startling realization. He was the man, in disposition and talents, who suited her best. Her liveliness was already making him easier and more pleasant in company and his greater information benefitted her immensely and engendered a respect she doubted she could ever feel for another man to the same degree.

We're perfect for each other.

Stunned by her realization, she failed to respond to something her husband said. Were there bees in the room? Is that why she heard buzzing?

"Elizabeth! Are you well?" He was placing a hand to her forehead and looking at her worriedly.

She only stared back at him blankly.

"You suddenly went pale. Come, lie down." He turned to lead her toward the settee but she didn't move.

He looked at her worriedly, and suddenly she blurted, "I think I love you." His eyes widened and she closed hers in mortification. "I'm sorry, that was badly done."

"You—you think... what?" he asked.

"Fitzwilliam," she said, eyes shining and color restored, "I've fallen in love with you."

"You've," he swallowed. "You've fallen in love with me? When?"

The urge to tease was nearly overpowering but she knew now was not the time. “I do not know exactly when, just that I know now. I believe it has been coming on so gradually I barely noticed.”

He crushed her to him and pressed a steady kiss to her hair.

“Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth. You are my very heart.”

She squeezed him back as hard as she could. “My Fitzwilliam.”

He sighed. “You do realize what today is?” he asked after a long silence.

“What is it?”

“Your birthday.”

She gasped. “How could I have forgotten?”

“We have had no sense of time here. Anyhow, it seems I am the one who got the gift.” He tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear.

She leaned into his hand with a soft sigh and he couldn’t stop himself from sweeping her into his arms and taking her straight to his bedchamber.



Two hours later, they were sprawled in Darcy’s bed, speaking of inconsequential nothings.

“When would you like your birthday present?” he asked.

“I thought the concert and the fireworks tomorrow were my gift,” she replied.

Darcy was taking her to an event a few miles away and there were to be fireworks over the lake afterward. Elizabeth had never seen them before and he couldn't wait to see her experience them for the first time.

“That is part of the celebration, but not the gift.”

She sat up, suddenly curious. “So what is the gift?”

“Wait here.”

He left the bed and went into his dressing room, returning a minute later. He handed her a folded piece of paper. She took it and looked at him quizzically.

“Go ahead, open it,” he encouraged.

She opened the paper and began to read the short letter, reading it twice through to make sure she understood.

“Fitzwilliam,” she said shakily, “is this real?” She held up the paper. He nodded. “You would go to so much trouble for me?”

Her eyes filled with tears and he pulled her into his arms. “Oh, darling, I didn't mean to make you cry. Of course I would go to the trouble for you. I would do anything for you, surely you know that.”

“Fitzwilliam! This is the best gift anyone has ever given me. I cannot wait to see them completed.” She read the letter again in excitement, marveling over the idea that her husband would

commission a Bennet family portrait and accompanying miniatures of the individual members. “Has he really already begun the sketches?”

“He has. He sent me a few suggestions for poses. I thought you might want to see them before he begins the final product.”

He showed her a few sketches of her father outside the cottage. In one he was in profile, looking at the sea; in another, he was reading in his favorite chair on the terrace; in the final sketch he was next to her mother and the two of them were laughing, her mother’s hand on her father’s arm. She reached out and touched the picture, suddenly missing her family and unbelievably touched by her husband’s gesture.

“He will come to Pemberley and sketch you once the rest of your family is completed,” he said quietly.

“Will he sketch you, too?”

“I am not a Bennet,” he said.

“But you are my family. If it is to be my family portrait, I would wish you to be in it. And Mr. Bingley, too, if he would like.”

“If you wish it, my love, consider it done,” he said thickly.

She fell into his arms and held him tight. “Thank you, Fitzwilliam. It is absolutely perfect.”

CHAPTER 30



In what was a surprising turn, though perhaps it should not have been, Bingley and Jane announced they would like to wed as soon as possible, right there in Margate. He said he did not care if his family or friends were there, as long as he was married at the end of it. He could invite a friend in London to stand up with him and preferred his sisters not attend.

Jane agreed. They had spent enough time waiting and thinking about each other; she was ready to begin their life together. She would have liked Lizzy to be there with her, but she knew her sister was in the middle of her wedding tour and very far away. It would take her a week to get to Margate, only to return north after a few days. Not wanting to subject her sister to such rigors, she sent a letter asking if Elizabeth would mind terribly if she married without her, and she and Bingley would visit Pemberley after their tour.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had no choice but to agree with the young couple. Mrs. Bennet bemoaned ever being able to decorate the chapel at Longbourn and have all her Meryton friends see one of her daughters wed. She was resigned to it

soon enough, though, when Lydia blithely suggested it was much less likely Mr. Bingley would disappear again if they married quickly. After that, Mrs. Bennet threw herself into planning a simple but beautiful wedding, and Mr. Bennet was pleased to save the cost of a lavish affair. He only wanted to see his very worthy daughter well settled.

The same dressmaker that made Elizabeth's wedding gown was commissioned to make Jane's, and Mary was to stand up with her. The friends they made in Margate were all invited and the Gardiners would come for the week of the wedding. The new couple would leave immediately after for Brighton. Bingley had let a house there for the remainder of the summer. All was put together rather quickly and before anyone really knew what had happened, Jane Bennet was Jane Bingley, waving to her family from the coach as they pulled away from their small but elegant breakfast.



“Fitzwilliam!” Elizabeth called as she rushed into his dressing room.

“Yes?” he replied, amused at her entrance and at his valet's quick exit.

“You will never believe what Jane is doing!”

“I thought she was marrying my friend Bingley. Is that not the case?” he asked sardonically.

“Ha ha. You may think you are funny now, Mr. Darcy, but I know something you don’t know,” she said in a sing-song voice.

“How do you know I don’t know it? It’s likely I have a letter from Bingley waiting for me as we speak.”

“Fine. If you’re so sure you have no need of my information, I shall leave so you may finish preparing.”

He smiled at her as she flounced out of the room. Once he was finished dressing, he looked in his room for a letter but saw nothing on the table where a letter would usually be found. He then checked the salver near the door and nothing was there but a packet on its way to Georgiana. He asked a footman if there had been a letter for him that day and the man said there had not been, but that Mrs. Darcy had received three.

Gritting his teeth, Darcy turned and found his wife in the sitting room, seated by the window and reading a letter with a look of pure happiness on her face. He sat down and watched her, saying nothing for several minutes. She bit her lip and laughed out loud and gasped more than once at what she was reading. Finally, he could take it no longer.

“Any news?”

“Hmm? Oh! Just something with my family. I’m sure it wouldn’t interest you,” she said simply.

He caught her lip twitching but was impressed by her ability to keep up her little game this long. Usually she could hold

nothing in when she was excited.

“That’s all right. I should come to know your family better. What says your father?”

“They are planning to return to Longbourn in early September. Mother wants him to stop in London for a week and he is trying to find a way to avoid it.”

Darcy smiled. “Has he been successful?”

“Not yet.” She gave him a look he’d seen often before. Half sympathy, half mischief.

Lord, she is delightful! “Tell your father they may stay at Darcy House if they wish. It would be tight at the Gardiners,” he said.

Her head snapped up. “That is very generous of you. Are you sure you wish to do that?”

“Of course. I shall write to your father if you prefer.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. I can take care of it. Thank you,” she said sincerely.

He nodded in response. He had won; his wife was no longer teasing him. He waited, wondering how long it would take for her to tell him the news.

“Jane and Bingley have decided to marry in Margate, in three weeks,” she said. “Two weeks now. Can you believe it?” Her eyes went back to her letter.

“Are you sad to be missing the wedding?” he asked.

“A little. I had always thought I would stand up with Jane. But she stood up with me, something I never thought would happen, so I suppose it is all right in the end.” She shrugged her shoulders. “They wish to visit Pemberley in the autumn and then go on to Scarborough for Jane to meet his family. They will return when my family arrives for Christmas.”

“That sounds wonderful. We will see more of them on a visit than if we were to go to the wedding.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Are you sorry to miss it? He is your closest friend.”

“Yes and no. It would be nice to be there, but not nice enough to forego my own wedding trip.”

He smiled in the way that always made her stomach flip and she blushed.

“Why did you think Jane would not stand up with you? I know it is usual for it to be a maiden, but married women sometimes perform the office. And she would not necessarily marry first just because she was the eldest,” he asked.

Elizabeth chuckled. “It is *Jane*, Fitzwilliam. She is the sweetest, most beautiful creature in the world. Why would I ever think I would marry before her? Or marry at all?”

“And yet you did.” He shot her a meaningful look and she looked away. “Why did you think you wouldn’t marry at all?”

“I simply didn’t think it very likely. I am not as sweet or as pretty as Jane, I have very little money and few connections, and I am not nearly docile enough for most men.”

He rose and walked toward her. “Good thing I am not most men,” he growled as he slipped onto the settee next to her.

She laughed. “You should never be given a docile creature. You would eat her alive in minutes!”

By this point he was nibbling at her neck and his hand was wandering dangerously high on her thigh.

“I was of the opinion some women liked being eaten alive,” he murmured before he nipped her ear.

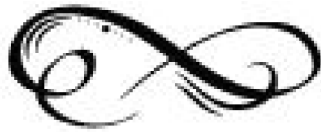
She gasped and smacked his shoulder lightly. “Fitzwilliam Darcy! How could you say such a thing to a lady?” She tried to look indignant, but it was difficult when her eyes were filled with mirth and her shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter.

“When the lady is my wife, I believe the rules differ,” he said huskily before rising and throwing her over his shoulder, causing her to shriek loudly.

“Put me down, you brute!” she cried as forcefully as she could while laughing uncontrollably.

“Never!”

The servants in the house looked the other way when a laughing mistress thrown over the shoulder of a running Mr. Darcy rushed into the master suite and slammed the door behind them.



*S*pring, 1823

“Come, Robin, we’re almost there,” called Elizabeth as she crested the hill.

“I’m coming, Lizzy,” returned her ten-year-old brother.

They reached the top of Oakham Mount and he looked out at the view surrounding him.

“I never tire of this view,” she said wistfully.

“Do you miss it when you are away in Derbyshire?”

“I am not away in Derbyshire. It is my home now.”

“But you said this morning that this would always feel like home,” he said, perplexed.

“Yes, because I grew up here. I know every tree and stream and farm. But the lot of women, or most women, is to move to their husband’s home, as I did when I married Fitzwilliam.”

“Will this always be my home?” he asked.

“Yes. Longbourn is yours already. We’re just helping you look after it until you’re older.”

He nodded thoughtfully. "When do you think I'll be old enough to look after it on my own?"

"I don't know. Perhaps two and twenty? Papa was five and twenty when he began managing Longbourn."

"I wish he was here now," said Robin.

Elizabeth sighed. "As do I. But we were very lucky to have him with us as long as we did."

Robin sighed and agreed, absently kicking a stone on the path. "When will Kitty come back again?"

She ruffled his hair and repressed the urge to pinch his round cheek. "She will return in six months, and then you will live with her and Mr. Thurston at Netherfield until you are old enough to live here alone." She squeezed his soft hand. "Are you nervous about her being gone so long?"

"A little," he said softly. "I am happy to stay with you at Pemberley and with Jane, too, but I have never been away from her so long before."

"I know, dearest. It cannot be easy. But Bennet and Alex and Charlie will keep you so busy the time will rush by, and she'll be back before you know it."

He smiled shyly and she led him back down the hill. "Come. I want to visit our parents before the wedding."

The two made their way into Longbourn's small graveyard and Elizabeth placed the flowers she had picked on her mother's grave. She said a few words and touched her fingers to her lips before placing them on the headstone, then left

Robin to himself. She knew he liked to tell their mother about his goings on and had visited her grave weekly since she passed four years ago. She traced the year on her father's headstone, 1817, and sat with her legs stretched in front of her, leaning back against the cold stone and settling in for a good chat.

“Well, Papa, Kitty is finally marrying tomorrow. I know we thought it would never happen, but Thurston is a good man. He must be, for he has waited for her long enough.” She laughed lightly. “You would be very proud of her, Papa. She has taken excellent care of Robbie. He is a good boy. I know he is only ten now and much will change soon, but I think he will be a fine man. Fitzwilliam says he has an excellent head for numbers and believes he will manage the estate admirably. He took him along when he was riding the estate with Bennet when we were last all at Pemberley. Who knew that would become a holiday tradition? Anyway, the boys are more like cousins than uncle and nephew, you saw that, but as they've gotten older it has only become more pronounced.

“They remind me of Fitzwilliam and his cousin Richard. I nearly fainted when I saw them racing around the lake.” She sighed. “He is so like you, Papa, but I see Mama in him, too. He has her liveliness and your mind. And of course her blue eyes. The bluest eyes in Hertfordshire.” She laughed lightly as she remembered her mother and her constant boasting about her children's beauty. “He shall be very handsome, I'm sure of it. He has your nose and hair. It was blond when you last saw

him, but it has gotten quite dark now and I believe it will be as dark as mine when he is grown.

“I will have another babe in the summer.” She rubbed her swollen belly absently. “Fitzwilliam desperately hopes this one will be a girl. He has never said it, but I believe he worries how he will provide for so many sons. Obviously, Bennet will inherit Pemberley, and Alex can take over Everbrook, the small estate to the north his grandfather bought. Fitzwilliam purchased a small estate in Staffordshire recently that is planned for Tommy, but that still leaves Jack and Peter without. I’ve told him that Peter is not yet two; there is time to save, and of course there is the Kympton living, but you know how he worries and plans.”

She sighed. “He takes such good care of us; I cannot believe I almost didn’t marry him all those years ago. Thank you, Papa. I know I’ve said it before, but thank you for seeing in him what I didn’t and convincing me to give him a chance. I cannot imagine my life otherwise.”

She looked up as a shadow fell across her face.

“Are you finished talking to Papa, Lizzy?”

“Yes, Robbie, I am. Help your sister up?” She held out her hand with a smile and he pulled her to her feet. “Oh!” she cried. “Do you want to feel the baby?”

His eyes lit up. “May I?”

“Of course. The boys do it all the time. Here, put your hand here.” She placed his hand on her abdomen and his eyes lit up

when he felt a tiny kick on his palm.

“Oh!” he cried.

“Isn’t it wondrous?”

He nodded. “Do you think it will be another boy?”

“You don’t think five boys is enough?” she teased.

Robin laughed. “I suppose. It would be nice to have a girl, though.”

“You think?”

“Mhmm. What do you think you would call her? If it’s a girl?”

“I like Sophie or Helena. Or Jane, after our sister. What do you think?”

“I like Jane. None of her daughters have been named after her, well, Agnes Jane, but second names don’t count, do they?”

“Of course they do!” cried Elizabeth. “You are Robin Thomas after our grandfather and father, and Bennet’s second name is Fitzwilliam after his father, and of course Alexander draws his name from Fitzwilliam’s second name, which was his grandfather’s name. A name is very important, Robin. It mustn’t be chosen lightly.”

He nodded. “Would you name her Agnes if Jane hadn’t already?”

Elizabeth smiled sadly. “I don’t know. Mama was Agnes Jane, so I probably would have used it in some fashion, but as

you know, I only produce sons. Well, until now.” She looked at her belly.

“Are you sure it is a girl, then?”

“I have a very strong feeling.”

He smiled her father’s smile at her and they walked into Longbourn together.

The End

SONS OF
PEMBERLEY



PROLOGUE



*L*ambton, Derbyshire, Summer 1769

Samuel Wickham walked through the woods with his fishing pole over one shoulder and a string of fish over the other. His mother would be pleased with his catch; he could almost hear the grease crackling in the pan on the old stove. He was lost enough in his imaginings that he didn't hear the footsteps running towards him until he was nearly bowled over by a boy a little smaller than himself.

“Oy! Watch yerself!” cried Samuel.

“Pardon!” cried the boy. “I must fetch help!”

The boy took off running again and Samuel called after him, asking what the problem was. The smaller boy yelled over his shoulder, “My cousin! At the pond!”

Wickham's eyes grew wide. He dropped his pole and fish and sprinted in the direction the boy had run from. The Dark Pond was a quarter mile away, just on the boundary of

Pemberley and another small farm. Samuel could run like a deer and he was at the pond's edge before he lost his breath.

He scanned the surface of the water, seeing nothing out of the ordinary. Then, so suddenly it made his breath catch, a pale hand shot up out of the water, followed by a gasping mouth that quickly sunk back into the pond.

Samuel yanked off his shoes and pulled his shirt over his head before diving in. The water was murky and filled with reeds and other plants. He could hardly see an arm's length in front of him. He swam towards where he thought he had seen the flailing arm, but he had to resurface for air and find his bearings. Finally, he saw what looked like an opaque wall where he knew the center of the pond to be. He hoped the cloudiness of the water was caused by someone attempting to swim free and pushed down his fear of creatures lurking on the muddy floor. He felt his way through the cloud and soon came into contact with flesh. He grabbed an arm and pulled the limp body towards him. Soon he had reached the surface and swam as fast as he could to the ledge.

He laid the small body on his side and pounded the boy's back as he had seen his father do. He said a prayer, then another, and continued to hit the boy high on his back as he balanced him on his side, water trickling from his mouth.

Finally, when Samuel had all but given up, the boy coughed and spluttered and spat up the pond water. He fell onto his stomach, continuing to spit and hack, and pushed himself up on his elbows.

“Are you well?” asked Samuel.

The boy turned his head and looked at him with dazed eyes.

“Can you speak?”

The boy continued to stare at him and Samuel began to worry.

“Your cousin has gone to fetch help. Someone should be along soon.”

“My cousin?”

Samuel sighed in relief. “You can talk!”

“Of course I can talk,” said the boy, looking mildly insulted.

“Well you cannot swim. It didn’t seem much of a stretch to think you couldn’t talk either.”

The boy looked at him in shock, his mouth dropped nearly to his chest. After a minute of silence, his shoulders began to shake, and he laughed breathily, interspersed with coughing, until he was shaking and guffawing loudly. Samuel Wickham joined him and shook his head until the other boy quieted.

“George Darcy of Pemberley,” said the boy with a hand outstretched. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Samuel Wickham of Lambton. Pleased to meet you.”

Lambton, Derbyshire, Summer 1776

“I hear Master Darcy’s back from Eton,” said Michael.

“Yes, he wrote he would arrive soon,” replied Samuel.

“You two still writing letters?” asked his brother.

“Of course,” replied Samuel Wickham. “Why wouldn’t we?”

Michael gave him an eloquent look and Samuel looked away.

“We’ve been friends near our entire lives. George is loyal,” Samuel defended.

“Aye, that he is, I’ll say that for him. He sent mother a basket of fruit this morning.”

“He did?” asked Samuel in surprise.

“Aye. Straight from the Pemberley orangery.”

His brother smiled and Samuel looked away again. The disparity in their situations had never bothered the two young boys when they were running across Pemberley’s fields or racing to the village green. But as they got older, Wickham couldn’t help but see the differences in their stations. His uncle was a gardener at Pemberley and his family had a small cottage in Lambton. George’s father owned Pemberley—an enormous mansion surrounded by miles of land all belonging to them and more besides.

Some days, he was surprised George Darcy still wanted to be his friend. But his brother Michael was right: George was nothing if not loyal.



“Come back here, George Darcy!”

“You’ll have to catch me first, Wickham!” George ran down the slope, his legs flying beneath him.

Wickham finally caught up to him by the creek on Pemberley’s eastern border and George reluctantly gave back the hat he had swiped from his friend’s head. They cooled themselves and sat in the soft grass, talking like childhood friends are wont to do after a long separation.

After nearly an hour of easy conversation, Samuel looked away and told his friend his news: he was leaving Derbyshire.

“What? Why are they sending you away? Can you not be apprenticed here?” asked George.

“I’m not being apprenticed. I’m joining the army.”

“The army! But why?”

“Because Michael and Gabriel will take on father’s business, and David has already joined the navy. I can’t stay home like my sisters. I have to earn my way.”

George shook his head. “They’ll send you to America.” Wickham looked away and George exclaimed, “What if you get shot?”

Wickham smiled his crooked grin and said, “I’ll try not to. I imagine it’s fair unpleasant.”

George shoved his arm as his friend laughed, then sighed and looked at him in resignation. “I wish you well, Samuel Wickham.”

“Same to you, George Darcy.”

CHAPTER I



*L*ondon, Spring 1811

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young man can refuse any woman who wishes him to dance when he would rather not—except his mother.

“Fitzwilliam, I must have you dance. Allow me to find you a partner.”

“Yes, Mother,” he said dutifully.

She smiled at his reluctance and led him to his cousin, Lady Arabella Fitzwilliam. He smiled at her in thanks and led his cousin to the floor.

“Are you enjoying the Season, Cousin?” she asked.

“Not as much as you,” he replied.

She laughed. “Be careful, Darcy, or it might become known you have a sense of humor.”

“Have you made any conquests yet?” he asked, ignoring her teasing look.

“Of course!” she cried. “Lord Epping has called on me twice, but I don’t think I could bear to look at his face across the breakfast table every day, so I will let him down gently.”

“How kind of you,” said Darcy dryly.

“And of course there is Mr. Arlington. You remember him from last Season. He is a very determined man. No matter how many times I tell him I am not interested in his attentions he insists on pursuing me. He is forcing me to be rude.”

Darcy shook his head and separated from her for a minute.

“Are there any gentlemen you wish to encourage?” he asked when the movement brought them back together.

“Well, there is one,” she said slyly. “But mother will not like him. His estate is small and he has no title. But he does have the loveliest smile,” she sighed and turned around him and Darcy barely resisted rolling his eyes.

His young cousin was pretty, rich, and well connected—her father was an earl and her mother was the daughter of a marquess. Her family had high expectations of her marriage and she was determined to enjoy a few Seasons before settling down to a Life of Sameness as she called it. Her first Season had been wildly successful. She had been invited to every party, soiree, and ball, and danced every dance. Eligible gentlemen were falling over themselves to court her and she turned them all down, with a smile and an offer of friendship. She had introduced two of her would-be suitors to the ladies they eventually married—and she had no qualms taking credit for the matches.

In short, she was a force to be reckoned with and one he was glad was on his side—as long as she didn’t turn her match-making skills on him.



“Will Mr. Bingley come to Pemberley this summer?” asked Lady Anne at breakfast.

“I have invited him, but his plans are not fixed. He should let me know soon enough.”

She nodded. “Is he still planning to lease an estate?”

Darcy nodded.

“You should send him to Blackwood. He may know of something.”

“I already have,” he said with a smile before biting his toast.

She returned it with an almost identical smile of her own. “I should have known. My ever-capable son.”

He nodded in thanks and they ate quietly until Lady Anne said, “What do you think of the seaside?”

“In general, or for a specific purpose?”

She ignored his impertinence. “I have thought of taking the children this summer. Luke was so young last we went I doubt he remembers it. Georgiana has been longing to go since her friends from school went last year and told her all about it. I have never seen her so envious as when she was recounting their adventures.”

“Did you have somewhere in mind? Brighton or Ramsgate?”

“I had thought Margate. Brighton will be terribly overrun and even Ramsgate will be crowded. Margate will be peaceful and idyllic, don’t you think? Your father and I stayed there in ninety-one. It was lovely.”

“That was twenty years ago.”

She shot him a look. “I am sure the sea is still there, Fitzwilliam. I will write to my cousin and see if she wishes to join us.”

“Very well. I will ask Jones to inquire about renting a cottage.”

“Thank you, my dear, but that won’t be necessary. I’m sure my uncle will grant us the use of his house. You are welcome to join us, you know. If Mr. Bingley has not committed to a visit yet, it may be the perfect time to adjust your plans. The children would love it if you came—Luke especially.”

“I will think about it, Mother.”

She smiled and left the table.



The third week of June, the Darcy family left London and made their way to Margate. Darcy, his closest friend Mr. Bingley, and his brothers Nathaniel and Luke rode alongside the carriage. Lady Anne Darcy, her daughter Georgiana, her

cousin Lady Julia Dryden, the countess of Livingstone, and that lady's daughter Lady Marianne Pickering rode inside.

Lady Julia and Lady Anne's mothers had been sisters; Anne and Julia had grown up together, gone to school together, come out together, and married within a month of each other. Their friendship was a steady one, and they spent much time together over the years.

Lady Julia's eldest daughter, Marianne—born a month after her cousin, Fitzwilliam—was expecting her third child and spending the summer with her mother and aunt. Her sons were with her husband's parents in Lincolnshire—at their insistence—while her husband himself was on the peninsula. He was a colonel in the eighty-second light division. She would have followed the drum as she had done in previous summers, but her pregnancy kept her in England until the babe was safely delivered.

Lady Marianne could have done better than a second son and a colonel—with her dowry and connections she could have gotten a first son and heir, or so her mother lamented, but she would have the colonel and none other, and his father was an earl, so her parents could not object too much. Privately, Marianne thought herself too plain to bring a high price on the marriage mart, but she would not point this out herself if others were disinclined to notice it. Her youngest sister was toying with the heir of a marquess; that would have to satisfy her mother's plans for matrimonial greatness.

They arrived in Margate with little trouble and made themselves at home in the rambling house. Lady Anne had been born a Fitzwilliam; her mother, and Lady Julia's mother, had been born Digbys, of the Somerset Digbys. This house was owned by her maternal uncle, Sir Colin Digby, and Lady Anne smiled to see the family crest framed simply in the vestibule.

"Where do you want me, Lady Anne?" asked Marianne in her straightforward manner.

Anne smiled. Marianne spoke as plainly as she dressed, yet she could not help but find it refreshing. "Let us see if Mildred has ruined anything with her redecorating," she answered as she led the way up the stairs.

Mildred Digby was her cousin's wife, who, with Colin Digby's declining health and increasing years, had begun redecorating his homes as if they were already hers. It was terribly indelicate, and Anne felt no shame in despising her for it. Her Uncle Digby was greatly loved and valued by his family, and she found anyone who wished his death a moment earlier than God ordained it to be unworthy of her time and heartless in the extreme.

"Let's put you here," she said to Marianne. They entered a breezy room with large windows facing the sea. "If Fitzwilliam says anything about you getting the best room, tell him pregnancy earns you precedence. And then send him to me."

Marianne returned her mischievous smile and began to settle in. Her mother's maid bustled in shortly to help her unpack. Marianne refused to keep her own maid; it was impossible to have one always with her on campaign—one of the lower soldier's wives was usually happy for the little work she gave them, and when she was with her family or her husband's there was always someone who would do to help her with what she couldn't manage herself. She would much rather save the expense—and herself the trouble of elaborate hairstyles and ridiculous gowns.

The women in her family were horrified by this, naturally.

Lady Anne settled everyone into their rooms, Nathaniel and Luke sharing a chamber at the back of the house and Fitzwilliam and Charles Bingley in linked rooms far from the ladies.

Lady Anne rather liked Charles Bingley. He was not who she would have originally chosen as a close friend for her son. Bingley's fortune had come from trade, but she was not so blinded by prejudice that she could not see how kind he was, and how genuine his affection for her son. His father had educated him as a gentleman and he was looking to purchase an estate of his own. All of this would of course make him more acceptable to her circles, and she would do what she could for the boy. It was rare to find someone so pure of heart, utterly bereft of malice. His situation was not ideal, but his character was exactly what her son needed in a friend. And she could admit to being a little beguiled by him herself.

He reminded her of her husband, and of her son Luke. So cheerful and unguarded. Fitzwilliam was more like herself—reserved, thoughtful, preferring intelligent discussions and debates to light conversations on inconsequential topics. She and George Darcy had been good for each other that way. She had grounded him when he became too carried away by his own *joie de vivre*; he had lifted her out of what could have become a depressing well of silence and introspection.

She hoped Mr. Bingley would be as lightening an influence on her son as her husband had been on her.



The beach was perfect. Darcy took his brothers swimming with Bingley and only had to fish Luke out of the deep water once. His youngest brother had come up spitting and gasping, declaring that he would have righted himself in a moment and his brother's interference had not been necessary. Darcy had laughed, then apologized for doubting Luke's aquatic abilities.

Georgiana split her time between the pianoforte and her cousin Marianne. She was fascinated by her cousin's life. Marianne had been on the peninsula several times since she married seven years ago, traveling with her husband's regiment. Marianne had seen the troops prepare for battle, and even assisted the surgeon by organizing supplies for operations. She had slept in a tent, and been on a ship, and ridden across Portugal on a horse.

Georgiana peppered Marianne with questions while stitching a cap for the baby; she adjusted her cousin's shawl, brought her a cushion when she looked uncomfortable, and always poured her tea exactly the way she liked it. Lady Anne and Lady Livingstone found it terribly amusing, but they never let Georgiana see for fear she would be embarrassed and cease to be so entertaining. Lady Anne would never admit it out loud, but she too enjoyed hearing stories of life following the drum. It was so very different from what she had always known; she couldn't help but be fascinated.



“Why are you hiding away by yourself?” asked Marianne when she came upon Fitzwilliam in the garden.

“I am not hiding,” he said, straightening his back on the bench he was sitting on.

“Of course you aren't. You are merely sitting on a bench by yourself behind a hedge in an empty garden. I can't imagine why I thought you were hiding.”

He glanced sideways at his cousin and gave her a half smile. “You are too observant for your own good, Marianne.”

“Out with it. What has you hiding from your dear mama and mine?”

He looked into the empty garden and said nothing.

“Shall I guess?” He gave her another look and she continued, “Your mother has found the perfect woman for you

to marry, from a good family and with a respectable dowry. If it wasn't for her hair, her face, and her personality, you would be thrilled with the match.”

He grimaced.

“Am I right?”

“Nearly.”

She looked at him expectantly.

“Her hair is tolerable.”

Marianne burst out laughing. “Poor Fitzwilliam!” After she had calmed a bit, she touched his arm gently. “I am sorry. I know it's awful when they play matchmaker.”

“How did you stand it?” he asked after a few minutes of silence.

“I chose my own husband before they could get too far in their scheming.”

Darcy scoffed.

“Mother wasn't happy he had no estate, but at least the connection was good. And I think she was beginning to think I wouldn't marry at all,” she added ruefully.

“You were twenty when you married Pickering. Hardly an old maid!” Darcy replied.

“It was my third season and she had wanted me to marry my second. Remember Josiah Cuthbert?”

Darcy groaned. “How could I forget? I can't believe she considered him.”

“If that’s what you thought of him, imagine how I felt! Thank God for Father. He put him off before he could propose. Though I have wondered if it was because he didn’t like him, or if he thought I would refuse him and cause a scandal,” she said thoughtfully.

“I imagine it was a little of both.”

“Yes, likely so.” She turned to face him again and put one hand on her protruding belly. “You will not distract me so easily, Cousin. Why not simply choose a woman to marry yourself? You’re attractive, respectable, wealthy. It shouldn’t be too difficult to find a decent woman to marry you.”

“Thank you for the glowing praise,” he said. He looked heavenward and sighed. “It is not that I am averse to marriage altogether, but...” he trailed off.

“But you have not met anyone you wish to be married to?”

“Yes.”

“A wise choice, Cousin. Marriage is for life; it’s better to frustrate your family a little now than frustrate yourself for the remainder of your life.”

“I cannot disagree with you.”

“Take it from a woman who has been married some time now. Your choice of partner may be the most important decision you make in life. There is so little we have control over. We know not when or where we will be born or die, if we will have children or how many,” she said with a rub to her

belly. “So much is left to chance. This is one arena where you may exercise some discretion. I suggest you take it.”

“Did you learn that in a tent in Portugal?” he teased her.

“You may laugh, but some of the happiest times of my life were spent in Portugal, splattered with mud, bone tired, alone in a tent with Henry. I can’t imagine being half as happy in the same circumstances with anyone else.” She watched her cousin’s thoughtful expression for a moment. “May you find a woman you wouldn’t mind spending months in a tent with.” She smiled and left him to his thoughts.



“Care to share your thoughts, Fitzwilliam?” asked Lady Anne quietly as she sat next to her eldest son on the beach.

He looked out across the water, watching his brothers and Bingley chase a crab along the surf. They darted in and out of the waves, laughing and calling to each other in excitement.

“Sometimes I think Bingley is more like Nathaniel and Luke than I am,” he said thoughtfully.

“They are full young. You were not so very different when you were their age; you simply do not remember it as such. And you have a great many responsibilities, thrust on you when you were very young.” He turned to face her, and she brushed the hair off his forehead tenderly. He smiled gently at the gesture and she looked at him with soft eyes. “You are more like me, Son. Reserved, calm, as likely to observe as to

participate. It is no less estimable than one who is lively. I daresay your quiet nature will serve you well in the years to come. It has certainly kept you out of trouble thus far.”

They shared a rueful smile and she continued, “Your brothers are more like your father. Careening wildly through life, looking for something to anchor them, though they do not know it yet. I was that anchor for your father, and I perform a similar office for your brothers, alongside yourself. All too soon they will grow up and marry shy, blushing ladies who I can only hope will be the steadfast companions they need.”

They watched the young Darcys running on the beach quietly for a few minutes.

“I do not think you would suit a quiet woman,” Lady Anne finally said.

Darcy turned to her in surprise. “Oh?”

“Just as I needed your father’s joy in life, his optimism, you need a woman who can make you laugh, who will not allow you to remain silent for three days together.” She nudged him gently with her shoulder and he shook his head, his hair falling over his brow again and ruffling in the breeze as they continued to watch the waves roll in, falling into silence as they so often did. “It is a mother’s prerogative to see her children well-married. I know you have been considering it of late.”

His head snapped towards her with wide eyes and she looked at him knowingly. He finally hung his head in

recognition of his mother's understanding. "I, I do not..." he tried to speak, but could not form the words he wanted to say.

"I am sorry I pushed you," she said. He looked at her in surprise again, wondering if this was a day for astonishment. She gave him a guilty smile. "You are my eldest son, the heir, my firstborn. You have a special place in my heart, Fitzwilliam, more than you will ever know."

She looked at him with watery eyes and he nodded, leaning over to kiss her cheek softly. He knew of what she spoke. He remembered long afternoons spent reading with her on her bed when she was too ill to rise. He had seen the tiny graves in the churchyard.

"I know, Mother. We are of a kind, you and I." They sat quietly for some minutes before Fitzwilliam spoke hesitantly, "I should like to marry a good woman. One I hold in affection." He squinted into the waning sunlight and whispered, "I should like to be happy."

Lady Anne rested her head on her son's strong shoulder and watched her children frolicking, a soft sigh escaping her.

"Very well. I will leave you be."

"Thank you."

"Promise me something. Do not leave it forever. I would like to see grandchildren while I am still young enough to hold them."

"Very well, Mother."

CHAPTER 2



*L*ambton, Derbyshire, Spring 1784

“Rachel Connelly, who are you getting all fancied up for?” asked Rebecca as she entered the small room.

“No business of yours,” she said with a smile.

“Just as well. Keep your secrets. I won’t tell you who asked for a dance this evening.”

Rachel looked at her cousin, wondering if she was telling the truth or just trying to make her jealous. “We’d best be going,” said Rachel.

She stood from the dressing table and removed her shawl from the peg. She pulled it around her shoulders, trying to make them look a little less broad, and carefully arranged two bright red curls to drape over the pretty blue fringe.

Rebecca slipped a delicate pink shawl over her equally flattering dress and pinched her cheeks in the mirror, her bright blue eyes shining large in anticipation of the party. Rachel swallowed a sigh and refused to be bothered by her cousin’s effortlessly superior beauty. Samuel Wickham had

returned in one piece. Nothing could mar her happiness this night.

The cousins walked into the assembly room together and as they always did, every male eye turned towards Rebecca Appleby. She looked around the room, receiving their admiration as her due and searching for an agreeable partner.

“Who shall I make fall in love with me tonight?” she teased quietly to her cousin.

“Shh, they might hear you,” scolded Rachel with a smile.

Rebecca sighed. “Very well. I will spread out my attentions amongst them all.”

They laughed together until a young man approached and asked Rebecca for a dance. With a wink to her cousin, she was off. Rachel smiled at her antics and scanned the room, looking for the one face she had hoped to see this night. Finally, she saw a thick mop of sandy hair near the punch table and made her way thither.

It was he. He was thinner than when she had last seen him, and though she had expected him to be taller, he seemed the same height as ever.

“Mr. Wickham?” she said quietly.

He turned to face her, their eyes nearly at the same level, and looked at her quizzically. “Yes? Miss—?”

It was clear he did not remember her name, but she was too happy to see him to care.

“Connelly. Rachel Connelly.”

“Rachel Connelly!” he exclaimed in surprise. “You’re a woman now!” He reddened at his outburst and she blushed and laughed with him. “Forgive me, Miss Connelly. Of course, you grew up. It has been six years. You were what, thirteen, when I left?”

“Yes, just barely,” she said softly. “How are you?” Her eyes were full of concern and he smiled lightly.

“I am well enough. A little worse for the wear, but I hope to be set to rights soon enough. How have the years treated you?”

“Very well, thank you.”

They exchanged pleasantries and reminisced about their shared childhoods. He eventually told her of the canon fire that had permanently injured his leg and caused a constant limp, though he assured her it was no longer as painful as it had been. She giggled softly when he showed her his trick—when he stood on his right leg, he was merely an inch taller than her, but when he stood on his left, he grew two more.

Rachel couldn’t remember when she’d enjoyed an assembly more.

Rebecca had danced three in a row and went in search of something to drink. Rachel was standing near the punch bowl, talking to some disheveled man she didn’t recognize.

When Rachel saw her cousin approaching, she made the introductions. Rebecca had moved to Lambton the same month Samuel joined the army and neither remembered the

other. Rebecca said she was glad he was returned safely and went off to find another partner. Rachel thought she had been a little rude, but she wasn't sad to have Samuel to herself again and said nothing. She happily spent another quarter hour in conversation with him, with barely an interruption.

Before she knew it, the assembly was over and her grandmother was herding them towards home. Wickham said how good it had been to see her and that he hoped he would see her in the village soon. She assured him they would meet before long and with a shy smile, she bid him goodnight.



Rachel was elated. She had seen Samuel Wickham nearly every day for a month and she was sure she was in love with him. She thought he held her in some affection as well. She knew she wasn't pretty; her complexion was ruddy and her hair was wild, and she had the height and shoulders of a man. Her bosom was pleasantly full, but instead of adding to her attractions, it made her appear all the larger. She knew she was quite homely in comparison to her cousin Rebecca. Becky was possessed of the sort of delicate beauty that drove men wild. Even had she not had shiny hair and a perfect smile, Rachel thought she would have compelled them through sheer force of personality alone. Rebecca had made an art of flirtation, and somehow, though Rachel could never see how she did it, she made whatever man she was speaking with feel like he was the greatest, bravest, most attractive man in the world.

Rachel had tried it once herself with disastrous results. She had only recovered by telling the poor man she had attempted to flirt with that she was unwell and thought she might be developing a fever. She had left the party quickly with a flushed face and the sting of humiliation in her eyes.

But Samuel Wickham was not like that. He was a good man, a kind man. He didn't mind that she was nearly as tall as he was and just as stout. He had even told her that her hair looked like fire dancing atop her head. She had thought he was teasing her, but then he had looked at her in such a way, and smiled self-consciously, that she realized it was a compliment. She had thanked him and looked down, filled with nervous pleasure.

She encouraged him as much as she could. She even baked him a pie last week when she heard his brother was ill. Technically, it was for the whole family, but he had complimented her cooking and she had beamed with pride when he told her he'd never tasted better. She thought he might even offer for her. Surely he would, if things continued to progress in the same direction. He wasn't the sort to toy with a woman's affections.

Pemberley, Derbyshire, Spring 1784

"He's a fine lad, Darcy. You must be very proud," said Wickham as he looked at his oldest friend's infant son.

"Thank you. I'm grateful it ended well. There was a little while when we thought," he trailed off and looked towards the

window. "It's no matter now. Lady Anne is on the mend and Fitzwilliam is proving to be a healthy babe."

"I'm surprised you didn't name him after yourself," said Wickham with a smile as his friend handed the babe over to a waiting nursemaid who whisked him away.

"We discussed it, but Anne's family will appreciate the gesture."

"I'm sure the old earl will be right pleased with his grandson."

Darcy guffawed. "The old earl is pleased by very little. He already has two grandsons and his second daughter will be brought to bed any day, and he doesn't seem any more pleased than he was before."

Wickham made a noncommittal noise of agreement and Darcy poured them both a small glass of brandy.

"So what are you going to do with yourself now you are back, healthy and hale?" asked Darcy.

"I haven't sorted that out yet. My brothers are using me a bit in the shop, but it can't support three men, so I won't be able to stay there long."

Darcy nodded. "Have you thought of another line of business you'd like to go into?"

"I've toyed with a few ideas here and there, but nothing seems right just yet. Lambton doesn't have many empty shops. There was talk Mr. Smith was going to sell his inn, but his nephew has decided to take it on."

“Oh? Do you want to be an innkeeper then?”

“Not particularly, but it was an idea. I don’t know that I’d do well with all them stairs,” he said with a shake of his head. “My legs aren’t what they used to be.” He took a sip of his brandy and swallowed, inhaling sharply as it burned down his throat. “I’ve a fine head for numbers, always have, and my captain had me tracking supplies in America, so I wouldn’t be completely at sea in business, but I haven’t settled on anything yet. I hate to leave Lambton now that I’ve just got back, but I may need to in the end.”

Darcy nodded thoughtfully. “You’re a clever man, I’m sure you would succeed in any endeavor.”

Wickham smiled. “Thank you, friend. Now I just need to be lucky as well as clever.”

Darcy smiled enigmatically, and Wickham asked him what was so amusing.

“I have been thinking of something, but I am not sure if it would interest you.”

“Oh? What is it?” asked Wickham.

“My steward is retiring next year. He will need to be replaced soon. We have been looking for someone suitable to begin training with him, but the two men we have interviewed won’t do. Then you came back and I have been wondering, would you like to be a steward?”

Wickham stared at him open-mouthed. “A steward? Me?”

Darcy nodded.

“Steward of Pemberley?”

Darcy nodded again. “You could begin training with Mr. Sanders immediately. There is a cottage on the estate for you to use and a horse, of course. He would teach you everything you need to know. I am sure you will do well—you said it yourself: you’re very good with numbers, and I know you’re clever besides. You already know most of the neighbors and tenants and the merchants in Lambton, and you have their respect. But most importantly, I trust you.”

He looked at Wickham seriously and his friend looked back at him, his expression thoughtful.

“I’m honored you would think of me,” Samuel Wickham said quietly. “But are you certain? Steward is an important job, and I would hate to damage such a fine estate as Pemberley.”

George smiled. “You have confirmed I’ve chosen the right man. Pemberley has been in good hands for some time and won’t crumble to the ground with a few mistakes. You’ve proven you put the good of the estate in front of your own personal gains. That’s exactly the sort of man I want for the job.” Seeing Wickham’s doubtful face, he added, “Let us begin the training. If you find you are not suited to it, you may walk away with no amity between us.”

“I will say the same for you. If you find me unsatisfactory in any way, you must tell me and send me off. Don’t let our friendship stay your hand.”

George smiled and reached out a hand to his oldest friend. “So we have a deal? You will begin training as Pemberley’s

steward?”

“Yes, we have a deal.”



“Is that him?” Rebecca nodded to the men across the busy Lambton street.

“The one talking to Samuel Wickham?” confirmed Rachel.

Rebecca nodded.

“Yes, that’s Mr. Darcy.”

“Why’s he talking to Wickham?” asked Rebecca.

“They’re old friends, of course.” At Rebecca’s look of surprise, Rachel said, “Oh, I’d forgotten you didn’t know them then. We all played together as children, the boys mostly, but I saw them racing to the horse chestnut tree nearly every afternoon. Samuel and George Darcy were always friends, since they were wee boys.”

“I see.”

Rachel wondered at the strange look in her cousin’s eyes but said nothing about it. “Let’s go into the shop. Mr. Simmons got some new ribbons in.”

Rebecca looked at the men a minute longer, then followed her cousin inside.



“How long will you be gone?” asked Rebecca.

“Only six weeks. Miss me already?” teased Rachel.

“I’m just wondering how many of your ribbons I can wear before you get back,” returned Rebecca. She smiled at her cousin and folded Rachel’s blue shawl and put it into the small trunk.

Rachel playfully emptied her drawer of every ribbon and put them into her trunk, and she and Rebecca dissolved into peals of laughter.

Soon enough, she was ready to depart. Rachel’s maternal uncle had invited her to visit some time ago, and she was finally making the trip. His daughter was approaching her lying in and Rachel would assist with her younger cousins while her aunt attended the birth. Her uncle was a successful carriage maker in Mickleover, a village thirty miles southwest of Lambton. She would enjoy a nice visit with the family she only saw every few years and be of help to her aunt and cousins in the process. Fortuitously, a local shop keeper was traveling within five miles of her uncle’s home and had offered to let her accompany him and his wife. Rachel was happy for the opportunity and bid her grandmother, great-aunt, and cousin goodbye.

When she told Samuel Wickham she was going, he had seemed sad to hear it and said he would look forward to hearing all about her adventures when she returned. She could hardly allow herself to hope, but she thought she was not too amiss to expect him to declare himself when she returned in

July. She could only hope her absence would make him realize how much his happiness had come to depend on her.

CHAPTER 3



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, July 1784

“How is the training coming, Wickham?” asked Mr. Darcy.

“It’s coming along well, Mr. Darcy,” answered Samuel.

“What’s this Mr. Darcy business?” he asked. “You’ve always called me George, or Darcy.”

“Things are different now. You’re my employer.”

Darcy nearly laughed, but stopped himself when he saw the serious expression on his friend’s face. “Very well, Mr. Wickham, if that’s how you want it.”

“It is, sir,” Wickham replied.

Darcy gave him a small smile and asked about his mother, and the conversation moved on.



Rachel stepped off the coach, looking around her eagerly. It was so good to be home! The streets were familiar and the

shopkeepers waved at her with a smile. Visiting her uncle had been pleasant, and she had enjoyed their company and especially seeing all the new sights, but nothing quite compared to Lambton for her. It would always be home. Her grandmother's neighbor caught her attention. He had come to fetch her trunk with his cart. She pointed it out to him, thanked him kindly, and began the short walk home.

Ten minutes later, she was stepping into her grandmother's rooms above the bookstore with a smile on her face. She found her grandmother and great aunt in the parlor, sewing with a pile of lace and ribbon on the sofa between them.

"Rachel! You're back!" cried her grandmother. She rose and embraced Rachel, followed by her sister, and the two older women talked over each other, trying to inform her of everything that had happened in her absence.

"Oh, but you haven't heard the news!" cried her grandmother.

"Shh, Hannah, Rebecca will want to tell her herself," said Great Aunt Appleby.

"Tell me what?" asked Rachel, bewildered.

The two women looked at her with matching expressions, deep-set blue eyes in gently lined faces, lips pinched as if to stop them from opening without permission.

Rachel continued to stare from one to the other, until finally her grandmother burst out with, "Rebecca is to be married!"

"Hannah!"

“Oh, hush, Abigail. She’ll find out soon enough.”

Abigail Appleby pursed her lips but was soon caught up in the tale her sister was telling. He had come to deliver firewood. Wasn’t that nice of him? And Rebecca had invited him in for tea. He had accepted—of course he had. He was a kind young man and Rebecca was so lovely. Who could resist her? They had had an easy conversation, and he had met her in town on several occasions, and she had spoken to him for above half an hour at the last assembly. Next thing they knew, they were betrothed. Wasn’t it wonderful?

Rachel followed the story with amused eyes, glancing back and forth between her aunt and grandmother. She had no idea whom they were talking of, but it all sounded regular enough. Though one’s only granddaughter does not marry every day, so she supposed it was due more excitement than she was allowing it.

Her Aunt Appleby continued. He had a good position lined up. He was in the early training period now, but soon enough he would have his own cottage, and a right nice one at that, and be surrounded by beautiful countryside. He would be given a horse to do his work and they were sure he could use the carriage sometimes, or perhaps the master would sell him an older one for a good price. They had a good relationship, always had. Everyone remarked on it. The master would be willing to assist such an old friend, surely. Look what he had done already? And there was no reason to think he would desist. Quite the contrary. They would grow closer than ever,

with nearly daily proximity, and that could only benefit their Rebecca.

Rachel's heart began thudding in her chest and a sick feeling filled her stomach.

“Who is the man? The man Rebecca will marry?”

“Why, Samuel Wickham, of course. Didn't we say that?” said Aunt Appleby with a confused look at her sister. Not waiting for an answer, she continued on with details of the wedding and the gowns they were making for Rebecca, for surely she would sometimes be in Mrs. Darcy's company, and the daughter of an earl was sure to always be dressed in the height of fashion.

Rachel felt her cheeks growing hot, and then her neck and ears until her scalp was tingling. She sank back on the cushions out of a sudden inability to hold herself upright. Samuel! And Rebecca! She had only been gone six weeks. What had happened? How had it happened? Rebecca knew Rachel was sweet on Samuel, she always had. She had teased her about it mercilessly.

How had it all gone so wrong?



Rachel was hanging her last gown in the closet when Rebecca waltzed in, all smiles and easy grace.

“Hello, cousin! Was your journey pleasant?” she asked airily.

“It was uneventful,” said Rachel plainly. She took her favorite blue shawl, the one she had been told made her eyes look like the clear Derbyshire sky in high summer by a drunken dance partner once, and draped it over the peg by the door.

“How was your family? Is everyone well?” asked Rebecca, as if everything was exactly as it had always been.

“They are perfectly well, thank you. They send their regards.”

Rebecca fixed her hair in the small mirror over their shared dressing table. Satisfied with her superior appearance, she turned to her cousin and said, “So Aunt and Gran have told you my news?”

She smiled expectantly, clearly waiting for praise and congratulations from her cousin. Rachel thought she would be sick.

“Yes, I heard. You are to be married.”

“In three weeks!” cried Rebecca. “The banns were read last Sunday in church for the first time. I was so giddy when they called my name; I had gooseflesh all over.”

Rachel looked at her skeptically, then turned away to place her neatly folded petticoat in a drawer.

Rebecca continued on, oblivious to her audience’s lack of reception. She spoke of the bonnet she had purchased for the occasion—it cost an entire month’s allowance, but it was her wedding, after all—and the dress her gran was making for her.

It would be cornflower blue, to bring out her eyes. She thought they were her best feature, did her cousin not agree?

“And you must stand up with me!”

“What?” Rachel whipped around, her face clearly expressing her shock.

“Of course you must! You are my cousin—we share a home. We are almost as sisters!” She crossed the small room and took Rachel’s cold hands in her own. “Say you will stand by me on the last day I am an Appleby. It will be a lifelong memory and I want you to be in it,” she said earnestly.

Rachel looked at her, her mind in riot, before finally saying, “Yes, Cousin, I will stand up with you.”

Rebecca beamed at her while Rachel barely held back the bile rising up from her stomach.



There were a few teas and a party thrown by Mrs. Simmons, the milliner’s wife, but otherwise Rachel stayed away from all society until the wedding. She hadn’t seen Samuel since before she visited her relations—when he had told her he would miss her. When she had been so sure there was something between them, that this *thing* she felt was not hers alone. But she had been a fool. Samuel Wickham had never thought of her. Why would he? Her hair was red and wild, her shoulders too broad, her height too high, her arms too strong to be feminine but not strong enough to be useful.

She couldn't even remind herself of her bright blue eyes—eyes like the Derbyshire sky in high summer—or of her pretty smile or easy disposition. She only saw hands that were worn from helping in the kitchen, and a face that was a little too broad to be pretty. She would never look like a delicate lady. She was too much like a man to be wanted by one. She was doomed to be a spinster and there was no use pretending otherwise.

The morning of the wedding, she wore a green dress and walked to the church with her grandmother. Rebecca had wanted to put her in yellow—a color that always made her look sallow and splotchy—but her grandmother had refused. Yellow may have been Rebecca's favorite color, though Rachel didn't remember her ever loving yellow before, but Hannah Connelly refused to let her granddaughter look ridiculous at her own cousin's wedding. She had worked all hours making a beautiful green dress for Rachel. It had simple lines and was gracefully decorated with embroidered flowers and a tiny bit of lace trim. Rachel had never looked more lovely. How ironic that it was for her cousin's wedding to the man she loved, instead of her own.

She entered the church with her head held high and swept to the front of the chapel. She heard appreciative murmurs behind her, but she kept her eyes on the vicar and did not look away. When she took her place at the altar, she thought she felt Samuel's eyes on her, but she refused to look at him. She would completely break down if she did, and she refused to humiliate herself in front of the entire town.

Finally, it was over, and they were signing the register. It was then that she realized Mr. Darcy was standing up with Samuel. He smiled at her kindly and handed her the pen and thanked her when she returned it. He made sure to take her arm and escort her out, and she felt him pull her a little closer when everyone crowded around to congratulate the young couple. He was probably the only man within ten miles whom she would look small standing beside, but she was too distracted to enjoy the novelty. Though she did clench Mr. Darcy's arm when Samuel thanked him for standing up with him, her eyes glued to the stone pavers outside the church, and she was grateful for his bulk that allowed her to hide behind him.

Mr. Darcy seemed to recognize her need for privacy and shielded her first from Samuel, then from the crowd around them. When everyone had dissipated and it was time to go to the breakfast, Rachel gave him a watery smile in silent thanks and he returned it, patting her hand gently and looking at her with a strange expression.

It would take her some time to comprehend it, but she eventually recognized the look in Mr. Darcy's eyes. It was pity.

CHAPTER 4



*M*argate, August 1811

“I hear you have found an estate, Mr. Bingley,” said Lady Anne at breakfast.

“Yes, in Hertfordshire. Blackwood recommended it. The owner may wish to sell if the terms are agreeable, and it is an easy distance to Town.”

“I am pleased for you. When will you view it?”

“Tuesday next. If all is agreeable, I will sign the lease and my sister will act as hostess. I may take possession by Michaelmas.”

“Wonderful! You are well on your way to fulfilling your father’s wishes, Mr. Bingley,” added Lady Livingstone. She had taken her time warming up to the un-landed gentleman, but Bingley had won her over after a summer of smiles and guileless amiability.

“Thank you, my lady. My sisters are well pleased.”

“Are they in the country at present?”

“Yes, they are staying with my brother Hurst’s family. They have an estate in Suffolk. I will travel there when I leave Hertfordshire.”

“We will be sad to lose your company, but it is good for family to be together,” said Lady Livingstone.

Bingley smiled and thanked her, and barely managed to restrain his laugh when Marianne rolled her eyes at her mother’s condescending well wishes.

“You will be missed, Mr. Bingley, and we wish you well with your new endeavor,” she said sincerely.

“Thank you, Lady Marianne. I wish you a safe journey to Town. Have you heard from Colonel Pickering recently?”

“I had a letter from him this morning,” she said brightly. “Campaign season will be coming to a close just before the babe is due to be born. He believes he may arrive in London in time for the birth.”

“That is excellent news,” said Bingley.

Lady Livingstone sighed. “I do not know why you must have your confinement in Town. It is so much more pleasant in the country.”

Bingley blushed in discomfort and Marianne made no effort to hide her expression from her mother.

“Because I do not wish for a long carriage ride when I am so close to my confinement, and because Henry would never make it all the way to Lincolnshire in time for the birth. I wish to see him as close to his arrival as I may.”

“An understandable wish, of course, dear,” interjected Lady Anne. “Now let us speak of more gentleman-friendly topics before Mr. Bingley matches the jam.” She smiled at her son’s friend and Bingley laughed, wondering where Darcy and his brothers were.



Bingley viewed the estate in Hertfordshire, called Netherfield, decided it was perfect for his purposes, and signed the lease immediately. He left for Suffolk to collect his sisters and brother and planned to return in September.

He wrote to Darcy of his plans and invited his family to visit, even if it was only to break the journey north. The Darcy family had shown him great hospitality and he wished to repay the favor. Lady Anne agreed and added a note to her son’s letter, saying how proud she was for Mr. Bingley that he had taken this step. Darcy thought his mother was being overly sentimental, but Lady Anne thought Bingley would appreciate the gesture since he had no living parents to look up to. Incidentally, she was right. Young Charles Bingley was one of Lady Anne’s greatest admirers.

The Darcy and Livingstone families traveled to London together, leaving Lady Livingstone and Lady Marianne at their home to await the latter’s husband and confinement, hopefully in that order. Lady Anne stayed long enough to order some clothes for Georgiana and see her goddaughter settled then began the journey north. She had no great love for Town and

only suffered the Season as much as she must. She blatantly refused to participate in the Little Season, and she felt great pity for her brother and cousins who were required to be in Town longer for their duties to Parliament. Once Darcy House was sufficiently closed, they headed north to Hertfordshire.

On the first of October, Bingley stood outside the stately house, bouncing his heels on the steps. His sister Caroline stood beside him, nervously twisting the rings on her fingers. She had only met Lady Anne once, at a ball hosted by a Darcy family friend. The great lady was everything Caroline hoped to be, and she had been so nervous when she met her that she barely said three words. Lady Anne had been gracious and kind but had quickly moved on to talk to her friends. Now she was staying at Netherfield, and Caroline was to be her hostess. It was a dream come true and a nightmare all rolled into one. Would Lady Anne be pleased with her apartments? Would she be put off by the outmoded decoration? Would the menus be to her liking? What of the servants?

Caroline shook her head and told herself to stop worrying. There was nothing to be done now but be as gracious as she could be. She looked up from her study of the steps when she felt a hand on hers. Charles looked at her with earnest eyes the same blue-green as her own.

“You’ll be wonderful, Carrie. Don’t worry. Lady Anne is gracious, and you are a talented hostess. All will be well.”

She smiled in relief and her shoulders visibly lowered. “Thank you, Charlie.”

A carriage pulled onto the drive and they turned to face it, heads held high. It stopped before them in a flutter of dust and a flash of a family crest. The Bingleys stood a little straighter and smiled when Darcy handed down his mother and sister.

“Welcome to Netherfield.”



Darcy joined Bingley in the study once he had seen his family well settled. “How do you like having an estate?”

“I like it very well!” he cried. “The neighborhood has been very friendly.”

“I’m sure half the men in Hertfordshire have come to call on you,” said Darcy.

“A good many certainly have. I have returned a few calls myself but haven’t met many families.”

“You mean many gentlemen’s daughters,” said Darcy with a grin. “You never change, Bingley.”

“I am dependable in this, at least,” he said with good humor. “There is an assembly tomorrow in Meryton. I told Sir William I would come if my party did not object. He knows you have only just arrived. We need not go if you do not wish it.”

“I shall ask Mother. She might enjoy a night of dancing. She occasionally attended assemblies in Lambton or Kympton.”

Bingley's expression showed his surprise. "I would not have thought that," he said carefully.

"With an estate as large as Pemberley, one has a duty to the local towns and villages. They rely on Pemberley's continued prosperity for their livelihoods. It is good for them to see us and know we are thriving, and it gives them an opportunity to talk to us of their concerns. It encourages loyalty and discourages poaching, among other things. The Darcy family has always been a force for good in Derbyshire—the people there must know that we care for them and will take care of the villages. That is hard to accomplish if we never show our faces."

Charles nodded his head with an expression that showed he wished he had been writing all this down. "You make an excellent point, my friend. I shall ask Lady Anne if she would like to go."

Lady Anne accepted the invitation and encouraged Mr. Bingley to make the most of this opportunity. If he was considering purchasing Netherfield, he must become acquainted with the local landowners. They would have to work together on occasion, and they would be his source of company in the months he spent in the country. It would be wise to make friends where possible. She said the same to Caroline, who was sitting on a chair near her.

"Miss Bingley, you should befriend the young ladies of the area. One can never have too many friends when living in the country."

Caroline was quick to agree with her and assured Lady Anne of her willingness to be kind to the country ladies of Hertfordshire. She was sure they would be in much need of direction in their fashions and behavior. Caroline was all too ready to help. Her sister Louisa agreed with an absent look and a jangle of her bracelets. Lady Anne merely looked at them for a moment before changing the subject.



The following morning, Lady Anne joined the gentlemen for breakfast before the other ladies came down. Unsurprised, she smiled at the young men and proceeded to ask them about the estate. Bingley was all excitement and eager to tell her of his accomplishments. She indulged him and encouraged him, while Fitzwilliam looked on with a suspicious look in his eye. If he hadn't known better, he might have thought Bingley was flirting with his mother. He was solicitous and attentive, and there was adoration in his eyes when he looked at her.

Turning his gaze to his mother, he saw indulgence, affection, and pride in her eyes, not unlike the expression she often gave her younger sons. She turned and met her eldest son's eyes and one brow quirked up while her lips pursed. Realizing he had been caught staring and more importantly, been caught in the wrong by his mother, he nodded in recognition of defeat and she turned her attention back to Bingley.

Who would have thought? His mother had a soft spot for Bingley, and she had been right about him: Charles valued her opinion and looked on her not quite as a mother, but with sincere admiration and more than a little awe. Like a favorite aunt who is beloved and familiar, but with the distance that comes from not sharing a home. Fitzwilliam could only smile to himself and shake his head. He was happy to share his mother with Bingley. His friend's parents were both deceased and Charles often lamented the loss of both their affection and guidance. It would be terribly stingy of him to begrudge his friend a little maternal affection. Besides, Lady Anne was clearly enjoying his company. When he thought about it, he realized Charles was about the age his brother George would have been, had he lived more than a fortnight.

Feeling suddenly melancholy, he turned his attention back to the conversation at the table. Caroline and Louisa came in, both dressed in stunning morning gowns with hair fixed much more elaborately than he would have thought appropriate for a simple morning at home.

“Good morning. I trust you all slept well?” Caroline asked.

“I did, thank you, Miss Bingley,” answered Lady Anne. “My rooms are quite comfortable in every respect.”

Miss Bingley flushed and thanked her guest. Lady Anne was in the best room Netherfield had to offer. It had been Caroline's own room, but when her brother told her of their guests, she quickly realized no other room would do and moved her things into the guest wing. Mr. Hurst had protested

all the moving about when she insisted all the family move as well, but Louisa had agreed that their guests must be comfortable, and the two ladies made quick work of directing the change.

“Do you know how often the assembly is held?” asked Lady Anne.

“I believe it is quarterly,” answered Bingley.

“And what is the size of Meryton? Are there many prominent families about and are they likely to be present this evening?”

Bingley was unsure of the exact size, but Fitzwilliam believed it was a little bigger than Lambton. As far as the families went, Bingley knew there were several with small estates and that Sir William Lucas would be hosting the night’s festivities. A Mr. Bennet owned the next largest estate, called Longbourn, but he did not recall meeting or hearing about anyone with any titles in the area or homes larger than Netherfield.

“That will make choosing my gown for the evening much easier. Thank you, Mr. Bingley,” said Lady Anne.

“I am always pleased to help a lady with her attire,” declared Bingley good naturedly.

“We must show these country ladies what true fashion looks like,” said Caroline. “They must be in want of a guiding hand.”

“On the contrary, Miss Bingley. I asked about the neighborhood so that I might choose my attire appropriately, not to make the ladies of Hertfordshire look out of fashion. I would never go into someone else’s home or ball and attempt to make them feel unworthy. A true lady leads by example, not disdain.” She smiled kindly at Miss Bingley while Caroline stared at her wide-eyed.

“Perhaps you might be willing to assist me in choosing something appropriate?” Caroline asked uncertainly.

“I would love to! Let us go up after breakfast.”

Two hours later, Caroline’s bed was piled high with gowns of every imaginable color. Louisa sat on a chair near the fire, unsure what to think about this exercise, while Georgiana happily helped her mother sort through ribbons, turbans, and feathers.

“What about this one?” Caroline held a peach gown up to her shoulders and looked in the mirror, then turned to face Lady Anne and Miss Darcy.

Georgiana’s nose wrinkled slightly. “I think the blue looks better with your complexion.”

“Yes, I agree.” Lady Anne looked at the gown critically, then turned Caroline towards the mirror. “For someone with your complexion, pale pink is better than peach. You have such lovely ivory skin. You should wear something to complement it.” She reached into the pile of gowns on the bed and pulled out a beautiful pale green ball gown. “Here. Try this one.”

Caroline looked at the gown doubtfully. It had been suggested by the modiste, but when it was delivered, she thought it too simple and had never worn it. “Do you not think it plain?” she asked.

“No!” declared Lady Anne. “I think it just right for a country dance. You don’t want to be overdressed, but neither do you want to be overlooked. This brings out your eyes. See.”

She held the gown near to Caroline’s face and the younger woman looked in the mirror, surprised to see green flecks in her blue eyes.

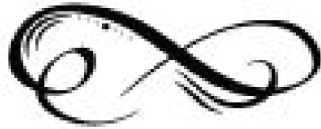
“Yes, and it is lovely with your hair,” added Georgiana. “Jade pins would be perfect.”

“What a wonderful idea, Georgiana!”

“I have just the ones!” Caroline cried, now agreeing that the gown was splendid on her.

Lady Anne left Caroline in peace and planned her own attire for the evening, satisfied that she had done right by the motherless girl. Miss Bingley was not the most pleasant young woman, but she had some potential. If Lady Anne was going to be thrown into her company, she must draw it out—if for nothing but her own sanity.

CHAPTER 5



*P*emberley, October 1785

Samuel Wickham and George Darcy were riding along the north pastures when the dark clouds that had been threatening rain for the last two hours finally opened up and quickly soaked the men through. Darcy gestured to a barn in the distance and they began heading in that direction, briskly but carefully. They were still some distance away when there was a large bolt of lightning, bright and incredibly close. Both horses began to dance about and whinny, and Mr. Darcy's horse reared up on his back legs, unseating his rider. Darcy was an experienced horseman, and he quickly rolled away from his frantic horse once he hit the ground. Wickham cried out, and before anyone could stop him, Darcy's horse had bolted and was making his way back to the stables.

Wickham calmed his horse as best he could, and when the beast had finally stopped stomping and snorting, he dismounted and barely managed to tie the agitated gelding to a limb.

“Sir, are you well?” he cried. He leaned over Darcy where he lay on the ground, trying to shield him from the worst of the rain.

“I am, but my leg,” he gestured to his right leg. “Oberon kicked it a bit.”

Wickham looked at the leg with worry but was happy to see there was no unnatural angle—it was unlikely it was broken.

“Come, sir, we must get you out of the rain.” Wickham stooped low and struggled to help Darcy to his feet. George Darcy was a tall man and broad besides, and Wickham had a leg that could barely hold his own weight. He wanted to put Mr. Darcy on his horse, but the beast was still prancing and snorting nervously, and Wickham thought it was more likely he would bolt the moment he was untied than safely carry his friend.

Eventually, he was up and the two began staggering towards the barn. Both were relieved to see that George’s leg was still functioning, just badly bruised. There was a little swelling, but he was able to bear weight on it with the help of his friend. They were a hundred feet from the barn when Darcy slumped beside Wickham and suddenly Samuel was holding Darcy’s entire weight.

“Sir? Sir! Mr. Darcy! George!” he shouted his friend’s name but there was no response.

He pulled George’s head more upright and was horrified when he saw blood on his hand where it had touched the back of Darcy’s head. Quickly, Wickham reached down and tried to

heft Darcy onto his shoulders, the way they had carried men in the war. The rain was strong and fast and it took him three tries to get a good grip. He moved as fast as he could on the sliding earth and with only one good leg, the rain stinging his eyes and making his clothes feel heavy and restrictive.

He slipped and stumbled and was covered in mud, but eventually, they were in the barn and out of the rain. He placed Darcy on a pile of hay and found a rag in the tack room. He blotted the blood from the back of his friend's head, then tied the cloth all the way around his head in the hope of stopping the bleeding.

Wickham's entire right leg was burning and throbbing, and his hip felt like someone had stabbed a knife into it. His stronger left leg was smarting from carrying the extra weight and he was starting to feel a little lightheaded from all the pain. He sat down in the hay with George until the dizziness passed.

He looked at his friend and saw that he was breathing regularly. He felt his forehead; thankfully it was not hot.

He got up painstakingly and looked out the door of the barn. "The rain won't stop anytime soon, and you need a physician. I'll be back," he said to his unconscious friend.

He made his way back to his horse, limping painfully, and rode as quickly as he dared to the stables at Pemberley. In short order, a bevy of riders and a cart was sent for the master.

When Wickham tried to climb onto the cart to accompany them, the stablemaster grabbed his arm. He swayed, and the

older man looked at him suspiciously.

“You’re in no position to be going out again. Someone should wait for the physician and his Lady will have to be informed. Go up to the house. I’ll send young Joseph for some dry clothes for you.”

Wickham agreed begrudgingly, but insisted he wait at the stables for his dry clothing. He would not drip all over Pemberley’s fine marble nor see Lady Anne in this state. Half an hour later, he was dry and awaiting Lady Anne in her parlor.

She swept in, her pale blue dress adding to the sense of cool sophistication about her, her swollen belly the only approachable trait Wickham could discern.

“Mr. Wickham, what has happened? Lucy said there was some commotion at the stables. Where is Mr. Darcy?”

“We were caught in the storm, my lady. He was thrown from his horse.”

She gasped. “No!”

Wickham held up his hands and shook his head. “He is alive, my lady, but unconscious. Or he was when I left him.”

“Left him?”

“His horse ran off and George was kicked. His leg was too hurt to walk far, though it didn’t seem damaged. We made it to a nearby barn, but he must have hit his head, for he fainted before we could get inside.”

Lady Anne was pale, her right hand playing anxiously with her necklace, her left resting protectively over her belly. “So you rode back to the stables for help.”

“Yes, my lady,” he said quietly.

Finally, Lady Anne looked at him and seemed to see *him*, not just the bearer of bad news. “Please, do be seated Mr. Wickham. You must be exhausted. I shall ring for tea.”

She rang the bell and sat stiffly across from her husband’s steward, clearly agitated and uncomfortable. Samuel wasn’t sure if it was his presence that contributed to her discomfort, or merely the situation. Regardless of her feelings about Wickham, and he knew she was not overly fond of him, she was a gracious hostess. Soon he had a steaming cup of tea in his hands and a small plate of sandwiches. He did not feel much of an appetite, even though he could hear his stomach rumbling. He realized Lady Anne must have heard it too and he blushed in mortification. It was bad enough he sat before her with wet hair and the news that he had left her husband behind in a storm, but now he was subjecting to her to the symphony of his digestive system.

He quickly took a bite of his sandwich and willed his body to be quiet.

Lady Anne looked out the window, her tea untouched, her fingers still working her beaded necklace.

Finally, when Wickham was preparing to go to the stables to check on the progress of the rescue mission, there was a commotion in the hall. Lady Anne rushed out the door of the

parlor so quickly her beads spun behind her and her dress tangled around her legs.

“George!” she cried.

The unconscious man on the stretcher did not respond.

“Has he woken at all?” she asked one of the men carrying him.

“He said a few words on the way here, my lady. Mostly nonsense. He’s been drifting in and out.”

“Has the physician arrived?”

“Should be in the next quarter hour, my lady.”

The men continued their processional up the stairs and Lady Anne followed along, one hand on the railing and the other clutching her belly. He could not die! He simply could not! She needed him too much. They were having another child next month. He wanted to meet her so badly. He was certain the babe was a girl. He had suggested names. Men who were naming new babies should not die. It would be too cruel!

On her mind raced as she made her way up the stairs and down the corridor to her husband’s room.

Wickham looked at the stairs looming before him and gathered his strength. He had a hand on the bannister and had gotten up the first two steps, with a hiss of pain and his face twisted, when the butler stepped forward and asked him to please wait for the physician. He needed to check things below stairs and assure the footman were reassigned as some would be sent to the master’s chambers to assist. Wickham nodded

gratefully, his hip burning so badly he could not hide his discomfort. He was only glad Lady Anne was not there to see him like this. He sank into an ornate chair in the entrance hall to await the physician and prayed desperately for his friend.

“Please don’t die. Please don’t die. Please don’t die.”



Samuel stepped into the master’s chambers at Pemberley, his hat in his hand, the brim nearly ruined with his twisting.

“Stop standing there like a dolt and come where I can see you,” George called from the bed.

Samuel shook his head and took the seat by his old friend’s bed. “How are you faring?” he asked.

“I have been better,” answered George. “The physician says my leg will heal fully if I give it adequate rest.”

“I am glad to hear that. And your head?”

“I barely notice it anymore—the headaches are fading.”

Samuel nodded and smiled, his shoulders falling in relief.

George looked down at his lap, then up at his friend again. “I see you have yet to give up your habit of saving my life.”

“I would, if you would quit getting into trouble.”

George laughed soundlessly. He reached out and placed one large hand on his old friend’s shoulder. “You are a good man, Wickham. I’m proud to call you friend.”

Wickham looked down with red cheeks. “You would have done the same for me.”

“Yes, I would have. But that does not lessen my gratitude, nor the valor of your actions.”

Wickham met his eyes and nodded solemnly. “I understand,” he hesitated for a moment, “George.”

Darcy’s eyes lit up and he smiled brightly. “I’m glad to hear it, Samuel. Now, how does the new babe?”

“Your namesake does well enough. He seems to have a strong aversion to sleep,” said Wickham with a rub to his eyes.

Darcy laughed. “That will pass in time. You know you are welcome to a bed at Pemberley if you need it.”

Wickham shook his head. “You are generous, but I will be well. Rebecca is considering fostering him out. She is worn out with his care and feeding. And with no mother or sisters to help her...”

“Will her cousin not come to stay? Miss Connelly, was it?”

Wickham rubbed the back of his neck and looked about the room. “I wouldn’t feel right asking her.”

George looked at his friend shrewdly. “How goes it with you and Rebecca?”

Wickham sighed. “Well enough. Little George takes all our energy. I haven’t thought of much else in some time.”

“Perhaps that is how it should be.”

“Perhaps.”



Rebecca was exhausted. An exhaustion she felt in her bones. Even her hair felt tired. Nine long months of feeling fat and ungainly, followed by two days of hard labor and innumerable sleepless nights had left her feeling like she could fall asleep while standing.

Samuel had suggested a nursemaid, she had wanted both a nursemaid and a wet nurse, and they had had the money for neither. Samuel had been incredibly angry when the bill from the dressmaker arrived. His face had gone a deep red and the vein in his forehead had bulged. She thought he would humiliate her by forcing her to return those items that could be returned, but instead, he had said the bill must be paid and paid promptly, and she would simply have to economize until his next wages came in.

She had thought the most insulting thing he could do was to return her new hat. But no. Forcing her to nurse her own child was infinitely worse. Her figure would be ruined. She would never wear her favorite gowns again without looking like a flabby old woman.

He should have put the tradesmen off and hired the wet nurse. She was certain it was not half as important as he claimed it was to pay them so quickly. They must have many customers who paid late and were therefore accustomed to it. Samuel was overreacting.

Besides, if it was so important, he could ask Mr. Darcy for the money. Everyone went on and on about what great friends they were. What was a new hat or two between friends? Lady Anne must spend twenty times what Rebecca did on clothes. She was hardly frivolous! Boots were always a practical purchase. And she had needed the new spencer as her old one had faded, and the hat was so becoming on her she had been unable to resist it. Surely, when he saw her in it, he would forget all about his anger.

Alas, a month had passed, and Samuel had not forgotten. He had paid the greedy shopkeepers and refused to hire a wet nurse until they could afford to pay her. Rebecca was incensed at his stubbornness, but she was too tired to fight him properly. Finally, inspiration struck. She would take George to her aunt and grandmother's home. The old biddies would love to spend the day holding a baby, and perhaps Rebecca could finally get some sleep.

"Let me hold my grandson," said Abigail Appleby, reaching for the bundle in her granddaughter's arms.

Rebecca handed over the babe gladly, sinking into the divan in exhaustion.

"You look tired," said Aunt Connelly.

"Little George never sleeps! I am exhausted."

"Why do you not go lie down in Rachel's room for a spell? We shall watch over the little one."

Having achieved her aim in coming to visit, she stumbled to her cousin's room and fell gracelessly onto the bed, asleep within moments.

Rachel arrived home a half hour later to find her grandmother and aunt cooing over her cousin's baby, young George Wickham. He was a cute enough baby, she supposed, but hardly worth making all this fuss over.

“Would you like to hold him?” asked Hannah Connelly.

Knowing she would appear churlish or worse, jealous, if she refused, she reached for the tightly wrapped bundle and settled into a chair by the fire. Young George was sleeping, and against her better judgement, she felt her heart reaching out to the tiny child. He was her blood after all, no matter how distant, and his mother had been something like a sister to her for the six years they had lived together. And his father had been precious to her once. It was difficult to harden one's self to a defenseless infant, especially when the babe insisted on curling his little hand around her finger and making the most delightful noises while he slept.

Looking up surreptitiously, she saw that her grandmother had nodded off across the room, and her aunt was occupied with her sewing. She was free to indulge her fantasies. For a moment, she dreamt this was her baby, and Samuel was her husband, waiting for her at the cottage at Pemberley. The babe would be the first of many, and she would be a devoted mother, and Samuel a wonderful father.

She allowed herself the image for a few minutes longer, then forced herself to return to reality. George was Rebecca's babe, not hers. Samuel was Rebecca's husband, not hers. The cottage at Pemberley belonged to her cousin, not her. She should not think of such things. It would only make it more difficult to face the truth. She would never have a husband. Never have children who looked to her for comfort and reassurance. Never have a cottage of her own. There was no use pretending. It would only break her heart.

CHAPTER 6



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, November 1785

“Really, dear, I don’t know why you spend so much time with your steward. It is unseemly,” Lady Anne said petulantly as she settled on the sofa.

“He is not only my steward; he is my friend,” replied her husband.

“That makes it worse!” she cried.

He smiled and looked at her charmingly. “He is my oldest friend, and a truer man I challenge you to find. Have you already forgotten the service he rendered me last month?”

She shuddered. “No, I have not forgotten. Mr. Wickham has my deepest appreciation for saving your life. Did I not gift his wife with a new cradle and linens for the babe *and* have them to dinner to thank him? It was a very great compliment. Many stewards never enter the main dining room unless it is to deliver a message!”

George Darcy laughed. “My darling little wife.” He pulled her rigid form closer to him. “How I love you.” He kissed her

cheek and rubbed her arm, smiling at her while she sat as straight as her extended abdomen would allow and stared into the fire, refusing to soften or look at him. “You are ever the great lady.”

Her head whipped towards him at that.

“And I love you for it. But Samuel is my friend. I will not change that, nor do I want to.”



The midwife stepped into the hallway and the physician followed her. Mr. Darcy leapt to his feet and stared at them expectantly. The midwife shook her head slowly and looked at him with pity.

“I am sorry, sir, the babe did not survive.”

Darcy closed his eyes and exhaled. He had feared that would be the outcome. Anne had been laboring for more than a day when the physician was brought in to assist the midwife. The babe was breech, and nothing they did would make it turn.

“I am sorry about the babe, sir. But Lady Anne will survive if she does not develop a fever,” said the midwife. “The babe was breech, and large besides. She should not have another for some time—allow her womb to heal.” The midwife gave him a significant look and he stared at her blankly.

The physician wiped his spectacles with a large handkerchief and said, “I’m certain you have other options.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Though you do have a son already, so the loss would not be devastating.”

The midwife gasped and George finally looked at the strange man.

“What did you say?”

“It does not bear repeating!” cried the midwife.

The thin physician looked down his long nose at her and sniffed. “I was merely saying that the gentleman is young and could marry again or not as he chooses as he already has an heir.” He sniffed again and perched his now-clean spectacles on his nose.

George looked at him coldly. “I will see my wife now.”

The midwife said something he did not comprehend then left, taking the physician with her. George entered the birthing room quietly, shutting the door softly behind him. Anne lay in the bed, still and sleeping. A cold breeze coming through the open window rustled the curtains gently. He wondered at its being open for a moment before the acrid smell of blood hit him. He saw his wife’s maid coming through the dressing room door and approached her.

“Lucy, how does my wife?” he whispered.

“She is well enough, sir, but her spirits are brought low,” she replied.

He nodded. “Of course.” He looked to the open window again, then back at the floor. “What has been done with the

babe?” he asked, his voice sticking in his throat like a carriage wheel caught in the mud.

“Mrs. Jones took her in there to be cleaned and prepared, sir.” She pointed to the dressing room.

“It was a girl?” he asked, his voice higher than usual.

“A bonny girl, sir. I’m so sorry, sir.”

He waved her away and Lucy bobbed a curtsey before scurrying out of the room.

A girl! Anne had borne a girl! And the poor babe had not taken a single breath, nor seen a slit of blue sky, nor smelled the clean Derbyshire air after a spring rain. Choking back a sob, he sank into the nearest chair and dropped his head into his hands.



“Dearest, you must drink something,” Mr. Darcy held the glass near her face, waiting for her to open her eyes and lean forward to take a sip, but she stubbornly pressed her lips together and refused to look at him. He sighed and sat down in the chair by the bed and pressed his hand to his mouth. “Very well. We will not drink today.”

Several hours later, he awoke in an awkward position in the too-small chair. He squinted to see his wife in the dim light and was troubled to see tears tracking silently down her porcelain cheeks. Quietly, he rose from his seat and found her maid in the dressing room.

“Please bring Master Fitzwilliam here, Lucy.”

She practically ran out of the room and he went back to his wife, standing far away from the bed near the door so that she might weep without an audience. Lucy returned a few minutes later with Fitzwilliam in the arms of his nurse. When he saw his father, he reached for him and smiled brightly.

“Good afternoon, Son. Would you like to visit Mama?”

“Mama!” cried eighteen-month-old Fitzwilliam.

Mr. Darcy took his son from the nurse and dismissed her and the maid, then closed the door quietly and walked to his wife’s bedside.

“Anne, Fitzwilliam is here. Would you like to hold him?”

“Mama?” said Fitzwilliam in a small voice. He furrowed his brow and looked at her seriously, his blue eyes probing.

Lady Anne opened her eyes and looked at her son, her expression crumbling when he reached his chubby little arms out towards her. She reached forward with a sob and snatched him from her husband, pressing her face into her son’s hair and shaking with the force of her grief. Young Fitzwilliam clung to his mother, his small arms tight about her neck, until his hair was wet from her tears and she lay limply on the bed, her anguish spent for the moment.



“What are you two about?” asked Mr. Darcy jovially when he walked into his wife’s chambers. It had been over a month

since the stillbirth, and she had sent for Fitzwilliam every day since her husband had first brought him to her. They were now prettily arranged on the carpet before the fireplace, stacking colorful blocks into a tall tower.

“We are building a tower, my dear. Can you not tell?” she asked playfully.

She had painted the blocks herself with her cousin, Lady Julia. It had been something of a project for them when each was expecting her first babe. Each block was a different color and had a unique picture painted on it. Some featured flowers that grew in the Pemberley gardens, others were covered with birds and foxes and various animals Fitzwilliam was learning to identify. She had spoken of painting more when she saw how Fitzwilliam loved them, with vague images of family members on them, shortly before the recent birth. He wondered if she would consider painting them still.

“Will you join us?” she asked with a smile.

“Papa! Bwocks!” cried Fitzwilliam, holding up two blocks for his father’s inspection.

“I see that, Son. A fine builder you are. Now let us see if we can create a bridge.” He sat down next to his son and they began creating a simple bridge over Lady Anne’s shawl, which was laid across the floor to look like a river.

Darcy looked up from his task to see a soft expression on her face and her eyes shining like they had not in months.

“My dear?” he questioned.

“I am very pleased to be married to you,” she said quietly.

His brows rose in surprise and he smiled. “As I am to be married to you.”



The midwife had said it would be wise to wait some time before having another babe. Her womb had been tested terribly with the breech birth; her body was tired. Allow herself to heal, a year, perhaps more, then try again. The midwife had given her a few suggestions to try to prevent pregnancy while allowing her to lie with her husband. Anne blushed furiously and could not imagine having such a conversation with him.

We may continue sharing a bed, my dear. As long as you do not spend inside me, all will be well. She was mortified at the thought. Had the physician told her husband the same? If she turned him away, would he understand her reasons? Would it harm their marriage? Would he seek comfort elsewhere?

The idea of her husband in the arms of another woman, kissing her, caressing her, making a child with her, was not to be born. Lady Anne Fitzwilliam Darcy, daughter of the Earl of Matlock and great-niece of the Marquess of Cheshire, was second to no one. She did not cower before difficulties but met them head-on. Awkward or no, she would speak with her husband.

And share him with no one.



Anne wrapped her favorite dressing gown tightly about her and knocked on her husband's door. She stumbled and stuttered but eventually came to the point and told him that she was not averse to lying with him, was in fact quite happy to do so, in a month or so when she had healed further, so long as he was able to control himself enough to not deposit his seed inside her. Her cheeks flamed bright red and her husband looked at her with such a soft look on his dear face, his eyes unbearably tender, his mouth tilted in a gentle smile, that she felt equally touched and mortified. Her pride blanched at his pity, at being seen as a bumbling fool. But he was so very dear to her, and she *was* bumbling at the moment. She was grateful for his understanding, truly.

He reached out and took her hand and she let him pull her closer, until she was standing only a few inches from his body. She placed her hands on his lapels and peeked up at him. He was a tall man—terribly tall, her mother called it—but she liked it. Anne was not small herself. Thin and willowy, but taller than her friends. She liked that he made her feel less like a heron standing by a stream, all long legs and sharp angles, and more like a gracious lady. She slid her hands up to his broad shoulders and ran her fingers over the fine lawn of his nightshirt. She stepped closer, closing the tiny distance between them, and immediately felt his heat covering her.

His hands settled loosely around her waist, and she sighed and rested her head on his chest.

“I have missed this,” she said quietly.

“I have missed you.”

“Could I sleep with you tonight?” she asked before she could second guess herself.

He sighed and rubbed his face into her hair. “I should like nothing better.”

As they lay together beneath the counterpane, her head on his chest and his arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders, he stroked his hand aimlessly over her skin, drawing meaningless shapes with his fingers, gathering his courage to ask an awkward question. Finally, he found the bravery when he remembered how his wife—his delicate, proper, ladylike wife—had come to him that very night to explain how the land lay in their intimate relationship. If she could muster the courage, so could he.

“Dearest?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you enjoy sleeping with me?”

She lifted herself up on one elbow and looked down at him. “Of course I do. Did you not know it?”

“I know you sometimes enjoy my company, especially in January when the nights are cold.”

She swatted his shoulder playfully. He caught her hand and toyed with her fingers.

“I mean, what do you think of sharing a bed every night?”

Her eyes widened and she looked at him in surprise. “You wish to sleep with me every night?”

His enthusiasm dampened at her expression. “Not if you dislike the idea.”

“No, I like it! I was merely surprised.” She looked down and fiddled with the ribbon on her nightgown. “So, would we sleep in your chamber or mine?”

He smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear. “It matters not to me. Pemberley has many rooms. Perhaps we should make a study of them all and choose our favorite.”

He smiled in that way that had always made her knees feel unsteady, and she leaned into it, kissing him sweetly on his smiling lips, then his strong jaw, already rough from the beard that never fully gave way to the razor, and a final kiss on his nose, impressive appendage that it was.

“Shall I take this show of sweetness to mean you like this plan of mine?”

“I like most plans of yours, but no, that is not why I kissed you.”

“No?”

She shook her head. “Do you not know by now?”

He raised his brows in question.

“I cannot resist you when you smile at me like that, George Darcy.”

In a flash, she was beneath him, gasping and laughing as he playfully kissed her all over, from her hair down to her ankles. She smiled at him indulgently as he stroked the top of one foot, tickling her toes and smiling when she laughed.

“I can never resist you, my sweet. Whether you’re smiling or not.”

Her mirth quickly shifted to tenderness and she smiled softly at him and held out her arms. “Come here, my husband.”

“Yes, my wife.”



Anne Darcy closed the gate behind her and slipped into the graveyard, making her way swiftly to the corner with the family plots. It had been six long months, but the soil had finally settled, and a small curved stone had been placed. She set her bag on the ground and took out the trowel. She dug a small space in front of the stone, then gently removed the tiny rose bush from her sack. She settled it into the hollow and scooped dirt around it, patting it gently into place. She sat back on her heels, heedless of her clothes, and looked at her handiwork. Pink roses, for love hopeful. She touched the cold stone with her gloved hand, tracing over the name.

Rose Catherine Darcy

B. – D. 22 November, 1786

She took a deep breath, stood, and dusted the dirt from her skirts. She gathered her tools into her bag and made her way back to Pemberley.

CHAPTER 7



*M*eryton, Hertfordshire, 2 October, 1811

The Meryton Assembly was a hopeless crush. The Netherfield party—Lady Anne, Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley, and Mr. and Mrs. Hurst—arrived as the musicians were tuning their instruments before the dancing began. The public rooms were overflowing with sound and people and their attendant laughter and scents. Darcy was overwhelmed by the latter when he walked into the room. Someone ought to tell the woman who had bathed in rose water that felling any gentlemen who came within sniffing distance ought not to be her goal.

Sir William Lucas had called on Bingley when he first arrived in the neighborhood and he now made his way to the party of newcomers, a broad smile on his face and his blue coat straining at the buttons.

“Mr. Bingley! We are delighted you could join our little assembly!”

Bingley introduced his party, then Sir William introduced his family—a rather plain but sensible looking daughter,

another less plain and less sensible daughter, and a wife from whom the overwhelming rose scent seemed to be originating.

Before Darcy knew what had happened, he was promised to dance with Miss Lucas, after she completed the first set with Mr. Bingley. His mother smiled at him knowingly, and he resisted the urge to roll his eyes. It would do him no good regardless. His mother would be appalled if he refrained from dancing while ladies were sitting down. He must do his part as a gentleman, even if he hated every moment of it.

Sir William then led them to a pretty woman near his mother's age and said she was Mrs. Bennet of Longbourn, the largest estate in the area after Netherfield. This woman proceeded to gush effusions on the guests, but thankfully Darcy was far enough behind the other members of his party that he did not hear everything she said. He did, however, feel his mother pulling his cuff and stepped forward to be introduced to the Bennet daughters where he dutifully asked the eldest to dance. She was engaged for the first set, and the second was promised to Bingley, but she offered him the third with a demure smile and dip of her pretty head, and he was relieved to know he would have at least one passable partner.

His mother's fingers pinched his wrist and he looked at her, seeing her eyes dart towards another young lady standing before them. Besides the mother, there were three other girls, the pretty eldest he had already engaged for the third, a shorter brunette he had glanced over, and a bored looking girl who didn't look much older than Georgiana and seemed to wish she were anywhere else. Assuming she wanted him to dance with

the middle daughter, he looked at her questioningly, hoping she understood that he had not heard the young lady's name.

"Miss Elizabeth," said Lady Anne, "I do love the shade of your gown. That fabric is so elegant."

The one called Miss Elizabeth thanked her and said she had gotten it on her last trip to town.

Before his mother could pinch him again, Darcy said, "Miss Elizabeth, might I have your hand if you are not engaged for the next?"

"I am not engaged, sir."

Lady Anne smiled happily and sent the young couple off to dance, pleased with her work for the moment.

"Such a handsome man is your son, my lady," said Mrs. Bennet.

Anne was surprised it was said so quietly, as everything else that lady had said had been at a volume designed to be heard over the musicians. At least Anne hoped that was her reason. She was glad to know the lady could speak at a more discreet level. And was that wistfulness she heard in her tone? Or was she imagining things?

"Yes, he is a very handsome young man, though I shouldn't boast of my own child," said Anne with no little pride.

"Tosh! Mothers ought to be able to boast of their children amongst each other. We've earned that right." Mrs. Bennet shifted her weight and pursed her lips, looking like a hen on her roost.

Lady Anne smiled. “Yes, I suppose we have. Your daughters do you credit. They are very beautiful and such graceful dancers.” She looked to the dancers moving down the line.

“Yes, they are lovely girls. My Jane is the beauty of the county, everyone says so, though I have a mother’s partiality. Elizabeth has the look of her father’s mother about her, but she is pretty in her way.”

Lady Anne looked carefully at the young lady they were speaking of as she danced down the line with her son. “That she is. She seems a happy sort of girl,” she added with a tilt of her head. Miss Elizabeth smiled broadly at the ladies she was standing in a circle with as they danced about, then turned back to her partner. Did Fitzwilliam nearly crack a smile? Such joy would be contagious, Anne thought.

“Oh, yes! My Lizzy is very cheerful. Always laughing and singing and scampering about. She has been that way since she was young. She has not Jane’s figure, but she is lively.”

“I think her figure light and pleasing,” said Lady Anne. Miss Elizabeth was not voluptuous, but neither was she boyish. Though compared to her sister, Anne could see why Mrs. Bennet referred to her as she did. Miss Bennet was everything feminine and lovely. Honey colored hair, bright blue eyes, ivory skin with cheeks pink from dancing, and a figure that kept her partner’s attention riveted to her neckline.

Mrs. Bennet was about to respond that Elizabeth was too thin, but looking at her very slim conversation partner, she wisely, and uncharacteristically, closed her mouth before she

could say something that would insult the lady. After all, Lady Anne was the daughter of an earl and the mother of an eligible son. Who knew how many nephews and cousins she knew who might be in need of pretty young wives?

Wanting to find out more, she said, “Your son seems an excellent dancer. Is he your eldest child?”

“Thank you, and yes, he is my eldest. I have a daughter waiting for us at Netherfield—she is only fifteen and not yet out, and two more sons. Nathaniel is away at Eton, but Luke is here in Hertfordshire.”

“Three sons!”

There was that wistfulness again. She was sure of it this time. “Do you have a son, Mrs. Bennet?” she asked softly.

Mrs. Bennet looked away, then back at her feet. “No, I do not. There was once—but he—but it was not to be.”

Lady Anne knew that look well. She recognized the pain on the other woman’s face and impulsively reached out and grasped her hand. Mrs. Bennet raised her head in surprise, and the two ladies shared a look of understanding before Lady Anne released her hand.

“You have three healthy daughters. That is something to be proud of.”

“Three! Oh, my lady! I have five! My two youngest were in the other room when we were introduced. They are just there dancing. The tall one with the blue ribbons is Lydia, and the one in the pink dress is Kitty.”

Lady Anne nodded as she found the giggling girls in the crowd. “Five daughters is quite the accomplishment.”

Mrs. Bennet beamed and wanting to return the compliment, said, “Your son has a very noble look about him. Does he take after your side of the family?”

“No, he is nearly the image of his father, though George was rather larger.”

“Larger?” Mrs. Bennet squeaked before she could stop herself. She clapped a hand over her mouth, hoping she had not offended the lady. But really? Larger? Than Mr. Darcy? The man who stood a full head above Jane who was quite the tallest woman in the area. He towered over poor Lizzy. The top of her head only reached his shoulder!

Lady Anne smiled and shook her head. “I know. Mr. Darcy was a very tall man.” And broad and strong and warm and wonderful, but she need not say all of that to a new acquaintance. “My son does have my eyes, though.”

Mrs. Bennet nodded, not knowing what to say that would not offend and still shocked that such a man could exist, or that such a lady would want him. Why, how could a lady lie next to such a man without fearing he would roll over and crush her in her sleep? Thankfully, she was saved a response by a pause in the music and clapped for the musicians. Seeing her friend pass near, she seized the opportunity.

“Let me introduce you to Mrs. Goulding.”

CHAPTER 8



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, Summer 1788

Samuel Wickham walked up the long path towards the cottage, stepping carefully in the darkness. His hip had been smarting all day and he didn't want to risk falling and making it worse. A movement drew his attention to the hedge encircling the small yard. A figure was moving quietly towards the gate.

“Who's there?”

He heard the gate's creaky hinges opening and the snick of the latch as it fell into place, then boots moving swiftly away.

He took a breath and entered the small garden and let himself in through the blue door, its bright paint black in the darkness. Rebecca was adding a log to the fire, her hair in a loose plait over one shoulder.

“I'm back,” he said quietly when she didn't turn or acknowledge his presence.

She poked the fire a bit more, then turned and smiled at him. “How is Mr. Darcy this evening?”

“Well.” He hung his coat and hat on a peg and took off his boots. “Becky,” he said hesitantly, “who was the man I saw leaving out the side gate?”

“What man?” she said, pouring hot water into the teapot.

“Don’t lie to me. I saw a man leaving just before I got here. Who was he?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She sliced bread from the loaf and put it on a plate, then set it on the table in front of her husband, leaning slightly across him.

Wickham smacked his hand on the table ledge and the dishes rattled.

“Damn it, Rebecca, I’m not stupid. I can smell him on you! There was a man here. Who was he?”

She stared at the wall for a moment, then finally looked at her husband. “He’s no one you know.”

“What was he doing here?” he ground out, as if he didn’t know the answer.

“Keeping me company,” she said with a sly smile and a wicked glimmer in her eye.

“Becky! I told you! No more!”

He limped towards her, anger making him clench his fists and grind his teeth.

She quickly moved to the other side of the table. “Sometimes a woman needs a real man. A cripple doesn’t always satisfy.”

Her blow hit its target and he took a step back, shock evident on his features.

She smiled triumphantly. “Good night, *husband*.” She walked down the short hall and into the bedroom, shutting the door behind her.

He didn’t realize she’d left until he heard the key turn in the lock.



Rachel Connelly walked into the bakery and the room quieted. It had been happening often lately, and she knew all too well why. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment for her family and her former friend, but she would hold her head up high. Her own actions were beyond reproach. If they wanted to gossip about Rebecca, there was nothing she could do about it.

But why could her cousin not be discreet? Was it not enough that she had stolen the man and the life Rachel had wanted? Did she have to ruin her reputation as well?

Aunt Appleby had died last winter, and at first, Rachel thought Becky’s odd behavior had been grief over losing her grandmother. After all, Abigail Appleby had taken in Becky after the girl’s father had died. She could have said no. She could have said that she was too old and too poor to look after a child. She could have let Becky go to the orphanage or the workhouse. But Abigail had refused to allow her son’s only child to grow up without her family and had taken the young girl in, though she could ill afford it. It had been a generous

thing to do, everyone had remarked on it. It was no wonder Becky would grieve for such a relation.

But in such a way?

Rachel could not understand it. If Samuel Wickham had been her husband, she would never have even looked at another man. But that was the difference between Rachel and Rebecca. Rebecca had always needed the attention of dozens. She could not be satisfied with one man's devotion—she needed the entire ballroom to wish to dance with her, the entire town's adoration. Every man she came across must admire her, every woman must be envious, or Rebecca was not satisfied.

Rachel tried to feel sorry for her cousin. Becky seemed to have a gaping hole inside her she could not seem to fill, no matter how hard she tried. But the longer this went on—the more Rachel heard the whispers and felt the stares of her friends and neighbors, the harder it was to have pity on her cousin.

Squaring her broad shoulders, she stepped up to the counter and made her order, then left the shop with her head held high. Rebecca had taken enough from her. She would not take her dignity.



“You must see how this is harming the family?” pleaded Rachel. She sat across the worn kitchen table in Rebecca's cottage, the tarts she had brought from the bakery on a plate between them.

“There isn’t much family to harm,” Rebecca replied blithely, daintily biting a pear tart.

Rachel fell back, stunned. “So Gran and I are no longer family, are we? And what of your son? Your husband? Do they not matter at all?”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “Don’t be so dramatic, Rachel. What harm has befallen you? Have your suitors gone running?” She laughed bitterly.

Rachel stared at her cousin, surprised at her blatant cruelty. Rebecca had always been thoughtless. Selfish. Dismissive of the needs of others. But this was so cold, so hurtful.

So deliberate.

Rachel swallowed painfully. “Where is my nephew?” she asked with false cheer.

Before Rebecca could answer, young George came into the room, sleepily rubbing his eyes. He eyed his mother warily before spotting his aunt.

“Auntie Wachel!” He smiled brightly and scrambled up onto her lap, laying his head against her bosom happily.

Rachel cuddled him close and kissed the blonde curls springing wildly about his head. He might be Rebecca’s son, but by some odd twist of fate, he had inherited her corkscrew curls. “Did you have a nice nap, Georgie?”

He nodded, his eyes closed and his thumb in his mouth. Becky reached across and tore his hand from his mouth, startling the boy.

“No sucking your thumb,” she said harshly.

“He is only two, Becky,” said Rachel softly, holding him a little closer.

“Nearly three, and it’s unseemly. He’ll never be allowed to play with Master Darcy if he continues with such habits.”

Rachel rubbed circles on George’s back and took a steadying breath. “Are the boys friendly, then?”

Rebecca shrugged. “Not particularly. But I have high hopes for their friendship. They are close in age, and there are no other children for the young master to play with. Why not my George?”

Rachel could think of several reasons why not, chief among them Lady Anne, daughter of an earl and mother to the young master. But her cousin never wanted to believe she was beneath anyone, no matter how true it was.

Rachel focused on little George for a bit, breaking up a tart for him to eat and asking him about his daily activities. Finally, she looked up at Rebecca. Her cousin had a faraway look in her eyes.

“Becky?”

“I had hoped he...” said Rebecca quietly, her gaze fastened on the window. Rachel reached out and touched her hand where it rested on the table. Rebecca’s eyes snapped back to her cousin. “No matter. George will become friends with the young master, and that will put all to rights.”

Rachel wondered what her cousin was not telling her, but given everything she had heard of late, she thought it might be better that she not know. She nodded along and changed the subject, then left with young George in tow, saying her grandmother would welcome a visit and that she would bring him back in a day or two.

Rebecca did not argue—she never did when Rachel suggested George spend some time with her in Lambton. It was always the same. Rachel would come to the cottage with something from the bakery, or occasionally a toy made by one of Samuel's brothers at the carriagemakers, and George would leave with his aunt and spend a few days with her in their rooms over the bookstore. The poor boy was always more relaxed at his aunts' home than his mother's, and Rachel was happy to provide what respite she could.

As she walked the nearly four miles back to Lambton, little George holding her hand, and then held in her strong arms, she contemplated her cousin and her choices and the unfathomability of her behavior. Rebecca had always done as she wished, but this, this was beyond the pale. This was humiliating, to herself, her family, her child, her husband!

Why had Samuel chosen her? He did not even seem to like her. Rachel knew what men looked like when they were enthralled with her cousin—she had seen it often enough. But Samuel avoided looking at Rebecca when they were in company—when he wasn't avoiding her presence altogether.

She stopped in the road, the truth tugging at her mind like a cold wind in January.

Samuel did not appear to like Rebecca because he *did not* like Rebecca. He had never liked her. Rebecca was cruel and heartless, and she always had been. And somehow, she had stolen Rachel's beau like a thief in the night.



Two weeks later, Wickham and Mr. Darcy were in the study when they heard a great commotion in the hall. The study was located near the front of the house and the sound of feet running past and doors opening and closing was impossible to miss. They looked at each other for a moment, then both leapt up and burst into the hall.

“Is it time?” asked Darcy, to no one in particular.

A footman was hurrying to the front of the house. “I believe so, sir. The physician has been called, and the midwife already arrived.”

He sprinted for the stairs. Why had the physician been called? Had they agreed on that beforehand? He could not remember. Surely this babe was not breech as well?

He burst into their chamber and found Anne pacing the floor in a dressing her gown, her gait wide and her cheeks red. “Are you well, my love?”

She smiled at him, then cringed as another pain came over her. “Quite well,” she managed to get out when it passed.

“The babe is comin’ fast, sir. Best say yer piece and move on,” said the midwife crisply.

He nodded and took Anne’s hands in his own. “I will be just outside if you need me. Be well, dearest.” He kissed her forehead as she squeezed his hands through another pain. She smiled at him weakly and he gave her hand a quick kiss.

“The room is ready!” Her maid, Lucy, rushed through the door.

He watched as the midwife and Lucy led his wife into the birthing room—what had been her room before they decided to share his chamber. He knew she was in good hands, but he hated to leave all the same.

George paced the hall, ignoring the maids bustling in and out of the room with hot water and fresh linens, and cringed every time his wife cried out. She did not scream, but she did moan and growl and shout at her maid, which he had never heard her do before. It was quiet for nearly ten minutes, then he cringed when she suddenly cried out in what was clearly horrific pain. He nearly tore through the door when he was stopped by the sweetest sound—a tiny cry, thin and disgruntled, followed by Anne’s happy cries. He couldn’t help himself. He burst into the room and rushed to his wife where she was holding their baby to her chest.

“I did it,” she said tearfully, insensible to everyone moving around her. “He is here!”

“He?”

She nodded, tilting the bundle in her arms so he could see the face of their son. “Isn’t he handsome?”

“He is perfect.”

She laughed through her tears, exhilarated and exhausted and utterly in love—with her new son and her husband and the second chance she had feared she would never get. She reached up and wiped the tears from her husband’s face, smiling beatifically.

“What shall we call this little fellow?”

“George, for his father,” she said proudly.

Darcy felt honored and humbled at her suggestion. That she would go through such pain, such horrors, to bring forth their son, and would then wish to give the babe his name. He took her hand up and kissed it fervently. “My very dear, you honor me.”

She continued to weep quietly, interspersed with laughter, overjoyed and overwhelmed at all that had happened.

The physician soon arrived and George was dispatched to deal with him while his wife and son were cleaned up and put to bed for a good nap. Once they were settled, the physician looked in on Lady Anne—speaking to her for only a few minutes before declaring her in good health—then he examined the baby.

“I do not like his color.”

“Pardon?”

“See how he looks a little blue around the edges? He may not be breathing properly. His heart is beating too quickly.”

George got closer and examined his son. He was pale, but weren't all babies? Perhaps his lips were a touch on the blue side...

The physician continued to poke and prod until the baby cried, a thin, watery sound.

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“His cry is weak.”

“He is small. He will get stronger,” George asserted.

“I hope so. Watch him closely for the next few weeks. He may grow out of it, or he may not. Send for me if I am needed.”

He gathered his things and bid Darcy farewell, having sufficiently robbed him of his enthusiasm. He gathered his son to his chest.

“All will be well, my boy. No need to listen to the mean old man,” he crooned. He was met with the steady breaths of sleep, but he could not help but notice how they sounded just the tiniest bit shallow.



“What is wrong?” Anne cried. “George! Call for the physician! He cannot breathe!”

George looked over his wife's shoulder at his son's blue face. "Has he choked on anything? Is something in his mouth?"

Anne frantically swept his mouth with her finger. "No, nothing! Call for the physician."

She held the baby close to her as George raced out the door and sent a footman for the physician. He knew it was useless. The boy was barely breathing. The physician would never make it in time. What they needed was a miracle.

Anne paced before the window, clutching her baby and praying frantically. George couldn't make out her words, only the occasional "dear God" and strangled sobs. He watched her helplessly, knowing there was nothing he could do but aching for action.

Suddenly, Anne's scream rent the air. She sank to her knees as if her legs had been cut out from under her, a cry unlike any he had ever heard ripping from her breast. She keened and rocked on the floor, their son's lifeless body clutched tightly in her arms.

"Anne, let me hold him. Anne, dearest, let me."

She looked at him with wild eyes, her grief a living creature suddenly sprung up between them. He put his hands on her shoulders and stroked down her arms, keeping his eyes locked on hers. Finally, she relaxed enough for him to pull her to him, his large hands rubbing circles on her back as she sobbed aching, heartrending tears onto his shoulder, their dead son pressed between them.

Lucy found them that way, the three of them in a puddle on the floor.

“Sir, my lady, the physician is here,” she said softly.

Anne lifted her head from her husband’s shoulder and met the eyes of her maid, the woman who had seen her through her come out, her wedding night, three pregnancies, and now two losses, and all she could say was, “Oh, Lucy!” before dissolving into a flood of tears.

“My lady!” Lucy rushed forward and brushed the hair back from her mistress’s forehead, making comforting sounds.

Darcy rose from the floor and said he would dispatch the physician and fetch Mrs. Reynolds.

Lucy nodded at him, as Anne was insensible where she wept next to her on the floor. “Let’s get you into bed,” she said softly. She rose up slowly, carrying her weight and Anne’s. She led Anne to the bed, baby George still wrapped in his blanket and held snugly in his mother’s arms. Lucy pulled back the coverlet, and before she climbed in, Anne turned towards her and looked at her with hollow eyes.

“You take him, Lucy. Take care of my boy.”

Lucy nodded and gently took the bundle from her lady’s arms. Anne crawled wearily into bed, her knees curling up to her chest. Lucy pulled the blankets up slowly, then crept out of the room.

She met Mrs. Reynolds in the hall and the two of them were so intent on their conversation that neither of them noticed the

door to Lady Anne's room open and a tiny figure slip inside.

“Mama?” Fitzwilliam whispered into the dark room. “Are you sleeping? I heard you crying.” He crept into the room on his toes, making his way to the bed. He could see his mother in the moonlight, her face pale and tear-streaked, with red blotches near her eyes and on her cheeks. Jutting out his lower lip, he climbed onto the bed beside her and put his head on the pillow next to hers. She mumbled something in her sleep and wrapped her arm around him, holding him close.

More than an hour later, after speaking with the physician and the housekeeper and his wife's maid, Darcy was changed into his nightshirt and ready for bed. He stumbled into his wife's room and climbed onto the bed, surprised to feel a small body in his usual place. Realizing what had happened, he smiled and scooted his son over enough to make room for himself and lay down to sleep beside them.

CHAPTER 9



*L*ambton, Derbyshire, Spring 1789

Rachel climbed down from the wagon and held little George's hand as he jumped down behind her. "Thank you for the ride, Mr. Wickham," she called to the driver.

"Any time, Miss Connelly. You may call me Gabriel if you wish. We are family now." He smiled as he made the suggestion for the dozenth time. She always smiled, thanked him, and went on calling him Mr. Wickham.

George thanked his uncle and waved goodbye as Gabriel drove the wagon onward. Rachel shook her head and rapped the knocker on the cottage before letting herself in.

"Rebecca," she called. "I've brought George back." She set her nephew's things on the bench near the door and helped him out of his coat and then draped her own shawl on the peg. "Becky?"

She moved through the cottage, looking for her cousin. She finally found her out back, talking to Samuel where he stood near his horse just on the other side of the small fence.

“Oh,” she said awkwardly, looking at the ground. “I’ve just brought George home. I’ll head back to the village.”

“That isn’t necessary,” said Samuel, just as Rebecca said, “Don’t be silly.”

Rachel ignored their words, tipped her head slightly, and turned back into the house to say goodbye to George.

She was wrapping her shawl around her when Rebecca found her. “You mustn’t go so soon, Rachel. You’ve just arrived.”

“Gran will be missing me.”

“Nonsense. I insist you stay for tea. Tell her, Samuel.”

Rachel’s head shot up and she saw that Samuel had followed her cousin into the house.

“Rebecca is correct. There is no need to rush off. Please, stay for tea.”

Cornered, Rachel nodded and sat in the small parlor while Rebecca called for tea. They had a maid, but she was not adept at serving, so Rebecca usually brought in the tray herself. Today, she had the maid bring it in. Rachel thought that perhaps her cousin had sensed her desire not to be left alone with Samuel and thought well of her for a moment. Perhaps Rebecca could be kind when she wished to.

Samuel passed on the tea his wife handed him to Rachel. “Miss Connelly.”

“Call her Rachel! We are all family. No need to stand on ceremony. We have been married five years now. Plenty of time for you two to become accustomed to using your Christian names,” Rebecca said with a hard smile.

Seeing the gleam in her cousin’s eyes, Rachel rethought her position on Rebecca’s kindness.

Samuel smiled awkwardly and sipped his tea, clearly wishing he were someplace else. They drank on, listening to Rebecca prattle about the gossip in the village. Finally, Rachel took her leave, refusing every entreaty to stay and insisting that she must return to her grandmother.

She was nearly a mile from the cottage when she heard a carriage approaching behind her. She stepped to the side of the road to allow the vehicle to pass and was surprised to see it was Samuel Wickham in Mr. Darcy’s curricula.

“Will the master mind you going out and about in his curricula?”

“I am hardly going out and about, and no, he will not mind.”

She nodded and turned to continue her trek towards the village. It was another three miles to home and she still had tasks to complete.

“May I take you back to Lambton?” he asked.

“That is not necessary, thank you.”

“I know it is not necessary, but I am offering.”

“I wouldn’t want to keep you from your duties.”

“It is no trouble.”

Knowing when she was beat, Rachel closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then turned and climbed into the curricule. She did not wait for Samuel to dismount and offer her a hand up. She was no fine lady, and there was no use pretending otherwise. “Thank you,” she said grudgingly.

She sat as far from him as was possible and looked out at the scenery, hoping he wouldn’t try to talk to her.

“Thank you for spending so much time with young George. He is very fond of you.”

“He is a sweet boy,” she said simply. *The poor lad cannot help his parents.*

“He is much like his mother,” said Wickham. Something in his tone made her look at him quizzically, as if he were searching for something, but she knew not what it was.

“I only saw Becky once as children, and I barely remember it. By the time she moved to Lambton, she was nearly thirteen. No longer a baby.”

“No, of course not,” he said quietly.

What was he trying to ask her? Why had he stopped to offer her a ride? Had he gone and gotten the curricule just to convey her home? If so, why? Just because she spent time with his son? Surely not!

She hated being near him. She hated not understanding what was happening. Things were not as they seemed, but no one would tell her what was going on. She wanted to shake him

and make him answer her questions, but she knew he would not.

He made some comment on the weather, she said something that passed as an answer, and they rode on in silence. Lambton was visible in the distance when he said quietly, "I wish things were different."

"What do you mean?"

He looked at her sincerely, with the look he had given her that summer five years ago, and she looked back suspiciously. He shook his head. "I would stand your friend, if you would let me."

"Your friend?"

"Yes. I can be a very good friend."

She couldn't help the smile that tugged at her lips. "So I've heard." She sighed. "Very well, we shall be friends. But I shall still call you Mr. Wickham."

"Very well, Miss Connelly."

He smiled again and drove her home, handing her down quite civilly when they arrived in front of the bookstore.



"How is young George?" asked Mr. Darcy. He poured himself a measure of brandy and did the same for his friend.

"He is well enough. He spends much of his time in Lambton with his Aunts," Wickham answered. He stretched his legs out

in front of him, repositioning himself in the chair to relieve the pressure on his hip.

George settled into the chair next to him and leaned back, sipping his brandy with a sigh. It had been a long day. Two tenants who had been on Pemberley land since his grandfather's day were having a dispute over a fence. One claimed they had an agreement to share repairs on the fence, the other said the first man had damaged it, therefore it was his responsibility to repair it. Somehow, the argument had devolved into another about the property line, the first man claiming the second had given himself a little more land the last time he had worked on the fence.

George knew the argument wasn't truly harmful yet, but he had seen small disputes turn into grudges that lasted decades, and he wished to avoid that. So he and Wickham had spent the day listening to the tenants, examining the fence, then the property line, and consulting maps to ensure everything was in its proper place. Neither of them particularly enjoyed dealing with grown men who behaved more like toddlers, but it was worth it to avoid greater problems in future.

"I am glad to see the back of this day," said Samuel tiredly. He let his head loll back against the chair and closed his eyes.

"Does George see many other children?" asked Darcy.

Samuel opened his eyes slowly, tracing the conversational thread back till he understood what his friend was speaking of. "Not many. The vicar has a boy near his age, but Becky doesn't care for him."

“Abara? What does she object to?”

“What do you think?” he said with a look.

Darcy looked heavenward and sighed.

Not wanting to talk about his wife, Samuel brought the conversation back to his son. “Why do you ask about George?”

“I thought he might like to spend some time with Fitzwilliam. They are not so far apart in age, and it would be good for them each to have a friend so close.”

Wickham nodded. “What did you have in mind?”

“Fitzwilliam is learning to ride, as you know. Perhaps George could join him in his lessons?”

“I don’t know that George is big enough for that pony.”

“There is a Shetland in the stable. Fitzwilliam only rode her for a year before he grew too tall.” Wickham shot him a look at his friend’s understatement. Fitzwilliam was so tall he looked a good two years older than his age. George only smiled in paternal pride. “The pony might do very well for young George. Why do you not begin teaching him the basics, then the boys may ride together? You could even keep the pony at your cottage if you wished.”

Wickham nodded. It was not an altogether bad idea. And young Fitzwilliam was a sweet boy. He would be good company for young George.

“Thank you, that is a very kind offer. I’m certain George will enjoy the chance to ride.”

“Think nothing of it.” George studied his friend carefully, not speaking for several minutes. “Samuel?”

“Hmm?” Wickham’s head had found its way to the back of the chair again, and his eyes were drifting closed.

“George is only a wee boy. He is not his mother.”

Samuel’s eyes flew open and he turned to face his friend. Another minute of silence passed before he said, “I know that. But you know what Rebecca is. Sometimes, I see George do something, or say something, ordering things to his preferences, manipulating outcomes, and I see her in him.” He looked away, his countenance troubled. “It chills me to the bone.”

“Is that why you allow him to spend so much time in Lambton?”

Samuel nodded. “Miss Connelly is a good woman. And she loves George. And old Mrs. Connelly is a sweet lady. They are always kind to him. A child should know kindness.”

George looked at his friend sadly. “Yes, he should.”

Samuel stared at the fire, then gave his friend a sad smile. “I thank you for the offer of the pony. It will be good for George. I’ll let you know as soon as he’s ready to ride with the young master.”

CHAPTER 10



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 15 October, 1811

“Why must we go to Longbourn?” whined Miss Bingley.

“Because they invited us and we accepted. It is now the polite thing to do to arrive,” replied her brother.

“But they are ridiculous!”

Bingley sighed. “If you are truly so against going, I will tell them you are unwell and you may rest here on your own for the evening. I’m sure one less person at table will not make much of a difference.”

Caroline did not like dining with her country neighbors, but she liked dining alone in her room while her guests were at the home of a family with five comely daughters even less.

“Are you unwell, Miss Bingley?” asked Lady Anne. She had entered the parlor before either of the Bingleys noticed her presence.

Flushing, Caroline answered, “Not at all, my lady. Simply wondering at the wisdom of our dinner arrangements.”

Bingley gave his sister a hard look, but she ignored him.

“The country is not Town, Miss Bingley. There are not amusements on every corner. We must take our entertainment where it may be found, and we must make friends where we can, or it will be a lonely winter indeed.”

“Of course, my lady.” Caroline scrambled for a response that would improve her in the great lady’s eyes. “I was worried about leaving Miss Darcy and young Luke here on their own, that is all.”

“Oh, well if that is all, you needn’t have worried. Mrs. Bennet was concerned about the same thing. How lovely that you both had the same turn of mind. She has invited them along. I did not think it appropriate for Luke to attend, but Georgiana will be joining us.”

Caroline could do aught but smile tightly and ask if the carriages were prepared, for she was ready to depart.

They filed into the entryway and Lady Anne caught her eldest son’s eyes. His lips twitched, but he showed no other sign of having heard her conversation with Miss Bingley.

Due to the size of their party, two carriages were readied. Lady Anne somehow arranged it so that Georgiana rode in the Bingley carriage with Mr. and Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley while Lady Anne rode with her son and his friend in the Darcy carriage.

“Mr. Bingley, I hope you do not mind the intrusion,” she ignored her son’s cough, “but I wanted to speak to you about

your relationship with Miss Bennet.”

Bingley looked surprised, but sat up straighter and said, “Yes, my lady?”

“What are your intentions towards her?” she asked plainly.

“Towards Miss Bennet?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I, that is, I hadn’t thought, I mean, my intentions are not *dishonorable*.”

“But are they honorable?”

Bingley spluttered.

“Let me be more specific. Do you intend for this to go beyond flirtation? Are you waiting to know her better with the potential of proposing marriage to her?”

Bingley’s eyes widened comically and before he could begin spluttering once more, Lady Anne continued.

“Miss Bennet is a gentleman’s daughter and a sweet girl besides. She has lived her entire life in the country with precious few visits to Town. She is not accustomed to being trifled with, and forgive me, but she does not know your reputation for falling in and out love at a moment’s notice.”

“Well, I—”

She held up a hand to forestall further response. “It is clear that you like her. And why would you not? She is a lovely girl. But I thought you should know how your actions are being perceived.”

Having gone from curiosity to indignation to confusion, Bingley now answered cautiously. "And how are my actions perceived?"

"You danced with her twice the first night you met her. When you saw her at Lucas Lodge, you monopolized her attention for most of the evening and danced with her again. When she called on your sister, you escorted her out to her carriage. When she came for tea, you joined us as well. At the Gouldings two nights ago, you barely left her side. Knowing all of this, how do you think those actions are being perceived?"

He sank back into the squabs, suddenly pale. "Have I committed myself then?"

She laughed lightly. "No, not as yet. It would take a great deal more than marked attentions to force a wedding, but not much more to engage your honor."

What relief he had begun to feel was short lived. "How should I proceed?"

"To begin with, you should decide what it is you want from Miss Bennet. If it is merely a little entertainment while you are in the country, I would suggest you set your sights elsewhere. She is not the type to enjoy a meaningless flirtation. If she appears to enjoy your company, then she truly does. It would be wrong to make her care for you if it is only a game on your part."

"No! It is not a game. I truly admire Miss Bennet."

“Then you must decide how you wish to proceed. Are you ready to be engaged or married? Do you wish to come to know her better with the intention of potentially making your proposals? I am not suggesting you decide all tonight—simply that you not encourage something you do not intend to follow through with.”

“Of course. You are right, my lady. I would not wish to hurt Miss Bennet.”

“Good.” She smiled and softened her voice. “If you wish for someone to speak to, or would like for me to invite Miss Bennet to create opportunities for you to know her better, you need only ask.”

Bingley beamed back at her. “Thank you, my lady.”



Mrs. Bennet had planned the dinner party to perfection. The menu was just right and the table setting was perfect. She had put Lady Anne next to Mr. Bennet, as was proper, but afraid her husband would bore the lady, she had placed Jane on his other side, and Mr. Bingley next to Jane. Mr. Darcy would sit beside Mrs. Bennet, as the highest ranking gentleman in attendance.

Beyond his position as a landed gentleman, she knew little about Mr. Darcy. He was terribly quiet for a young man of fortune. Only look at Mr. Bingley! As garrulous and amiable as the day is long. But Mr. Darcy was highly eligible, and if

being quiet was his worst fault, he would do nicely for one of her girls.

Jane was clearly taken by Mr. Bingley, and they were so well suited, that the natural candidate was Elizabeth. But Elizabeth was wont to talk on and on and spout all sorts of opinions, showing off her cleverness, and these great men did not like women who were smarter than themselves. Did he want someone as quiet as he was? She could place Mary next to him, but the poor girl was so plain Mrs. Bennet did not think her capable of turning the head of a gentleman worth ten thousand a year.

Lydia might do well for him if he wanted a lively wife who could brighten him up. But she was the same age as his young sister, and she thought he was not the type to go for one so much younger than himself. Kitty! She would place Kitty on his left. She was older and quieter than Lydia, but prettier than Mary and less clever than Elizabeth. Mrs. Bennet frowned. Kitty was not one to rely on in matters of great importance. And she was a slight little thing—even smaller than Elizabeth. It really was too bad Lydia was too young for him, for she was on her way to being the tallest of her daughters, and Mr. Darcy was easily the tallest man she had ever seen.

She would place Kitty on Mr. Darcy's left and Elizabeth across the table. Georgiana could be on Kitty's other side, so if conversation with Mr. Darcy did not progress, Kitty could befriend his sister.

Attire was chosen as carefully as everything else. Lady Anne Darcy was terribly elegant. Long and lean, she dressed herself in light, cool colors and had an almost fey elegance about her. Mrs. Bennet was in awe. Drawing on her fresh inspiration, Jane was made to wear her newest gown of pale blue, even though she preferred the green, and Elizabeth was dressed in pale green to bring out the flecks in her hazel eyes. Elizabeth could only smile an apology to her older sister for wearing her favorite color.

A rather obtrusive feather was placed in Jane's hair, which Elizabeth promised to accidentally pull out when their mother was busy elsewhere. Jane also wore the Bennet family pearls that had belonged to their grandmother. If it were not for the ridiculous feather in her hair, she would have been perfection.

Even Mary did not escape her mother's machinations. She was stuffed into one of Kitty's dresses, for her own were all declared too plain, and her hair was done in a more elaborate style than she had ever seen it. Mary scowled throughout her toilette, but Mrs. Bennet only tutted at her and said it was not every day an earl's daughter dined at Longbourn and that this friendship was very important to the family. Mary would not damage it with her ugly clothes.

Mrs. Bennet herself was in her best gown of deep blue, chosen to bring out her eyes, and had three perfect feathers in her new turban. Overall, she looked absurd, but she was too proud of her feathers to be convinced of such. When Mr. Bennet saw her in the corridor, he stopped and stared at her for a full minute.

“What are you staring at, Mr. Bennet?”

“I am merely wondering if you will take flight, my dear.”

She huffed. “Oh, Mr. Bennet! Lady Anne is sure to be dressed in the latest fashions, we cannot look out of date. Did you see Miss Bingley’s gown at the Gouldings? So much lace!” And on she went until Mr. Bennet wished he had said nothing at all about her feathers.

By the time their guests arrived, Mrs. Bennet’s feathers were drooping sadly and Jane’s had gone missing altogether. Mrs. Bennet welcomed the Netherfield party into the drawing room with an excess of civility that embarrassed her two eldest daughters, but did not seem to bother their guests overmuch, though Elizabeth could see Mrs. Hurst trying to stifle a laugh and Miss Bingley sniggering behind her fan.

Having spent enough time in drawing rooms to know how to handle them, Lady Anne quickly attached herself to Mrs. Bennet. Clearly, the lady was nervous and it was making her say the most outrageous things. Lady Anne sat beside her on a settee and spoke of her son Nathaniel’s latest letter from Eton, leaving the younger generation to speak amongst themselves.

The Hursts and Bingleys ended up sitting with Jane and Mary while Elizabeth hurried to Miss Darcy. The young woman was far too timid and sweet to be left to Kitty and Lydia. That left Mr. Darcy standing on his own for a moment, but he quickly decided to join Miss Elizabeth and his sister.

Miss Elizabeth was slowly drawing Georgiana out, asking her about music and her studies. They eventually landed on the

topic of the seaside and when Miss Elizabeth confessed that she had never seen aught but the Channel, Miss Darcy launched into stories of their time at Margate that summer. Mr. Darcy occasionally added to the conversation, but overall said very little.

Dinner was much the same. Mr. Darcy sat next to Mrs. Bennet, and besides the red tips of his ears, one could not be certain he had heard her, so little did he respond. Of course, Mrs. Bennet left so little room in her discourse for others, it was unclear whether he was deliberately quiet or simply unable to find an opening to speak.

Elizabeth watched him throughout dinner, trying to make out his character, but she did not get on at all. She wished to be irritated with him for not speaking more, but her justice demanded she acknowledge that Mrs. Bennet gave him little opportunity. She could hardly speak to him herself—the centerpiece was so long and high that those on opposite sides of the table could hardly see each other. During the second course, Elizabeth amused herself by pretending she was in a jungle, peeking through the foliage at some exotic animal. Mr. Darcy caught her eye as she was smiling at her own silliness, and for a moment, he smiled back at her, but then his attention was drawn to her mother and she brought her mind back to the present.

Elizabeth was conflicted about Mr. Darcy. When she had met him at the assembly, he had been a perfectly amiable gentleman. He was not gregarious or as easy in company as his friend, but he was polite and made intelligent conversation.

She had looked forward to knowing him better, for it was not every day a well-educated young man came into the neighborhood, and a handsome one besides, but things had not progressed as she had thought they would.

Once he and Lady Anne had stopped by Longbourn on horseback. Lady Anne had come in for tea, but he had claimed he was too muddy for the drawing room and had gone back to Netherfield. When she had seen him at Lucas Lodge, he had watched her, or so she thought, but he had never made an attempt to approach her. She had separated herself from Charlotte and stood near the window with a glass of punch, in case he wanted to speak with her, but he never did. She had given up in frustration and thrown herself into the party.

At the Gouldings, he had again seemed to watch her, but she had decided he was not worth the frustration and ignored him the entire evening.

When she called at Netherfield with her mother, she had met Miss Darcy and was quickly convinced she had never met a sweeter girl. Georgiana was guileless and gentle, with an innocence about her that was endearing and inspired her protective instincts. They had not had much opportunity for private discourse until the Bennet's dinner party, but Elizabeth thought she would eventually be friends with the shy girl from Derbyshire.

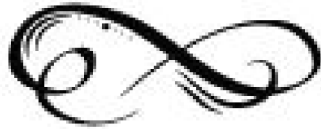
How had Lady Anne, a lady in every sense of the word and the mother of sweet, shy Georgiana, raised such a vexing son? One moment he was attentive and engaging, like when he

joined the ladies for tea at Netherfield, and the next he was aloof and haughty. She could not make him out.

By the time the dinner party was over, Elizabeth was relieved. Not only because Mrs. Bennet had served entirely too many dishes and she was uncomfortably full, but she was tired of trying to understand Mr. Darcy. When the ladies withdrew, Miss Bingley and then Mary had played for them. The gentlemen returned just as Elizabeth was moving to take her turn at the pianoforte. Without any provocation, Mr. Darcy came to the instrument to turn the pages for her, but then he had said fewer than a dozen words to her! What was she to make of that?

Elizabeth shook her head and brushed out her hair. She would think about what she could understand, like the scowl on Miss Bingley's face when she realized she would spend dinner between Lydia and Mr. Hurst, or the way she sulked in the drawing room afterward. Elizabeth had more important things to think about than Mr. Darcy. She would put him out of her mind, starting now.

CHAPTER II



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, Summer 1791

“Mind where you go, Fitzwilliam!” Anne called to her son where he ran across the grass, chasing his older cousins.

Her elder brother and his family were visiting, as well as her cousin Lady Julia and her two eldest children. Her brother Randall was the Viscount Hyde—he would inherit the Matlock earldom when their father died. Hence, he was at the mercy of their father, who often required his presence in Town or at the family estate in Staffordshire. The old earl had little use for his two daughters or his younger son, but he had great use for his eldest son and child, the one he imagined would carry on his legacy long after he had shuffled off this mortal coil.

Randall was a decent fellow. Good-tempered, but weary of arguments and with the look of put-upon badger about him. Their generation of Fitzwilliam children, bar Catherine, were long and lean and fine-boned. They looked rather like a flock of birds, settled down in the drawing room, all long legs and pointed noses. Catherine had somehow inherited the size and

dominant personality of their grandfather, but the other three children were pattern cards of each other. Each fair haired, blue eyed, and almost frightfully thin.

Randall and Anne had always been close, due largely to the fact that he had been five when she was born and rather enamored of the real-life doll in his mother's arms. They shared a love of horses and fruit tarts, which they would still occasionally sneak to each other's rooms to share after everyone else had gone to bed.

Lady Catherine was the second Fitzwilliam daughter, only a year younger than Anne but thrice her size in personality. If there was a conversation, Catherine must take part in it. If there was a party, Catherine must direct it. If there was a dispute, Catherine would settle it—often to no one's satisfaction but her own. She was constantly inserting herself where she was not needed or wanted, but she would hear no correction, even when it was kindly meant.

When their father betrothed her to Sir Lewis de Bourgh in Kent, a county blessedly far away from their home, they all secretly rejoiced that she would be so far removed.

In contrast, Anne and Randall enjoyed their relative proximity and were frequent visitors to each other's homes, though Anne preferred to visit when her father was not in residence. She did not hate her father, but neither was she fond of him, and thus they shared only the occasional letter and basic pleasantries when they were in shared company.

Randall had been married off young, at the insistence of their father who was afraid he would die before he could see his son properly wed. Without his guidance, his children would of course all choose poorly and ruin the family name forever, driving it into disgrace and destitution. Thus Randall found himself married before his twenty-second birthday to the daughter of the Marquess of Chatham, Lady Philadelphia Cosgrove. He was a father by twenty-three, and when Anne married Mr. Darcy at nineteen, Randall was bouncing his second son on his knee.

Their younger brother, Richard, was a colonel in the regulars, and had sworn never to marry. Anne suspected it was because he knew his father would never allow him to choose a woman he actually liked, and with Richard's lesser income, he would be forced to share small quarters with a woman he despised. Anne rather suspected that if her father were to suddenly die, her brother would soon after find himself betrothed, but it was only her suspicion.

Randall and George Darcy were attempting to show the boys how to bat at cricket, while Anne, her sister Lady Philadelphia, and her cousin Lady Julia watched. Julia had delivered her third child, a plump little boy, only two months ago. She had had a wretched time of it and was spending the summer at Pemberley to recuperate. She still had crying jags at the oddest times and felt poorly most days. Anne had made it her personal mission to cheer Julia up.

Julia's daughter Marianne was only a month younger than Fitzwilliam and the two had got on splendidly since they were

old enough to play with one another. Philadelphia and Anne were both in the family way, lounging on soft chaises in the shade, patiently awaiting their confinements.

Lady Philadelphia—Adele to her friends—was due to deliver her fifth child any day, and it was decided she would do so at Pemberley. Her last confinement had been at the Matlock seat and her father-in-law had been an absolute bear. He had nagged her constantly on what she should eat and how she should behave in order to produce a son, ignoring that her first two children had been boys and only the third had been a girl. She ignored him as best she could, but when the babe was born a girl, he had been unbearable. For her fifth confinement, she wisely decided to be away when the birth would come upon her suddenly, with no time to return home.

Anne had introduced her to the midwife and the chamber was prepared. Now they were only waiting on the young Fitzwilliam to arrive.

Anne had another two months to go until her confinement. She had a strong suspicion this babe would be a girl, and she was ecstatic about it. A little girl to dress and teach and dote on. A girl who would not have to be sent away to school, but who would stay with her mother until she married. Anne was quite looking forward to it. She thought they might call her Regina, or perhaps Charlotte. Anne was named for her mother, and Catherine had named her only daughter Anne, making it a complicated option. Perhaps Matilda? Or Madeline? The vicar had a little girl named Madeline and she was a darling thing.

Anne turned her attention back to the ladies and away from her own thoughts. Adele was giving Julia advice on her daughter Marianne, who was a bright but stubborn little girl. Marianne did not want to play with her dolls. She did not want to have tea parties with her friends. She did not want to wear lacy dresses with pretty satin bows.

She did want to chase her cousins and climb trees and catch toads, to her mother's great horror. Anne tried not to laugh. Julia was her dearest friend, but she was a touch dramatic. Marianne would be perfectly well. She was merely a little different from the other girls they knew, and very different from how her own mother had behaved. But Anne remembered enough of her childhood with Julia to know her cousin had not always been a perfect lady, and that wild children eventually grow up, at least to some degree.

Adele was smiling serenely at her cousin, her hand absently rubbing her round belly. Five children! Anne could not imagine. Of course, if things had gone differently, this child would be her fourth little one, not her second. Adele seemed born to be a mother. She was serene and gentle and endlessly patient. Her eldest son Alexander was a rascal of the first order, followed closely by her second son, Richard, named for his uncle. Yet she never lost her patience with them or raised her voice or issued harsh punishments.

Somehow, looking at her savage children with her big gray eyes full of disappointment, she made them feel awful over whatever it was they had done until they apologized and punished themselves! "I will make it right, mother. I didn't

mean to hurt Marianne.” Or, “I didn’t mean to cut the horse’s tail. The scissors slipped!” followed closely by, “I will help the grooms for a fortnight! I will take such good care of the horses!” Anne had bitten her lip hard when she heard that one, not wanting to laugh and spoil their guilt-ridden state.

The three women looked up when pounding footsteps rushed past them. Fitzwilliam and Marianne were running hell for leather, Richard in hot pursuit. Alexander was at the other end of the lawn, taunting his cousins.

“What are they playing at now?” Julia complained.

“They’re children. Let them run,” urged Anne.



Two days later, the house was in uproar. Lady Philadelphia was in labor, and the babe would not descend. Her children were dreadfully worried, especially the two eldest boys who understood what the maid meant when she said the lady was “like not to pull through.”

Darcy stayed with Randall in the library, plying him with brandy and empty platitudes. The nurses did their best with the children, but eventually they took them to the lake and let them run free in an attempt to spare them from whatever was happening in the birthing room.

Anne and Julia stayed with Adele, changing the cloths on her forehead, offering encouraging words, and silently praying while they shot each other worried looks. The midwife was

experienced, but she was a bit in awe of Lady Philadelphia. She had gradually accustomed herself to Lady Anne, but Lady Philadelphia was both the daughter of a marquess and the wife of a viscount, destined to be the next Lady Matlock. She was hesitant to suggest anything the lady might find undignified. Sensing the midwife's restraint, and her sister's waning strength, Anne drew the midwife aside.

“Is there nothing that can be done? Surely there is something!”

The midwife twisted her apron but seemed hesitant to speak.

“If there is anything you can do, anything at all, no matter how odd or unconventional, please do it! Her children cannot lose their mother today,” Anne said somberly, her blue eyes pleading.

“Very well. We need to get her up and moving.”

Soon, the midwife had Adele moving about the room, circling her hips in an odd rhythm, and squatting down low while her sister and cousin supported her on either side. Her strength was flagging, but she knew her life hung in the balance, and that of her child, so she followed every instruction, and held every bizarre position while the pains crashed over her relentlessly.

Eventually, she was clutching the bed post, Julia under one shoulder and Anne under the other, while the midwife instructed her to push at her signal. In what seemed like no time at all, she was holding her new baby, a flood of tears

covering each woman's face. Anne gingerly wiped Adele's brow and brushed her hair back, replaiting it loosely. Julia, who could be surprisingly practical when the situation called for it, collected a fresh nightgown, and slipped it over Adele's head after the maid cleaned her up. Finally, they got Adele and the baby clean and in a fresh bed, ready to receive visitors.

"I shall go fetch Randall. He will be anxious for you."

Adele grabbed her hand tightly and pulled Anne close. "Thank you, Sister. You have saved me this day."

"You did the difficult part," Anne said with a watery smile. She kissed Adele's forehead, then the baby's, and left to find her brother.



"It was an eventful day," said George as they prepared for bed that evening.

"Yes, it was."

Unsurprisingly, everyone had been too exhausted to bother with a proper dinner. Anne had trays sent to everyone's rooms, and now that the children were assured Adele would live, they were properly impressed with their new brother and cousin, Andrew.

"It was frightening for a while. I feared she would not survive," Anne said quietly.

"I am sorry, darling. That must have been awful for you."

He took her hand and led her to the sofa before the empty fireplace. He encouraged her to sit back and took one of her feet in his hands, gently rubbing along the arch and sole.

“That is lovely. Thank you.”

“Are you well, my dear?” he asked sincerely.

Anne sighed. “I will be. I was afraid, and worried and anxious, but the worst is over now. The babe appears healthy and Adele is resting. Though I do not think she will want to have another child for some time.”

Darcy chuckled lightly, “No, I doubt she will. Poor Randall was beside himself. I had to restrain him from barging in more than once. He was convinced she was going to die.”

“She nearly did.”

They stared blankly ahead for a time, allowing the events of the day to settle over them like a thin shawl. Randall and Adele had not had a passionate love affair. Their union had been arranged by their parents, but they were both so kind and unassuming, so gentle and respectful of each other, that love of a sort could not help but bloom between them. Regardless of how they came together, they were very good friends and a devoted couple, and Anne knew Randall would be lost without Adele.



Anne spent the next few days in a flurry of activity. She could not explain it, but she felt an irresistible urge to clean her

house—which she did not know how to do—and to cook something—a skill she refused to learn. She sorted the baby clothes in the nursery. She placed fresh flowers on every table in every public room of the house. She sewed two baby bonnets and a long gown, and began a painting she thought to hang in the baby’s room.

“Do you not think you are doing too much?” asked her husband. “I do not want you to tire yourself out.”

“I feel wonderful!” she cried. “I cannot explain it, but I cannot sit still for long at all.”

George watched her with a wary eye. She had done the same thing before Fitzwilliam was born, and again with their son George. She had not with their stillborn daughter, but then the babe had been breech. Perhaps that had something to do with it? She was still several weeks away from her lying in. He feared that if she were delivered of a child now, it would not survive. Though she was large enough... perhaps they had estimated the dates incorrectly?



Unfortunately, George’s concerns for an early delivery were proved correct. By the end of the week, only eight days after Adele had delivered her babe, Anne was brought to bed. She repeatedly said it was too soon, but the babe wished to be born and born it would be. She labored for a short time before the midwife said she was ready, and Julia held her hand tightly as Anne bore down, the babe coming surprisingly easily.

“I am sorry, my lady.” The midwife held the small babe, tiny and blue, and draped a blanket over its face. “She was too small to survive.”

Anne was in shock. The labor had been so easy, the delivery nearly painless. How could the babe be stillborn? She had felt it kicking only a few hours ago.

The midwife was pressing her belly, Anne staring blankly ahead in shock.

“It is as I suspected. There is another babe, my lady.”

“What?” cried Julia.

“I’ve seen it ‘afore. The smaller one does not survive, and its death causes the pains to begin. The bigger one will be coming shortly.”

Just then, Anne felt a kick in her abdomen, strong and solid, and nearly wept with relief. She was alive! She was still alive! The pains began again and soon Anne was bearing down, this one significantly more difficult than the tiny babe before it. Julia held her hand and wiped her brow and told her to continue on, that her daughter was on the way, that she just needed to push a little more, just one more time.

Somewhere through the haze of pain and fear, a lusty cry was heard and the next thing she knew, Anne was holding her daughter in her arms, pink and squalling.

“A girl! I have a daughter!”

Julia cried with her, both of them insensible and overwhelmed.

“I shall call her Julia, for the dearest friend I have ever had,” Anne said quietly.

Julia opened her mouth to speak, but could only make a breathy sound before dissolving into tears again.



“May I meet my daughter now?” George asked. He entered the room quietly, smiling to see Anne propped up on pillows with the baby in her arms, Julia in a chair beside the bed.

“I shall go give Adele all the news,” she said as she slipped out of the room.

“Look at her, George.” Anne beamed at him.

He touched the downy cheek. “She is perfect.” The babe clutched his finger and he felt tears pricking his eyes. “What shall we call her?”

“I am calling her Julia.”

He raised his brows and she looked back at him sheepishly. “She is my dearest friend, and she was an enormous help during the birth. Besides, she looks like a Julia, does she not?”

He smiled. “She does. How about Julia Anne?”

“That is perfect.” Anne looked at her daughter, then back to her husband, her eyes shadowed. “Did they tell you there was another?”

“Another babe? Yes, the midwife explained. She said the second babe was much smaller and would not have survived,

even had she lived to be delivered.”

“Probably not. What should we call her? We have to put something on the stone.”

“How about Mary?” George suggested.

“For your mother?”

“Yes. Or would you rather save it for another daughter?”

“We do not know that there will be another. Let us call her Mary, the poor dear.”

“At least this one survived. That is something to be thankful for.”

“Yes, it is.” She looked far away again. “I worry for her though. She is very small and born too soon. Her lungs are not strong, I think.”

They listened to the strained respirations for a minute without speaking.

“The midwife said some babes born this soon continue to develop outside the womb and become perfectly healthy children,” Anne said quietly.

“And others?” he asked, his voice a near whisper.

“Others do not survive more than a few days.”

“So we should prepare ourselves,” he said somberly.

“It would be wise,” she said, pulling her shoulders back and sitting up a little straighter. “But I do not want to be wise. I want to hold my baby, and kiss her hair, and not worry that she will die any moment. Is that so enormous a wish?”

“No,” he answered, his voice choked, “it is a perfectly rational desire.”

CHAPTER 12



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, Summer 1791

Three days. Julia Anne lived for three days before succumbing to the lung weakness the midwife had warned them about. Anne wept bitterly, unable to stop thinking that if it had only been one babe, or if she had just stayed in the womb a little longer, she would still be here with them and Anne would not be burying yet another child.

But no amount of wishing would bring her daughter back, and Anne felt herself becoming hard and brittle, like a thin sheet of ice over a pond, hiding everything beneath it, but ready to break with the slightest pressure.

She was angry. Angry at her body for betraying her. Angry at God for allowing it to happen. Angry at her husband for being unable to help. Angry at herself for not knowing how to save her own children. Angry at the tiny babe for leaving her.

Soon, their houseguests left and things began to return to normal, but her anger remained. She was angry when she woke in the mornings and when she went to bed. Angry when she walked the grounds and when she planned the menus.

Angry when she played her instrument and when she forced herself to eat, for her appetite was a thing of the past. Her house felt like a prison and her husband's arms, once the most comforting thing in the world, felt like chains.

The only thing that did not make her angry was her son. Her precious, perfect boy, with his father's smile and her blue eyes. What would she do without him?



Three months after the funeral, Anne was less angry than she had been but by no means recovered. Her anger had burned itself down to a low ember. She could become quickly enflamed, but she no longer burned hot every moment of the day.

One night, as she was preparing for bed in her room, she heard her husband moving about in the room next door. The room she had shared with him until the delivery. Perhaps it was time to resume sharing a bed. She pondered the idea, and the more she thought on it, the better it seemed. She had wanted her space to heal and recover, but she was becoming lonely. His strong arms holding her while she slept began to sound like the safe haven they had once been.

In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she liked the idea of lying with her husband. She wanted to lose herself in his arms, in the sheer strength of him. To abandon all her relentless thoughts and surrender herself to sensation.

Yes, that was just what she needed.

She strode across the room and rapped on his door. He answered quickly, and she stepped inside, in no doubt of her welcome.

“May I sleep with you?” she asked.

It was all politeness. She knew he would not refuse her. Her husband’s love was the one thing she had always counted on when all else in the world went awry. The one thing that never changed. The one thing that she was sure of, with a certainty she felt in her bones—the sun rose in the east, the sky was bluest over Derbyshire, and her husband loved her with a deep and abiding affection that was as unshakable as the land they lived on. His passion was as rugged as the peaks. His steadfastness as reliable as the heart beating in her chest.

He would not deny her. She knew it.

He took her hand and led her to the bed, pulling the coverlet up over her gently. He moved around the room, extinguishing lamps and candles, until finally, they were in the dark.

Anne scooted closer to him, wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing her lips to his. He responded slightly, but not with the eagerness she had hoped for. She thought he was being gentle with her for her sake. She would encourage him—she was not made of glass.

Finally, when it became painfully clear that he had no intention of doing anything but kiss her, Anne asked in a peevish tone, “What is wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.”

“You will not love me?”

He was silent for a moment, then quietly, “No, I will not.”

She gasped. In all the years of their marriage, he had never denied her. Not once.

“May I ask why?” she said, her dignity holding on by a thread.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. “You cannot take another loss, Anne. And neither can I,” he added quietly.

She took a deep breath. “So this is it? We are never to lie together again? Ever?”

“Do you see another solution?”

She huffed. “I do not see why we should deny ourselves solace.”

“Because I almost lost you!”

She looked at him wide-eyed. “What?”

“The midwife told me. You were so distracted you didn’t notice, but Annie, you lost a tremendous amount of blood. Did you not wonder why you slept so long? Fourteen hours! You slept fourteen hours! I thought you would never wake up! You had a fever. It wasn’t strong, but it could easily have gone another direction.”

“But it did not! I am perfectly well now!”

“Are you?” he asked quietly.

She fell silent, hurt and betrayal licking up at her like flames. She swallowed the boulder in her throat. “I am coping.

It is only right for a mother to grieve her child.”

He took her hand in the dark, staring at her in the moonlight. “Of course it is. But aren’t you tired of grieving?”

She raised her head to meet his eyes, surprised at the question. She had never thought about it as something she was *allowed* to be tired of. Her grief was like her hair color—it simply was.

“I am so very tired of it, Annie. I do not want to keep burying my children!”

She choked on a sob. He pulled her into his arms, and she clung to his nightshirt, soaking it with her tears. He wept into her hair, their arms wrapped tightly around each other as they finally grieved together.



In the morning, Anne woke with her husband’s arms around her, holding her tightly. Her head was nestled under his chin, his knees behind hers. He was an enormous man—a great bear of a man her father called him. He would never admit it, but she knew Lord Matlock was intimidated by her enormous husband. Anne loved that about George. He made her feel safe, and delicate, a feat not easily achieved when one stood nearly a head taller than all her friends.

She snuggled deeper into his arms, feeling his chest rise and fall on her back. She ran her foot along his shin, hoping he did not mean his edict from last night. He began to respond to her

ministrations, and she smiled at the return of their intimacy that she had missed so much.

But then he jolted awake. He pulled away from her, disentangling her legs from his and his arms from around her, nearly tossing her from the bed in the process.

“We must not,” he said sleepily.

She hated that his voice, rumbly from sleep, still made her stomach clench in anticipation. “Truly?” Her voice sounded smaller than she would have liked.

“This must stop, Annie,” he said sadly, his eyes mournful. “No more, please!”

She closed her eyes against the gaping hole that opened inside her chest.

He touched her cheek gently, tracing the lines of her face. “I cannot lose you! We’ve lost so much. I cannot lose you, too.”

She wanted to rail at him, to tell him he was denying her the one comfort she had had through all of this, that though her confinements had not been successful, she had been comforted by the fact that her children were conceived in affection. At least she had not wasted her efforts on an unworthy man; she had not broken her heart for nothing.

But she had her pride, so she looked at him with dry eyes and said, “As you wish,” and left the room without another look.

CHAPTER 13



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 16 October, 1811

Livingstone House, London

Dear Fitz,

It is done. I am delivered of a baby girl. After much discussion, we have decided to call her Rosamund Anne, for Henry's mother and yours, though do not tell my mother she has been passed over in such a fashion. She would never recover.

I am well, and little Rosie is a wonder. She has thick black hair, soft as a kitten, and the most elegant little fingers. Mother is sure she will be a fine pianist. I would be glad were she simply to become a fine sleeper.

Henry arrived with a few hours to spare. I was already feeling the first pains and preparing to call the midwife when he came bursting into the house. I shall spare you the horrifying details and simply tell you that I am well, and that Henry is the best husband a woman could ask for. I can't

imagine anyone else keeping my mother so well occupied while her first granddaughter was born.

We shall remain in Town through the end of the week, then we will travel to Lincolnshire. Henry is anxious to see the boys and I am certain Lady Baringer is no less anxious to see me and be relieved of their care. If Napoleon would stop being so bothersome, we might all spend a summer together.

How is Hertfordshire? I visited it once before and it was a lovely county. So much gentler than Derbyshire or the moors country. Has Mr. Bingley settled into his estate well? Do pass on my best wishes to him. He is a delightful young man. I wish my younger brother had half his amiability. Perhaps it has something to do with trade? I have noticed in my time with the army that occupation can do wonders for one's disposition. Surely an eldest son who is not active on the estate can have nothing better to do but spend money and wait to inherit. Not the most effective system, I'm sure you agree.

Henry sends his best and asks that I convey his thanks to you for keeping me sane while we visited with our families. You have my thanks as well. If it weren't for you, I'm certain I would have forcefully stuffed a teacake into Mama's mouth more than once. I do love her, but she is trying at times.

Tell Georgie I shall send her a letter in a few days, wherein I shall properly thank her for the lovely gift she sent. It is beautiful and currently hanging above the cradle. I shall take it to Harkley when we leave.

Be careful with Miss Bingley. Her brother is a dear, but she has her sights set on Pemberley. I am certain your mother is already working on putting her in her place, but watch your back all the same. The enemy often attacks when we least expect it. Remember to lock your door.

And perhaps have your valet sleep in the dressing room.

Your exhausted but happy cousin,

Lady M.

“What has you smiling so, Fitzwilliam?”

Darcy looked up from his letter to see his mother watching him from across the breakfast table. “A letter from Marianne.”

Caroline looked up from her tea with a worried expression.

“Is she in good spirits? I am still awaiting a reply to my last.”

“Yes, she seems very happy. She and the baby are well, and she is happy to have her husband back home with her.”

Caroline relaxed.

“Did she say when they would return to Harkley Hall?” asked Lady Anne.

He scanned the letter. “They should leave within the week.”

“Hmm. I should have liked to see the baby before they travel, but there is not time to open the house. Though I suppose I could stay with Lady Livingstone.”

“I shall escort you, if you wish to make the journey,” offered Darcy.

Lady Anne smiled at him. “Thank you, Son. I shall consider it.”

“If I may,” Caroline spoke and startled Lady Anne, who had forgotten she was there, “if it would be convenient, your cousins may break their journey at Netherfield, if you’d like.”

Lady Anne looked at her with surprise and something akin to appreciation. “That would be lovely, Miss Bingley, thank you. I shall ask Lady Marianne what she prefers. It is so difficult traveling with an infant, and so close after one’s confinement. But she does not wish to stay in Town in the heat and disease, and I cannot blame her.” She looked back to Miss Bingley and nodded. “I shall let you know her response. Thank you, Miss Bingley.”



Darcy stood outside Netherfield next to Bingley, wondering if his entire family was to be in residence at his friend’s home. Bingley bounced on the balls of his feet and smiled as he looked at the surrounding countryside.

“Still find living on an estate to your liking?”

Bingley turned to him abruptly. “Yes, of course. Why would you think otherwise?”

Darcy twisted the ring on his finger. “My entire family has descended on you like a plague of locusts. Some might find it

tiresome.”

Bingley laughed. “A plague! You do have a turn for the dramatic, Darcy. We are hardly overrun. Nathaniel has gone back to Eton, and Luke is great fun. Miss Darcy and Lady Anne are hardly intrusive. In fact, Caroline has been much less trouble since they arrived. I was going to invite you all to stay longer.” Bingley laughed at his friend’s expression. “I know the idea of a house full of guests is torture to you, but I like people.” He slapped Darcy on the back. “And you should enjoy these people. They are your relations, after all.” He smiled again and loped towards the approaching carriage, a scowling Darcy behind him.

“I am not a curmudgeon,” said Darcy.

“No, of course not. Just a man averse to company.”

Before Darcy could reply, the carriage stopped and Colonel Pickering stepped out.

“Darcy!” he boomed. He turned and helped out his wife, who quickly rushed to her cousin.

“Fitzwilliam, it is so good to see you!” She kissed his cheek and he smiled genuinely for the first time that day. “Mr. Bingley! What a lovely home you have here!” She smiled in delight as she looked around her, and Bingley’s chest puffed up as he raised his chin and thanked her. She gave him her hand, and somewhat surprised by the gesture, it took him a moment to bow over it. She smiled kindly at him and introduced her husband. “As you can see, my dear, Mr. Bingley is every bit as amiable as I said he was.”

Darcy rolled his eyes, Pickering shook Bingley's hand and thanked him for the invitation, and Marianne smirked at her cousin as she took his arm.

“Take me in, Fitz, I'm desperate for a cup of tea.”

“Before I see my new cousin?” he asked, gesturing to the nursemaid standing next to the carriage with a wrapped bundle in her arms.

“If you care to preserve your sense of smell, you'll wait till she's had her bath.”

He wrinkled his nose and Marianne laughed at him and tugged his arm towards the doors.

Bingley soon introduced his sisters to the Colonel and Marianne, who pretended she had not met them at two separate balls last season, for lack of better sport. Miss Bingley was every bit as insufferable as she remembered her to be. And despite Miss Bingley's current deference, when she had met Marianne the first time, she had been abominably rude before she realized Colonel Pickering was the son of an earl and Marianne was the daughter of another. On their second meeting, she had sneered at Marianne's simple gown and not remembered the acquaintance.

Marianne would be polite now; she was never a rude guest. But Fitzwilliam was her favorite cousin and Marianne was not going to allow this harpy to hunt him like a fox.

Lady Anne gave Marianne a warning look and Marianne smiled back innocently, not fooling her aunt for a moment.



“Where are you off to this morning?” asked Marianne when she saw Lady Anne in the corridor the following morning.

Lady Anne tugged on her gloves and answered, “I am calling on Mrs. Bennet, the mistress of the nearest estate. She has daughters near your age. Would you like to come along?”

“I’d love to. Let me collect my things.”

Soon, the ladies were in the Darcy carriage headed to Longbourn. “Tell me about the Bennet family. I assume they are the same family Luke mentioned last night?”

Lady Anne sighed and looked heavenward, a small smile on her face. “Yes. I invited Mrs. Bennet and her two eldest daughters for tea a few days ago, following our introduction at a local assembly. It was clear that Miss Bingley was not fond of them—”

“Who is she fond of?” interjected Marianne.

Anne continued without answering her, “—so we walked in the gardens. Georgiana walked with Miss Bennet, who is a very sweet young lady, and I walked with Mrs. Bennet. Luke accompanied Miss Elizabeth.”

Marianne’s brows shot up. “I see. How old is Miss Elizabeth?”

“I believe she is nineteen or twenty.”

Marianne stifled her laugh. “Oh dear!”

“Poor Luke. He is destined for heartbreak,” said Lady Anne, mostly joking.

“Poor Miss Elizabeth! She’ll not have any peace now. He can be tenacious when he wants something.”

Lady Anne looked out the window thoughtfully. “That he can. Let us hope Miss Elizabeth lets him down gently.”

“Or he moves on before he makes a fool of himself.”

“It may be too late for that,” Lady Anne said with a small smile.

Longbourn was bustling when they arrived. The two youngest girls and Miss Bennet were about to head into Meryton to call on their aunt there. Seeing their visitors, Jane suggested she stay, but Lady Anne insisted she go ahead with their plans and invited her to call at Netherfield the following day.

Soon, Marianne and Lady Anne were seated in a sunny parlor with light blue paper and east facing windows. Mrs. Bennet had called for refreshments and Miss Elizabeth sat beside her mother, making polite conversation.

Curious, and a little bored, Marianne decided to speak to Miss Elizabeth on her own to see what all the fuss was about. She moved to the window and asked Miss Elizabeth something about the prospect. Soon, the two women were in conversation in a pair of chairs away from the others, laughing and talking like old friends.

It didn’t take Marianne long to come to three conclusions.

First, that her poor cousin Luke was destined for heartbreak.

Second, that she would very much like to be friends with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

And third, that this young lady would be perfect for her cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam.



“How did you find Miss Elizabeth?” asked Lady Anne in the carriage on the return trip to Netherfield.

“I found her delightful!” cried Marianne. “She is everything a young lady ought to be—pretty, lively, and impertinent.”

“Is that what a young lady ought to be?”

“If she can. She would be marvelous on campaign! Can you imagine how much more interesting the long marches would be with such a companion?”

“I cannot, but I shall take your word for it.”

“I shall make a friend of her.”

Lady Anne shot Marianne a look. “Remember that she is a lady, Marianne, not a puppy you have found and wish to bring home.”

“Lady Anne! That was years ago!” she cried indignantly, stifling a laugh.

“Nevertheless.”

“I mean to make her a proper friend, not a pet. I am not Miss Bingley.”

Lady Anne looked heavenward, as close as she would ever come to rolling her eyes. “And we are grateful for it.”

“I think she would do wonderfully for Richard.”

“Your cousin Richard?”

“Of course.”

“What makes you say that?”

“They are both fond of conversation and well versed on a variety of topics. They enjoy society and are good company, and he needs a wife who can handle a Spanish summer, not one of the wilting roses Lady Adele keeps throwing at him. Miss Elizabeth is fond of both books and dancing. What more could a man wish for?”

“A dowry, for one thing,” said Lady Anne drily.

“Tosh. The grandson of a marquess and an earl ought not to be concerned with such things.”

“Maybe he ought not, but Richard must. My brother may do something for him, but with Alexander causing so much trouble all the time, there may not be enough for Richard. And don’t forget your younger cousins.”

“Stupid Ally,” said Marianne with disdain, rolling her eyes. “He is always getting into scrapes and expecting someone else to get him out of them. Everyone ought to stop helping him for a minute and see if it does him any good.”

“Randall does not wish to encourage his behavior,” she said, referring to her elder brother, the earl, “but it is well known that Alexander is the heir. If he makes promises against his inheritance, there is little Randall can do about it. And there is the family name to consider.”

Marianne pursed her lips and looked away. She had never been very fond of her eldest cousin. The only person who could get him to behave was his mother, Lady Philadelphia. She had a way of making a person feel absolutely horrible for even a minor infraction, and she wielded her power over her sons like an avenging angel. But Alexander and his father had a difficult relationship—which was terribly sad because Randall was a very kind man, though not a forceful one—and the only man Alexander had ever listened to, Uncle George, had been dead these five years. If he did not change his ways soon, Alexander would not live to be the next earl. He would be shot in some gaming hell brawl, or break his neck racing that ridiculous phaeton. Then Richard would be the next earl—it was not an altogether unpleasant thought.

“I have never understood men’s notion of honor,” said Marianne thoughtfully.

“How do you mean?”

“They will gamble away all their family’s money, make public fools of themselves, and pauper their mother and sisters, but the family will pretend it isn’t happening, and support the behavior, all in the name of honor.”

“Would you have the family break with your cousin?”

“I was not referring to Alexander specifically—he is not as bad as all that, though perhaps a little distancing would do him some good—but of the way men think in general. They gamble their sister’s dowry and call it a debt of honor. Yet if a man were to do what is truly necessary—retrench when it is called for, live within his means, refuse to play cards for high stakes—he would be said to dishonor his family name. It makes little sense to me.”

“The rules of men are not meant to make sense. We should not try to glean meaning where there is none.”

“Lady Anne, are you saying you believe men to be ridiculous?” asked Marianne in teasing indignation.

“Upon occasion, yes, men are ridiculous, as are women. But because the world is ruled by men, their ridiculousness becomes the law of the land.”

“Which makes it considerably more than a little ridiculousness, if you ask me,” said Marianne with more than a little heat. The rights of women was a pet topic of hers and given the opportunity, she could speak on it for hours. Her family had begged a reprieve some time ago, stating that they agreed with everything she said, and would agree forever, if only she would quit speaking of it.

Lady Anne nodded, thinking of her husband, the least ridiculous man she had ever known, and how very much better off the world would be with more George Darceys in it.



Netherfield, Hertfordshire, 22 October, 1811

Dear Julia,

Your granddaughter is a beauty! I know you must be thrilled to have the first girl of the next generation. Marianne is keeping well and seems to be fully recovered from the delivery. I know you were not comfortable with her visiting before she was churched, but she is not going out much, and I believe what company she has is good for her spirits. Remember how you were after Thomas's birth? I would not like to see her in such straits.

The babe is sleeping as well as can be expected and Col. Pickering is quite enamored of his daughter, as he should be. Fitzwilliam pretends he is only mildly interested in the babe, but I caught him sitting with Marianne and the babe only yesterday, and he was rocking her slowly, humming to her while Marianne talked to him. He seemed quite content. I think you were right—it will not be long before he is looking for a wife of his own. He has a restlessness about him, a longing to be settled. At least I hope that is what it is, and not some horrid secret I know nothing of.

Hertfordshire is a lovely county, all gentle hills and soft grass. The weather seems much milder than Derbyshire, but that is to be expected. We have made friends with many locals, including a family by the name of Bennet. Have you heard of them? Their seat is called Longbourn, and it has been in their family for some generations. The eldest daughter is something of a favorite with Mr. Bingley. I do not know if he will make

her an offer, he is often in and out of love, you know, but he certainly seems enamored.

Marianne has made a friend of the Bennet daughters, especially Miss Elizabeth, the second daughter. She reminds me a little of Marianne, though rather softer. I trust you know what I mean. Her elder sister, the one Mr. Bingley cannot stop talking of, puts me in a mind of Nora or Georgiana, so shy she is. I cannot tell how she truly feels about Mr. Bingley. If she is merely hiding her feelings, she may do herself a disservice by hiding them from the object of them. If she truly does not feel much, it may be to her benefit if Mr. Bingley moves on as quickly as he has done in the past.

Time will tell.

Miss Elizabeth, the spirited sister, is quite well-read and witty. Georgiana likes her very well. Miss E has taken the time to draw her out and speak patiently with her. You know me well enough to know that that alone has endeared her to me. But besides her kindness to my daughter, she has made something of a conquest with Luke, though I do not know if she realizes she has done it. Poor boy! He is destined to be disappointed. I hope he shall move past the infatuation before he makes a fool of himself or does something to upset her. She is a sweet girl, I think, and I would hate for her to be put in an awkward position.

So far, she has been patient and kind with him, like an indulgent older sister, and God willing, Luke will come to see her as such in time.

How are John and Thomas? Has Arabella decided to leave off torturing poor Lord Charles and accept him already? Or does she prefer another?

Do keep me informed of events. Georgiana is so shy that I doubt we will ever experience anything like Arabella's season. I must live vicariously through you.

Give my love to John and the children.

Your cousin,

Lady Anne



Luke smiled when he spied a bonnet moving through the woods ahead. He spurred his horse on to the boundary between Netherfield and Longbourn and slowed as he approached her.

“Good morning, Miss Bennet!” cried Luke.

Elizabeth turned towards him in surprise and smiled brightly. “Good morning, Master Darcy. Enjoying a morning ride or are you headed somewhere?”

He dismounted and bowed neatly, then said, “I was just enjoying the autumn weather. May I walk with you?”

“Of course.” She smiled and waited for him to tie his horse to a tree. This was the second time he had come upon her while she was out walking. Once was a coincidence. Twice was by design. Thankfully, she enjoyed his company.

He held out his arm and she took it, thinking it an adorable gesture and hiding her smile. Without his hat he was a little shorter than her, and with it he just passed her. He stood with his back stiff and straight to make himself appear taller.

“Are you enjoying your stay in Hertfordshire?” she asked.

“Yes, it is very pleasant country, much different from Derbyshire and Kent.”

“I wouldn’t know, I have never been to either, but I shall trust your word.”

“You have never been to Kent?” he asked, surprised. “Not to visit the seaside?”

“Sadly, no. I have never been there, though I have heard it is lovely. I have seen the Channel, though. The year I turned fifteen, I accompanied my aunt and uncle on a trip to Essex. My elder sister Jane was supposed to go, but she became ill just before it was time to depart and I went in her place.”

“I have never been to Essex,” he said. “Is it like Hertfordshire?”

She described the landscape and the towns they had visited, and he listened with rapt attention, laughing in all the right places and asking intelligent questions that proved how sharp his mind was and how thorough his education had already been.

How odd that my favorite companion of late should be an eleven-year-old boy, she thought.

“Tell me about Derbyshire,” she said as they walked along a stream, both enjoying the other’s company so much they were oblivious to the time.

“Oh, Derbyshire is the most beautiful place in England!” he cried. “It is much different from Hertfordshire, more hills and rocks, but just as green.” He went on to describe the streams and lakes and forests, the caves he had explored with his brother and the sheep that dotted the landscape.

“Are you looking forward to Eton next year?” she asked after the subject of Derbyshire had been exhausted.

“Not particularly. I shall miss home and Mother and Georgiana. And Fitzwilliam, of course, though he is not often there. But it will be good to be with Nathaniel.”

“He is two years your senior?”

“Yes, almost exactly. This is his second year at Eton. Georgiana misses him dreadfully.”

“I can imagine. If I had such fine brothers, I would never wish them to leave me,” she said sweetly.

He smiled beatifically at her and she reminded herself not to encourage him too much. It wouldn’t do to hurt the dear boy.

“Georgiana often wishes for a sister, but Mother says she should be satisfied with keeping her gowns to herself and having three brothers to protect her.”

Elizabeth laughed and said, “Your mother is correct. Sisters can be wonderful, but they also steal your ribbons, make over

your bonnets without your permission, and make a dreadful amount of noise before a ball.”

He laughed and was about to say something when a loud voice interrupted them.

“Luke! Come, you’re wanted inside.”

Elizabeth looked up and saw Mr. Darcy astride a great grey beast, watching them from his high perch. Luke pulled himself up high and drew her a little closer.

“In a moment, Brother. I must bid good day to Miss Bennet.”

He released Elizabeth’s arm and bowed smartly before her, thanked her for a lovely walk, and ensured she could make her way home safely on her own. She informed him that since they had traveled back to where they had begun, nodding to his horse tied a few yards away, she would be perfectly well. She curtsied, thanked him for the walk, and told him she had had a very pleasant time. She gave a nod to the elder Mr. Darcy and turned to go.

“Fitzwilliam!” Luke hissed once they were some distance from the woods where they had left Miss Bennet. “Must you embarrass me so?”

Darcy looked at him in bemusement. “I apologize if I did, it was not my intention. Mother has been looking for you above half an hour. Miss Bennet should know better than to drag you off on one of her walks without informing anyone.”

Luke huffed. “She did not drag me anywhere! I approached her on her morning walk. We were having a perfectly lovely time until you came along and spoiled it!” He looked straight ahead, his lips pursed in annoyance and his eyes hard.

Darcy stared at him in surprise, then straightened and said formally, “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to spoil your morning or embarrass you in front of your friend.”

Luke thanked him curtly, still refusing to look at him, and took off towards the house at a canter. Darcy watched him go, a suspicion forming in the back of his mind.

CHAPTER 14



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, Spring 1792

Six months after her husband's edict to create no more children, Anne thought she would go mad. Her body was restless, her heart was sore, and her mind was in turmoil. She needed something to channel her energies. But what? She had ridden every horse in the stable—even taking a few reckless rides on a stallion until she realized how stupid she was being and stopped. And she did not want George to hear of it from the grooms and forbid her. That would be one humiliation too far.

She had gone to London for the start of the Season. After half a dozen dinners where her friends paraded their growing broods after dinner—two children, three children, five children!—she had stopped attending dinners. If she attended, she would have to return the hospitality. And she did not want to march in her single child, marvelous though he was, and see the pitiful, knowing looks on their smug, aristocratic faces. She stayed in Town long enough to order what clothes she required and a few new things for Fitzwilliam—the poor dear

was so tall he needed new breeches every few months—and she headed back to Pemberley.

Her cousin Julia, understanding Anne perhaps too well, suggested that little Marianne accompany them back. The little girl disliked being in Town and she and Fitzwilliam got along so splendidly. Julia would collect her after the Season.

Anne knew what her cousin was doing—ensuring a distraction for both Fitzwilliam and herself, and creating a convenient excuse to visit that summer—but she did not mind. It was a relief to be known so well, to feel fully seen by someone she loved.

Unbeknownst to Anne, Julia and her husband had considered something even more drastic than their cousin imagined. Julia loved Anne like a sister. Indeed, she had no sister of her own, and their mothers had been so close that the girls had often been in company growing up. Julia would do anything for Anne, or so she thought. To her great surprise, Julia found there was one thing she would not do for her cousin.

Marianne.

Julia saw Anne's heartbreak. She saw the well of grief Anne had sunk into. She had something her cousin wanted—something she desperately needed. She had a child. A beautiful little girl, with chocolate colored hair that curled without being tied in rags and plump cheeks that dimpled when she smiled. Marianne was only a month younger than

Fitzwilliam, and the two were more like brother and sister than second cousins.

Julia had two young sons and the ability to deliver healthy babes. She could send Marianne to live at Pemberley. Marianne would love it—she adored her aunt and uncle, and Fitzwilliam was her dearest friend. Anne would take wonderful care of her, and it might be just what she needed to pull her from the valley she could not seem to rise out of. The Darcys' marriage might improve as a result.

But Marianne was Julia's first child. Her only daughter. Julia may not always understand her, but she loved her with a fierceness that frightened her in its intensity. As much as she loved her cousin, she could not give up her child, no matter the cause.

Lord Livingstone could only be relieved Julia had come to the decision on her own and he had not been forced to deny his wife, who for all her supposed frivolity, rarely asked him for anything. Marianne was his favorite child. She was not his heir, nor the one destined to inherit his title, but she held his heart in her tiny hand. He lived for her smile, for the laugh that bubbled up when he teased her, for the gleam she got in her eye right before she did something that was destined to get her into trouble.

Thus it was decided. Marianne would continue to live with her parents but would spend every summer at Pemberley so long as she was welcome. It would be good for her to spend

time with her cousin and it might go some way to healing Lady Anne's heart.



George grew more distant every day. Anne had never realized how much they relied on their physical bond, but it would appear they were not much without it. She had entertained the notion that he was keeping his distance to avoid temptation, but even the daughter of an earl was not that vain.

Anne knew she was no great beauty—she was pretty in her way, but she had always felt too tall and gangly to be considered more than that. She was attractive, her hair was thick and smooth, and she had worked very hard to overcome her childish clumsiness, enough to be called graceful upon occasion, but smooth hair and graceful dancing were hardly the sorts of things that drove men wild with desire.

Her mother had been lovely, and Julia had inherited the Digby countenance—and had had the suitors to prove it—but Anne looked more like a Fitzwilliam. Her attractions had been more practical in nature, namely her titled connections and her dowry of thirty thousand pounds.

George had never minded that she was so tall—he rather liked it, actually. He did not have to bend so far to kiss her and he did not have to shorten his stride when they walked together. They had been so well-matched. Where he was broad, she was slight. Where he was strong, she was delicate.

Where he was garrulous, she was quiet. Where he was impetuous, she was thoughtful.

But look at him now. As wise and careful as she had ever hoped he would be. Almost too careful. Had he simply outlived his need of her? Was she a boyish fancy that had passed with maturity? Or was it as he said: he could not take any more sorrow? Did he see death and pain every time he looked at her? Is that why she found his eyes on her so little of late? Was he angry with her, as she had once been angry at herself?

Was their marriage so bound up in their grief that they would never be able to have one without the other again?

Or had he simply ceased loving her?

She did not know if George had no interest in her if he could not bed her, or if he had found solace in someone else's arms and therefore had no use for her, but she knew this could not continue. She was running mad. She must find something else to think about.



It was Marianne's idea, really. They had been sitting on the terrace—Anne was teaching Marianne how to host a tea, and she and Fitzwilliam were her guests. She thought it was the least she could do for Julia, who was having a terrible time getting Marianne to do anything that required decorum or occurred indoors—hence the compromise of tea on the terrace.

To encourage the two eight-year-olds, Anne had agreed to allow Fitzwilliam's dog, Goliath, to be at their tea as well. She was more amused than anything to see that of her three students, the dog had the best table manners.

Goliath sat patiently next to the table, waiting until he had Anne's attention, and she dropped a cake into his mouth. Fitzwilliam and Marianne could barely restrain themselves from reaching across each other's plates, and Marianne swiped food from her cousin's plate more than once. She was certain Fitzwilliam kicked her under the table for it, but neither would admit to anything.

Anne shook her head at them, hiding her smile, until Marianne said, "Lady Anne, you ought to have your own school."

"Whatever makes you say such a thing, Lady Marianne?"

Marianne wrinkled her nose. She disliked being called 'lady.' "You like teaching people how to do things, and you are very patient. Not like Nanny. She is always telling me I am tearing her nerves to shreds." Marianne rolled her eyes and shoved an entire cake into her mouth, sighing in pleasure at its lemony goodness.

Anne was too distracted to notice.

A school. Now there was an idea.



A fortnight later, Anne sat in her favorite blue parlor with the vicar from Lambton, Mr. Abara. Between the two of them, they had drafted a wonderful start for the school. There was land adjacent to the church that would do nicely for the building, and Anne would supply the funds. Mr. Abara would teach half of the classes the first year, and if it was successful, they would see about bringing on a teacher year-round. Anne would work with the girls, and she would convince the local ladies to donate their time in teaching classes on comportment, etiquette, and various artistic pursuits.

One of her neighbors was a wonderful painter—Anne was sure she could convince her to teach at least occasionally, and perhaps Mrs. Reynolds might teach household management. Many of the children were likely destined for service. Why not begin teaching them early?

After a few weeks of planning, they were set to begin. Anne now had to tell her husband of her plans. She hated to admit that she was nervous. There had been a time, not long ago, when she could have told him anything. When she had believed that he would support her through any endeavor.

After dinner, they sat in the drawing room, he reading a book and she playing a light tune on the pianoforte. When the song finished, she gathered her courage and approached him.

“I’ve decided to start a school,” she declared simply.

“Oh?” he looked up from his book, mild interest in his eyes.

“Yes. I’ve spoken with the vicar in Lambton and we have drawn up some plans.” She passed the list of classes and

schedules to him, along with the drawings of the small building they would place near the church.

George's brows rose. "I see you've given this much thought."

"I have."

She stood before him, back rigid and jaw tight.

He looked at her thoughtfully, tilting his head to one side as he considered her. "I understand this is important to you," he said carefully.

"It is."

George nodded. "I assume you are asking for the money to build the school?"

She shook her head sharply. "Not at all. It shall come out of my dowry. It has been gathering interest all these years, has it not?"

He nodded.

"Then it shall be of use at last." She kept her eyes glued to the painting above his head, not thinking of the daughters who should have had a share of her dowry and who now never would.

"If that is what you wish," George said softly. He reached out and touched her hand. It was so unexpected that she flinched, more out of surprise than anything else, and he withdrew quickly. "I will speak with Wickham about it tomorrow."

“I can speak with him. I do not wish to take up more of your time than necessary.”

“Very well, if you wish.”

She nodded and returned to the pianoforte, refusing to look at him until she was safely behind the cover of her sheet music. By the time she peeked over the instrument at him, he had returned to his book.



By mid-October, the school was built and staffed. The children would come from the market town of Lambton and its surrounding farms. There was a small children’s home that housed roughly twenty-five orphans who would attend as well.

Lady Anne Darcy was a force to be reckoned with. She had grown up around politics, and her mother had been a fabulous political hostess in her day, but Anne had never had the stomach nor the patience for it. But with the right motivation, she could cajole and persuade with the best of them. Apparently, she was more her mother’s daughter than she had ever realized.

The local ladies had been shamed into regular commitments teaching needlepoint, mending, painting, and drawing. Their daughters were drafted to teach music lessons, and an elderly baronet had donated an equally elderly pianoforte. The town tuner had repaired it, free of charge.

The local craftsmen had been eager to assist with teaching the older boys, especially when they heard that Mr. Darcy was awarding the senior boy with the highest marks five pounds, an amount Lady Anne matched for the girl with the highest marks. Many of them had sons who would attend the school, and they would not miss an opportunity to impress the richest man in Derbyshire. The carriage makers—Samuel Wickham’s elder brothers—would teach the basics of engineering. The baker had agreed to come once a month and instruct the children. The bookseller would come once per week and read from his latest acquisitions, though Lady Anne suspected he did it as much for himself as for the children. Book lovers were often like that.

The cook from Pemberley would teach once per week—for an extra stipend, of course—and Mrs. Reynolds would see the children once a fortnight. She was insulted at the idea that she might be paid for such a service, but she didn’t bat an eye when her pay was slightly higher the next month.

By the time the school opened, every shop owner in town was contributing in some way, and the majority of the gentry. The owners of her favorite haberdashery told her they were grateful for such quality instruction, as it would save them from bringing in anyone for their daughters, or worse, sending them away for school. They could ill afford such a thing, and Lady Anne guessed correctly that the girls would have simply had to forego formal schooling altogether.

By the end of the first week of classes, which had been a resounding success, Anne felt that she had finally found a

purpose for her life, and the gaping hole in her chest that had grown larger with every disappointment finally began to close.

CHAPTER 15



*H*ertfordshire, October 1811
Netherfield Park, Hert.,

23 October, 1811

Dear Richard,

You must thank me for I have done you the most wonderful service! What have I done for you, you ask? Only found a perfect wife for you, that is all!

Before you discount my information, I ask you to recall the last time I recommended a lady to you. Casting your mind back, I'm certain you have realized that I have never done such a thing. Having proven myself to be the opposite of a matchmaker, I insist you trust me now.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet is the second daughter of the second largest estate in this corner of Hertfordshire (there is a delightful symmetry to that, do you not think?). Her father is a well-read gentleman with a satirical wit and a rather dry sense of humor. You would love him. Her eldest sister, (Bingley's

latest angel—more symmetry there—he of the largest house in the neighborhood and she the prettiest of the girls in said neighborhood), is a very sweet girl. She is rather too kind, but she does remind me somewhat of Nora, all wide eyes and innocent expressions.

The younger sisters are drab, dull, and vulgar in turn, but nothing too shocking. And they would hardly live with you. Mrs. Bennet and Lady Anne have become friends, oddly enough. Mrs. B is the sort of woman our aunt would normally never associate with, yet they have found some sort of common ground and have called on each other at least twice per week since our aunt arrived in the country. Mrs. B is doing her best to imitate our aunt's manners, to the entertainment and benefit of all, or so I have gathered from what Miss Elizabeth and her sisters have hinted at.

I shall not keep you in suspense any longer and will tell you all about her. She is a delightful creature and I am sure I shall be friends with her for years to come. She has a wonderful sense of humor and laughs when others would cry or shout in anger. She is patient and kind, but not of the sickly variety, and she does not wear too much lace—something I know you will appreciate as you are always complaining of the stuff.

As for the attributes more important to men—she is quite pretty, second only to her elder sister. Miss Bennet's beauty is such that I believe most women would be second to her, so do not hold that against Miss Elizabeth. Elizabeth has shining dark brown hair with rather a lot of natural curl I think—or else it holds its shape from the wrappers remarkably well. Her

complexion is bright and healthy, not that ridiculous pale sickliness so in fashion.

On another note, Miss Bingley is a fan of the extremely pale face and looks positively ill half the time. At least her fear of a robust complexion keeps her indoors most of the time, so I may walk out as often as I choose without unwelcome company. And before you ask, I have been remarkably well-behaved. Little Rosamund keeps me quite busy, and I promised Lady Anne I would be kind—to an extent.

Back to Miss Elizabeth. Her eyes are bright and sparkling. I believe they are brown, but then I saw her in a green gown and they looked more green, then gold in yet another gown, so I shall settle on hazel. She is shorter than me but taller than your sisters. Her figure is formed but trim. I believe her penchant for long walks has seen to that.

And that may be her most perfect quality—she is robust of health and enjoys being out of doors. She would not faint at the idea of a summer spent following the drum in Spain. And she plays the pianoforte and sings rather well, enough to entertain you of an evening. Her personality is delightfully impertinent, just the sort to keep you interested and on your toes, for you know you are too apt to become bored and get into mischief. I do not believe she would put up with any ridiculous behavior—a wonderful quality in a wife—and would likely make a good sister for Alexander as well.

In short, she is as charming a creature as ever existed and I would very much wish for her to be my cousin. Do come to

Hertfordshire to meet her. Or if you cannot, I will invite her to Town next spring as my guest and you may meet her then.

Your matchmaking cousin,

Lady M

Fitzwilliam House, London

25 Oct., 1811

Dear Marianne,

Your suggestion that I escape to Hertfordshire is a good one, except for one tiny detail. I would be escaping London and my matchmaking mother for a matchmaking cousin and aunt. Lady Anne is not nearly so invested in my matrimonial prospects as my mother, but I would not be surprised if my mother deputized Lady Anne to act in her stead. Do not let her innocent expression fool you—she is forever plotting the demise of my bachelorhood.

Your Miss Elizabeth sounds lovely, but you have forgotten one tiny detail—her dowry. Since you were so thorough in her other attributes, I can only assume she has none, or very little. I must remind you, dear cousin, that a second son cannot marry without some consideration to fortune, as much as I wish it were different.

Now, how is my new cousin? Or shall I be Uncle Richard? It is odd calling a girl thirty years my junior my cousin. And I have not heard that I am to be the godfather. I assume this is only a mistake on your part, for I am certain you must

remember the conversation. I know it was proper for Pickering's brother and yours to stand godfather for your first son, but then you chose Darcy and your younger brother for your second—shameful that I was passed over there. I know John is your favorite brother and close to you in age, but you barely tolerate Thomas, and you and I spent nearly every summer together when we were children.

For shame, Marianne.

I shall take this opportunity to refresh your memory. You had recently been delivered of little Jack, and I had come to bring him a gift and to visit your tired, puffy self, when you were so grateful for my consideration that you promised the next babe would be my godchild. I recall it quite clearly, though your lack of sleep at the time (remember the circles under your eyes? You looked positively dreadful!) may have prevented you from recalling it.

I can assure you that the promise was made, and that I have every intention of calling it in.

Your teasing cousin,

The Colonel

Netherfield, Hert.

28 Oct., 1811

My Dear Colonel Fitzwilliam,

You know you are one of my favorite cousins, only second to Fitz, and he is more of a brother really. I prefer you even to

Reggie, at least now that we are older and you no longer tug my plaits or dip my hair ribbons in ink and get me into trouble with Mother. No one can replace you in my heart—especially Thomas. He is not all bad, he is merely a dreadful bore and rather enamored of his own voice, but no family can be solely comprised of interesting people full of stimulating conversation. Arabella is fascinating enough for two brothers, so we shall have to be satisfied.

There. Have I flattered your vanity enough? Shall you forgive me the slight of not asking you personally to be godfather to little Rosamund? If you are willing to do so and able to get to Lincolnshire, you are to be her godfather, with all its attendant glory and responsibilities. I fully expect you to teach her to wield a sword by her twelfth year, or I shall consider you derelict in your duties.

I am surprised you do not already know this. Henry says he wrote to you the day after her birth to announce her arrival and ask you to do the job. Did you not receive the letter? Did you only read the first half and become distracted by some shameful activity or other and miss the most important part? You must admit that would be rather like you. Or perhaps you spilled jam or coffee on it as you have a dreadful habit of reading at the breakfast table when you know you have always been terribly clumsy.

Or are you merely harassing me for not writing myself? I have just been delivered of a child, Richie. I have been rather busy.

Now, about Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Lady Anne likes her, Georgiana likes her, Henry likes her, even baby Rosamund likes her! Luke is utterly enamored of her, so you will have some competition there, but I rather think you can best him in the end. A woman does like her husband to be taller than her, and of age when possible.

As for her dowry, I believe she has one thousand pounds, a trifle I know, but it is something at least. And surely the right woman would be worth setting such considerations aside? 'She herself is a dowry,' I believe is the quote, or some such nonsense, from King Lear. Or was it Richard III? I shall leave the study of the bard to you and only say you really should move your focus from her dowry to your own felicity. All the money in Matlock will not make a poor partner more palatable. Ask your grandmother.

And I am sure Uncle Randall would do something for you. In fact, he is much more likely to see to your comfort than Alexander is, especially if he likes the lady. And I have already said Lady A thinks her lovely and you know Uncle almost always agrees with her. You should move quickly before Ally spends all the money on some ridiculous bet and your father won't be able to do anything for you, even should he wish it. Time is of the essence, dear cousin. You know you are not getting any younger, and ladies like Miss Elizabeth do not remain available for long. I am certain she is only still free because she is recently turned twenty and she rarely goes to Town. I shall remedy that myself, and when some wealthy

gentleman scoops her up, you will be filled with regret and wonder why you didn't listen to your cousin.

Do come! You could spend a few days in Hertfordshire, then travel with us to Harkley Hall for the Christening. Shall you spend the festive season at Matlock? It would be an easy journey there, and on to Pemberley as well if that is your destination.

Think on it.

Your luminous and not at all puffy cousin,

Lady M

Fitzwilliam House,

1 Nov., 1811

Dear Major Marianne,

You are proving as tactical as ever, my dear cousin. As much as I hate to admit it, you are right about Alexander. He is unlikely to offer me much, despite the fact that we are brothers, or perhaps because we are. He is also likely to plow through the family coffers with a shovel if something isn't done.

Keep this between us, but father is taking measures. He is considering increasing my sister's dowry in such a way that the money cannot be accessed by the estate. It is too late for Adele, but at least she married and made use of her dowry while she could. But something can still be done for Clara, though I do not know that she will ever marry. She seems not

to wish it, but then a larger dowry might be more necessary to her. She could live off the income if she wished to leave Matlock.

Father is placing Darcy and myself as the trustees of her money. Alexander will be livid when he finds out, but he cannot be surprised. He goes through money like water. Father has five children—he cannot allow one to bankrupt all the rest.

Father has also talked of doing something for both me and Andrew. I believe he means to buy Andrew a house in Town—his law practice is finally beginning to earn income and if he had a home, he would be able to marry soon. You know that would make Mother happy.

Grandfather has also made noises about some sort of inheritance, but I don't know that I can trust anything he says. After all, Uncle is in charge of the estate now, and who knows what he means by inheritance? He may simply leave me his favorite stud. I would appreciate the gesture, but it would hardly be a financial boon.

Alas, I cannot resist your entreaties and I'm sure you know you have several valid points, much as I hate to admit it. Grandfather Matlock was a difficult man—I don't know how grandmother withstood him as long as she did. Though I must disagree about money not being of help in such a situation. Were they in a small house in Town, they would have been thrown together every day and for much of their time. At Matlock, they had rooms on opposite sides of the house. They

had separate friends and I know she often traveled without him. She was at your grandmother's nearly half the year!

But you are right that the situation was not felicitous, and I would not wish such a union for myself. I should like to at least be friends with my wife.

So, my scheming cousin, I shall join you in Hertfordshire and take the measure of your Miss Elizabeth. I promise nothing but to keep an open mind, and I am trusting you to do nothing to embarrass myself or the lady. We are both too old for childish pranks—or at least those perpetrated on those outside our circle. Darcy is still fair game. Do we have an agreement?

Your ungrateful but resigned cousin,

R. Fitzwilliam

Marianne laughed when she read his reply, and wrote:

Netherfield, Hert.

3 Nov., 1811

My dear cousin,

You have an agreement! I shall be a perfect lady, and you shall see I am right about Miss Elizabeth! I have spent many happy afternoons walking the surrounding countryside with her and I only like her more on each encounter.

We depart Netherfield for Harkley on the 12th of November. Might you come before then?

Your excited cousin,

Lady M

M,

If I have an invitation, I shall arrive on the 8th. Does that suit your scheming?

R

Dear Richie,

Ha!

Lady M

Folded inside her letter was another, written in an elegant, looping hand.

Netherfield Park, Hertfordshire

6 November, 1811

Dear Col. Fitzwilliam,

Please accept our invitation to stay at Netherfield with your cousins. We would be most happy to host you. You are welcome for as long as you would wish.

Sincerely,

Caroline Bingley

Colonel Fitzwilliam had to laugh at his cousin's scheming. Nobody could say Lady Marianne Pickering did not know how to get what she wanted. He called his batman and told him to prepare to leave for Hertfordshire the day after next. Despite his dismissals to his cousin, he was curious about this Miss Elizabeth.

CHAPTER 16



*D*erbyshire, Spring 1793

Half a year after the school opened, classes became so large and so frequent that she was obliged to hold a class or two at the local orphanage. At least that was what she told the house mistress, Mrs. Landry, when she suggested the idea. Anne had noticed that several of the children from the orphanage were not attending classes as they should. She suspected Mrs. Landry had them doing work around the children's home instead of sending them to school. Anne understood that the work needed to be done, but the children also needed to learn to read.

So she began attending the orphanage every Tuesday, with occasional surprise visits on other days, and instructing the girls there herself after shooing the boys out the door to school.

On one such visit, Anne bent over the back of a chair where a young girl was working on her sampler. "Very nice, Lily. Be sure to keep the threads taut." The girl smiled at her and Anne moved on to the next girl in the large room, offering

encouragement and correction where needed. A squeak of the floor behind her brought her attention to a small figure watching her through the crack in the door.

Anne turned to move towards her but the girl ran away, leaving Anne standing in the hall with a surprised expression on her face.

“Is aught amiss, my lady?” asked Mrs. Landry, the orphanage mistress.

“There was a little girl here. But when I moved towards the door, she ran away.” She looked at the other woman quizzically.

“Oh, that was probably the chore girl.”

“Does she belong to a local family?”

“No, my lady, she lives here at the orphanage.”

“Why is she not participating in class?”

“She’s daft! Can’t teach her nothin’!”

Lady Anne took a deep breath and lifted her chin. “Please have the little girl brought to the parlor for lessons.”

The house mistress huffed and clenched her fists, but she shuffled off to do as she was told.

A few minutes later, Lady Anne saw a small girl enter the room, her eyes on the floor, Mrs. Landry behind her.

“Go on, girl! Don’t keep the lady waitin’!” Mrs. Landry gave her a shove and the girl lurched forward, barely catching herself before she fell.

Lady Anne rose and met the girl in the middle of the room, shooting a glare over her head to Mrs. Landry, who was pointedly looking at the window. Deciding to ignore the other woman, Anne took the small girl's hand and led her to the sofa against the far wall.

“Good day. I'm Lady Anne Darcy. Might you tell me your name?”

“They call me Daisy,” the little girl said, barely above a whisper.

“Daisy? That's a very pretty name.”

The girl stared at the carpet.

“How old are you?”

“Seven.”

“That's a fine age.” Anne's throat felt tight for a moment, thinking of the daughter who would have been the same age had she lived. “Do you know how to sew?”

“A little.”

“Have you ever done anything like this?” she asked, pointing to the work of another girl nearby.

Daisy shook her head.

“Would you like me to show you how?”

Daisy nodded, and Lady Anne spent the next half hour showing her how to hem a handkerchief. She reminded Anne a little of herself at that age, all knees and elbows, never

knowing what to say, and half wishing she could disappear into the curtains.



That night after dinner, Lady Anne said to her husband, “I met a new girl at the orphanage today.”

“Really? Was her family local?” He settled in the chair nearest her with a glass of port.

“I do not know. Mrs. Landry was not very forthcoming.”

“How did you find her?” he asked, sipping his port and keeping his eyes on the broadsheet he was perusing.

Anne took a deep breath and looked at the paintings on the opposite wall. “She seemed a sweet girl. Shy and quiet. And perhaps a bit frightened.”

“Not unusual in an orphanage, I’m afraid.”

“No, I suppose not, though it is lamentable.”

She fiddled with the lace on her cuffs for a few minutes, the silence between them stretching like a violin string till she felt ready to snap from the tension.

“I may do something for her.”

“Who? The girl?”

“Yes, the little girl,” Anne replied tightly. She forced herself to calm and asked, “I wonder how she came to be there. Do you know anything about a recent family loss in Lambton?”

“No, but I can ask Wickham to look into it.”

“That would be most appreciated.”

He made a small sound she took as agreement and continued reading. He did not look up at her—he never looked at her anymore. He looked over her shoulder, at her hair, just to her left, but never at her face. She wondered if he even remembered the color of her eyes. Finally, when the ticking of the clock on the mantle felt more like a hammer pounding her skull, she stood and made her way to the door, calling good night over her shoulder. She didn’t wait to hear a response. She doubted he even noticed she had gone.



A few days later, Anne was returning to the house from the stables when she ran into Mr. Wickham outside. They greeted each other, then he told her he had found out about the little girl she had met at the orphanage.

“What can you tell me?” she asked eagerly.

“Sounds like she was Mrs. Cartwright’s niece.”

“Mrs. Cartwright?”

“She was the butcher’s wife, and when he died, she stayed on with a cousin of his who took over the business. The little girl’s parents died a few years back and she had been living with her aunt and uncle for nigh on two years when old man Cartwright died. From what I gather, the cousin never liked the little girl, but there wasn’t much they could say about it.”

“But then Mrs. Cartwright died, and they put the little girl out.”

“Exactly. It’s a right sad story, my lady.”

Lady Anne breathed deeply and shook her head. “How could a butcher not afford to keep a child? Surely he would always have food?”

Wickham gave her a speaking look. “Some men’s hearts shouldn’t be looked at too closely.”

She pursed her lips. “Thank you for the information, Mr. Wickham. You’ve been most helpful.”

“I’m glad to help, my lady.”



When Anne visited the orphanage that afternoon, she made sure Daisy was included in the lessons. She was a delightful child. Bright, sweet, and bashful, she tugged on something in Lady Anne’s heart. She had a quick meeting with the vicar and left the orphanage with a renewed sense of purpose.

“Mr. Wickham!” Anne called across the courtyard. She turned her horse over to a groom and walked swiftly to catch the steward where he was entering the house. “Please file this with the important papers after a copy has been made for my use. And set up a meeting with the lawyers. I need to set aside a portion of my pin money for my ward.”

“Your ward, my lady?” repeated Wickham, utterly confused.

“Yes. Miss Eleanor Mason. Can you manage it?”

“Yes of course. Consider it done.”

She smiled broadly and nearly skipped up the stairs. Wickham shook his head, wondering what had occurred. My, but it was nice to see her smiling again! It had been too long since she'd looked so happy. He only hoped Mr. Darcy wasn't about to spoil it.



“She did what?”

“The paperwork is all there, signed and witnessed.”

Darcy stared at the papers in front of him, mouth open. Finally, he sighed and dropped his head into his hands. “I assume my wife is upstairs seeing to the preparations?”

“I believe so, sir,” said Wickham carefully. “If I may say so, she seems very happy.”

“Of course she's happy! Not least because she managed to do all of it without a word to me.”

Wickham studied the carpet, his silence heavy between them.

“I am sorry. That was uncalled for. Lady Anne has the right to do with her pin money as she sees fit, and Pemberley has plenty of space.” He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I shall go see her.”

Wickham nodded and watched his friend leave, saying a silent prayer that he wouldn't let his temper get the better of him.



“I see you have been busy,” said George when he found Anne in the small bedroom near the nursery.

“Yes, I have. I think it looks lovely, even though it is only the work of a day.”

“Were you going to tell me you are bringing another child into the house, or was I to find out when I stumbled upon her one day?”

“I knew Wickham would tell you. There was no secret,” she said lightly.

“Neither was there any discussion,” he said lowly, trying to keep his temper in check.

“I hadn't thought it necessary. I will feed and clothe her out of my pin money. She will be out of your way and no trouble to you at all.”

“It is a child!” he cried. “Not a new horse!”

She rounded on him. “Yes! A child without a mother or a home. A child who needs someone to watch over her, to secure her best interests. Why should I not be that someone?”

“Why should you be?”

She stood rigidly, refusing to allow herself to pound her fists against his chest and scream that he must understand—surely he understood? She blinked her eyes rapidly and lifted her chin.

“I am sure that if you consider it carefully, my reasons will be apparent.”

Instantly, he softened. He exhaled heavily, moving towards her, and hesitantly, he reached out and took her hand. It was not lost on either of them that it was the first time they had touched each other in months.

“If this is truly what you wish, I will offer no objection. But if the girl is to be in the nursery with Fitzwilliam, she must be properly educated.”

“Of course. I have already inquired about a governess.”

They smiled tentatively at each other, neither knowing who twitched first, until finally, Anne leapt into his arms as she had been longing to do for months now. “Thank you, George. You will not regret it!”

He held her tightly, burying his face in her hair, and kissed her head. He almost said he would give her anything she wished for, but they both knew there was one thing he would not give her, and he did not wish to quarrel.



Anne walked into the orphanage the following day with purpose.

“Lady Anne! We did not expect to see you,” cried Mrs. Landry.

“I should expect not. I’m here to collect my ward.”

“Your ward?”

“Yes, Miss Eleanor Mason.”

“Who?”

“The girl you call Daisy. She is to come with me.”

Mrs. Landry spluttered.

“I’ve had a copy of the papers made for you. Please have her things gathered and send her to the parlor.”

Anne made her way to the parlor on her own, ignoring the gasps and murmurs of Mrs. Landry. Soon, her charge was brought in, her eyes glued to the floor. Anne leaned down to the girl’s level.

“Daisy? Are you well?”

Daisy wrung her hands in front of her, her eyes still glued to the worn carpet. “I’m well, Miss.”

Anne did not correct her. “I have spoken with the vicar. You are to come live with me at Pemberley. Would you like that?”

Daisy finally looked up at her, wide green eyes meeting calm blue. She nodded.

Anne smiled. “My son will be so happy to meet you. He is a little older than you and a very sweet boy. I’m sure you will have a splendid time together.”

Daisy gave her a tentative smile, and Anne beamed back at her. "Come, my carriage is just outside."

Daisy reached up to take the offered hand and the sleeve of her too-large frock slid up her forearm, revealing angry purple bruises. Anne gasped when she saw them, and Daisy quickly pulled her sleeve down to cover the marks.

"Come, Daisy," she said quietly.

Anne situated Daisy in the carriage, then told Mr. Abara she wished to speak to him about Mrs. Landry at his earliest convenience. Based on what she had already seen, and the size and position of the marks on Daisy's arm, she knew who had inflicted them.

She joined her young charge in the carriage and settled in next to her. "Have you ever ridden in a carriage before?"

Daisy shook her head no, and Anne patted her knee. "Don't worry, soon we shall be home." Daisy watched her with wide eyes, then turned her attention to the window. They were pulling into the gates of Pemberley when Anne asked, "What would you like me to call you?"

Daisy looked at her with that surprised expression again, as if a cat had just started speaking to her.

Anne spoke more gently. "Mrs. Landry called you Daisy, but the records showed your name to be Eleanor. Do you prefer one over the other?"

"Uncle called me Daisy." She shook one foot where it dangled off the carriage seat. "He said I reminded him of a

flower.”

Her voice was so quiet Anne had to lean down to hear her. “That sounds lovely. Were you fond of him?”

Daisy nodded. “Aunt always called me Eleanor. She said it was a lady’s name.” She bit her lip and Anne patted her knee again. “Mrs. Landry says I am no lady, and won’t never be no lady, so I should be Daisy forever.”

Her lower lip trembled and Anne squeezed her hand. “I shall call you whatever you like. You can be Eleanor, or even Ella or Nora, or we can call you Daisy if you prefer.”

She scrunched up her face in thought. “I don’t like being called Daisy no more.”

“I understand perfectly. But if you should ever change your mind, we could call you Daisy as your uncle did. You could even be Eleanor most of the time, but Daisy for special days or just amongst the family. Whatever you wish.”

She looked thoughtful at this, biting her lip and watching the trees pass through the window. She nodded and Anne left the subject for now.



“This is to be your room.” Anne led her into the small bedroom near the school room. “Fitzwilliam’s room is just across the hall. When you are both older, you will move into proper chambers, but we needn’t worry about that now.”

Eleanor looked around her with wide eyes. Anne fluttered around the room nervously, showing her various toys and dolls and the two dresses she'd been able to find hanging in the wardrobe.

“We'll measure you for more clothes tomorrow. Would you like to meet Fitzwilliam now? He's been curious about you since I told him you were coming.”

Eleanor nodded and they went into the school room, knocking lightly on the door as they pushed it open. Anne introduced her son and his tutor, a small man with spectacles named Mr. Thistle. Eleanor thought the name was apt—he appeared to be a prickly sort of man.

The tutor said they were in a good place to stop and Fitzwilliam joined them, offering to show Eleanor around the school room and the adjoining play room. He introduced her to Nanny, who watched over him when he was not having lessons, and then proceeded to show her his toys.

He had a large collection of tin soldiers and he quickly set to showing her which ones performed which functions in his elaborate army set up. Eleanor joined in his play, choosing to line up a group of soldiers behind a small canon while Lady Anne and Nanny looked on with fond smiles. Finally, Anne said she would leave them to it and would be back in an hour. Both barely acknowledged her farewell, which she took to be a sign of their engrossment, and she dressed for dinner with a lighter heart than she'd had in years.

CHAPTER 17



*L*ambton, Derbyshire, Summer 1793

Anne soon realized why Mrs. Landry had thought Eleanor was daft. Eleanor had the imagination of a poet. She could often be found sitting in the chair by her window, staring out at the rain-soaked gardens. When she was outside, she would look into the distance for long periods of time, insensible to everything else.

Anne never thought she was deficient for a moment. A few questions soon revealed Eleanor was very imaginative, and Anne thought the best way to deal with her daydreaming tendencies was to give her an outlet for them. And to build her a window seat, of course.

When Anne hired a governess, she made sure the young lady was adept at drawing. She ordered a surplus of paints and pencils, and young Eleanor spent many happy hours in the gardens, painting and sketching. She was learning to read, and Anne thought once she had a good grasp on writing, Nora (that was what young Eleanor had decided she wanted the family to call her) would enjoy crafting her own stories.

Nora attended some tutoring sessions with Fitzwilliam, but her education had been so indifferent up to that point that she was woefully behind. Mr. Thistle did not think it right to be teaching a girl and a butcher's niece besides, but Mr. Darcy had made it very clear that Nora was now an indelible part of the family, and if Mr. Thistle wished to continue working for the Darcy family—and living in his very comfortable accommodations and receiving his very respectable wages—he would put in the extra time to bring Miss Nora up to the level appropriate for her age.

Nora did not like Mr. Thistle—he was exactly as his name proclaimed. But she very much liked all the information she was learning, and she was instantly fond of her new governess, a cheerful young woman called Miss Havers. But she adored Lady Anne. Lady—as Nora privately thought of her—was graceful and kind and pretty, and she smelled so nice, unlike Mrs. Landry at the orphanage. Lady Anne bought Nora several new gowns and let her choose whatever colors she wanted. She had a yellow gown, a pink one, and two different shades of green. There was a nicer purple one for special occasions, and two pairs of house slippers. Two! She even had a gown made especially for sleeping, something Nora had not even known existed. Hers was white and billowy and had a thin blue ribbon at the top. She felt quite decadent when she wore it. She also had boots for walking out, and a gorgeous riding habit in deep blue.

There was a pony in the stables named Pepper that she was learning how to ride, and Fitzwilliam had a little gig and pony

he would drive her about in. Fitzwilliam was an ideal elder brother, and he seemed to immediately accept Nora's comfort as his responsibility. Lady Anne told him it was unnecessary—she would take care of Nora, he could focus on his studies. But Fitzwilliam could not help it. He showed her around the house and grounds, made sure she knew all the servants' names and those of the gardeners and grooms, and taught her the best hiding places for the games they would play when his cousins came to visit in the summer.

Lady Anne watched the two of them together with a soft smile. Finally, Pemberley would be filled with the laughter of children, and not just when her family came to visit.



Lady Anne sat across from Mr. Abara in the vicarage at Lambton, ready to argue her case.

“You are certain it was Mrs. Landry?” he asked.

“Who else would it have been? I saw her push Eleanor right in front of me, and if she was willing to do that in my presence, what is she willing to do out of it? And the marks on Nora's arm were not large enough to be a man's.”

“Could it have been one of the older children?” He held his hands up at Lady Anne's exasperated expression. “I am not doubting you, but it is a serious accusation and the post will not be easy to fill. If we are to remove Mrs. Landry, I want to be certain.”

“Of course, I know you are right. Would she not confess if we simply asked her? Or could we speak with the children?”

“I think we may have more luck speaking to the children, though they may not talk to us,” he said thoughtfully.

“Why do you say that?”

“If they are frightened, they are unlikely to trust other adults.”

“So what are you thinking?”

“I think I will ask Madeline to speak to them. They are more likely to talk to another child. Then she can tell us what is going on and we can take the appropriate actions.”

Anne nodded. “Very well. Let us begin.”

Young Madeline was called in, and they began planning in earnest. Madeline was a few years older than Fitzwilliam, with sparkling brown eyes and jet black hair, her skin a perfect combination of her father’s soft brown skin and her mother’s fairness, complete with freckles. Madeline loved the idea of engaging in espionage, as she called it, and threw herself into her new role with all the relish an eleven-year-old girl could muster.

Within a fortnight, she discovered Mrs. Landry was not only being rough with the smaller children, but she occasionally over-disciplined as well. One such case had left a ten-year-old girl in bed for a week, her back so sore she could only lie on her stomach. Anne was appalled when she heard, and when

she found out Mrs. Landry was also selling orphanage supplies for her own profit, she gladly called in the magistrate.



Lady Anne rapped on the door to Wickham's office and sank wearily into the chair he held out for her.

He looked at her with sympathy but waited for her to speak first.

"How are things progressing?" she asked, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"Mrs. Landry will be tried next week, and likely convicted. In the meantime, the housekeeper is managing at the orphanage until we can find a replacement. Mrs. Reynolds has sent a maid and a footman to assist with the boys."

Lady Anne released a ragged breath. "That is good." She sat up straighter and focused her attention on the steward. "Forgive me, Mr. Wickham. I'm afraid all of this has left me feeling rather unlike myself."

"Think nothing of it, my lady."

She smiled at him wearily. Their relationship had been rocky in the beginning. She had not liked that her husband was friends with his steward. She had not liked that the steward continued to do her such invaluable service that she could not help but admit how wrong she had been about him. She *really* had not liked it when she began to like Samuel Wickham on his own merit. But time had softened her, and she had finally

realized that one's position in the world was merely one of many factors and should not be the defining characteristic of one's life.

“Now we need only find a new mistress for the orphanage,” she said tiredly.

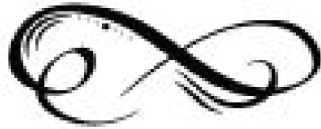
“Have you any candidates in mind for the position?”

“Not as yet. We will place an advertisement in the Derby papers. I would like someone as local as possible.”

“I have a suggestion, if you wish to hear it.”

She brightened. “I do! Who do you have in mind?”

CHAPTER 18



*L*ambton, Derbyshire, Summer 1793

Lady Anne smiled as she watched Rachel Connelly reading to the children. When Wickham had first suggested her, she had had her doubts, but on speaking to Rachel, she realized the woman was much kinder than her cousin, and more importantly, well-suited to the position. She had helped in the bookshop in Lambton for several years, and she had run her grandmother's household for longer. It was a very different thing to running an entire orphanage, but she was clever and quick to learn, and more importantly, patient and kind. She was well known by the villagers and had their trust, as well as that of the vicar, Mr. Abara.

Anne had always thought children were excellent judges of character, and they all seemed utterly taken with her. Miss Connelly it would be.



When Rachel had opened the letter from Lady Anne inviting her to interview for the position of orphanage mistress, she had been surprised. When she had met the great lady and realized how well-suited she was for the job, she had been surprised again, and more than a little flabbergasted when Lady Anne offered her the position. She could have been knocked down with a feather when she saw the salary she was to be paid. But nothing could have prepared her for Lady Anne's next suggestion.

After two weeks of living in her apartment over the bookstore and walking to the orphanage at dawn each morning, Lady Anne had suggested it would be better if she lived on the orphanage property. It would be good for the children to feel she was a more permanent fixture, and it would hopefully stave off any wrongdoing on the part of the staff.

Rachel could not argue with her reasons, but she did feel somewhat overwhelmed at the idea of leaving the home she had lived in for more than twenty years, shabby though it was, and living day and night with nearly thirty noisy children. It would be hard to give up her own home, but the lady was right. It was for the best.

Rachel agreed and made a poor joke about accustoming herself to sleeping with so much noise, and Lady Anne looked back at her slightly horrified.

“My dear Miss Connelly, I would never expect you to live in the orphanage itself! I was not clear. I am suggesting you

live in a cottage we will build for you on the orphanage property. Are you amenable to such an arrangement?”

“A cottage? For me?”

“It will be small but quite comfortable. I am happy for you to include your own specifications if you wish. A lady should have some control over her own surroundings, after all. Do you not agree?”

Rachel could only nod mutely. Her own cottage! And she would be allowed to choose her own furnishings! She blinked rapidly to dispel the tears that were suddenly filling her eyes.

“Yes, my lady, I agree completely. It sounds wonderful.”

“Very well, then. We shall get started as soon as possible. Mr. Wickham will bring by some plans for your inspection. I insist you tell him if something does not meet your needs.”

Rachel made some sound of agreement and Lady Anne talked on, but she was in a haze of daydreams and could not focus on what the lady was saying.



A few months later, as Rachel watched the men carrying her new furnishings into the cottage Lady Anne had arranged for her, she considered the irony of her situation. She had often gone to her cousin’s house, nestled cozily on Pemberley lands, and seen firsthand the largesse of the Darcy family. She had seen how generous George Darcy could be. He wished his

steward and friend to be comfortable, and had done everything in his power to make it so.

Rachel had watched it all with envy, hating herself for the blackness in her soul that knew she would have been a better wife to Samuel, a better mother to little George. She would have appreciated the kindness of Samuel's employers and she would have recognized her good fortune.

But none of those things were to be hers, and she had made peace with that long ago. She had learned to find contentment in assisting the bookseller below her apartment, in taking care of her grandmother in her final years, in volunteering at the local school and helping the vicar's wife with her condolence visits. She had made a life for herself, devoid of Samuel Wickham and the Darcy's generosity.

Yet here she stood, on land donated from the Darcys, beside a house built for her by Lady Anne, watching Samuel Wickham direct the movers as they carried in furniture.

She couldn't help but laugh a little to herself. It was funny how she now had everything she had wanted, bar Samuel. A cottage of her own, a respectable place in the community, children to love and take care of. And yet, there was Samuel, taking care of her in his way, and as always, standing her friend.



Rachel was arranging her books on the shelf when there was a knock on the door. To her surprise, her cousin Rebecca was on

the other side of it.

“I’ve come to see your new cottage,” she said.

Rachel expressed her surprise and led her into the small sitting room.

“Well this is nice!” said Rebecca.

Rachel thanked her and sat across from her, wondering what her cousin was truly doing there. They had barely spoken in the last three years. There was no formal falling out, they simply stopped seeking out each other’s company once George was old enough to run into the village on his own to see his aunt and no longer required Rachel to walk him home. Rebecca seldom did anything that did not serve herself in some way, and Rachel was wary of her cousin’s true purpose in coming there.

“How have you been? How is George?” asked Rachel politely.

“I am as well as I always am. You know I am seldom ill. George is well, too, as is my Samuel. He received a bonus from Mr. Darcy. They got a better price than usual from the wool last season and Mr. Darcy rewarded him,” said Rebecca with a smug smile.

“That is good for Samuel and Pemberley.”

Conversation languished and Rachel did nothing to revive it. She knew she was being a bad hostess, but she had nothing to say to Rebecca. Well, nothing that would not prove her an even worse hostess than simple silence.

“Has my George been by to see your new cottage?”

“Yes, he came with Mr. Wickham when the furniture was brought.”

“I see.”

Rachel was silent again.

“I will tell him not to bother you anymore, now that you spend so much time at the orphanage.”

“Excuse me?”

“George. He mustn’t get in the way of your employment.” She said the last with a slight sneer.

“He is no trouble.”

“Nevertheless. Orphanages are terribly dirty places. Lord knows what kinds of diseases you will be exposed to. George does not need to be exposed as well. He is my only son, after all.”

Rachel looked at her with dawning horror. Rebecca stared back, an implacable expression on her face.

“You are forbidding George from coming here?” she said, her voice strong despite the shaking in her hands. She knew what her cousin was doing, but she would make her say it out loud. She would not let her hide behind false civility.

“Yes, I am. I am his mother. It is my right.”

Rachel felt a knife twisting in her gut. Sweet little George, the light in her life for so many years now, was being ripped from her, and for no reason other than spite.

“Why are you so hateful?” she asked, tired of the falseness.

Rebecca looked surprised. “Hateful? For wanting to protect my own son?”

Rachel snorted. “You don’t give a damn about protecting George and we both know it. You just don’t want him liking anyone better than you.”

Rebecca’s face flushed a deep red. “I am his mother. You are just a pathetic relation who isn’t pretty enough to get a man to bed you and needs to work in an orphanage because you cannot face the fact that you will never have children of your own.”

Rachel trembled in indignation. She stood, happy for once that she was so much larger than her cousin. “Get out of my house.”

“Gladly.” Rebecca stormed out, throwing a malevolent smile over her shoulder as she flounced through the door.



The following week, Rachel was preparing her breakfast when she heard a tapping on the glass. She looked to the window and saw young George, barely tall enough to see through the window, smiling and waving at her.

She opened the back door and pulled him in, unable to resist crushing him to her in a tight hug.

“You dear boy. What are you doing here? Did your mother say you could come?”

“She told me I wasn’t to come visit you anymore. Why would she say that?”

“Your mother is a complicated woman. We don’t always understand her reasons. But she is your mother, so we will have to listen.”

George frowned. “I miss you,” he said plaintively.

Her heart ached and she took a deep breath to steady herself. “And I you, dear boy. But I don’t want you to get into trouble.” He stared at the floor as she ran her hand through his unruly curls. “Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“Now get to school before you’re late.”

“Yes, Aunt.”

She watched him go with a heavy heart.

CHAPTER 19



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 7 November, 1811

Elizabeth arrived at Netherfield to find it in turmoil. Servants were rushing to and fro in the entrance hall, the front door was ajar, and there was shouting coming from above stairs.

She saw Mr. Bingley running towards the stairs and called his name. “Have I come at a bad time?”

“Miss Elizabeth?” He looked at her in bewilderment, as if he had no idea how she had come to be there.

“Mr. Bingley, good day. I came to call on Lady Marianne. I gather this is a bad time?”

He stepped very close to her and said in a low voice, “There has been an accident. Young Luke fell from his horse.”

She gasped and pressed her hand to her mouth. “Is he badly injured?”

“The apothecary has been sent for. He is alive and awake, but his left leg took the brunt of the fall. I fear it is broken.”

Her eyes widened in horror. “No!”

“Lady Anne is beside herself, naturally. Darcy carried him into the house and up the stairs, white as a sheet, both of them. I’ve never seen him so frightened—Darcy that is. I oughtn’t be telling you this. Forgive me.” He paced away from her, then towards her again.

She touched his sleeve gently. “What may I do to help? Is anything being done for his pain?”

“Lady Marianne said she knew of something. Her husband was shot in the war, you see, but I do not know where she has gone. The stillroom, perhaps.”

Elizabeth smiled at him gently, for he was clearly on the verge of panic, and said she would join Lady Marianne in the stillroom to see if she might be of assistance.

Elizabeth rapped on the door frame as she entered the stillroom. Lady Marianne was rapidly picking up glass jars of dried herbs and smelling them, as there were precious few labels, and examining those plants still hanging from the rafters to dry.

“May I be of some assistance?”

“This blasted stillroom is useless! All they have is lavender. Lavender! As if I couldn’t find that in any obliging field in England!”

She turned to face Elizabeth, her face red and arms akimbo.

“The stillroom at Longbourn is well stocked, I believe, as is the herb garden. If you like, we can send a note and request

what you are looking for.”

Marianne made quickly for the door. “We can send ourselves—that shall be much faster.”

Elizabeth ran to catch up to her. “As you wish, my lady.”

“Did you ride over? Is your horse still saddled?”

“I walked. I am no horsewoman.”

Marianne looked at her strangely for a moment, then gruffly told a footman to see her horse was saddled quickly. “Miss Bennet, would you please write me a note for the housekeeper? I shall have to be abominably rude and go straight to your stillroom without calling on your mother.”

“Of course.” Elizabeth quickly penned a note at the writing desk in the sitting room and handed it to Marianne.

“Are you sure you do not wish me to accompany you?”

“It will take too long to ready the carriage. I shall be quicker on horseback.” She looked to the window and saw her horse being brought around. “Damn side saddle. I could go faster astride, but there is no time to change. I shall be back shortly, Miss Bennet.”

Surprised in a dozen ways and not knowing which to start with, Elizabeth merely nodded and told her to be careful. Knowing herself to likely be in the way, she made her way to the front door to leave when Mr. Jones burst in.

“Miss Lizzy! Wonderful. I shall need you to assist me.”

“Oh! I, uh, yes, very well,” she said hesitantly. Everyone in Meryton knew she assisted Mr. Jones when he was tending to a tenant at Longbourn and occasionally a neighboring estate, but the visitors did not know that, and she knew her mother would be mortified for her extra-curricular activities to become common knowledge. Thankfully, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were visiting an acquaintance in Stoke, fifteen miles away, and were not due back until late.

She followed Mr. Jones up the stairs, keeping her head low. Soon they were at the door to the sickroom and she hovered near the doorway, not wanting to intrude.

The room was very full. There was Mr. Darcy near the bed, guarding his brother like a sentinel, Mr. Bingley near the window, looking worried, and Lady Anne and Miss Darcy sitting on the bed on either side of a prostrate Luke, who looked sweaty and pale with pain. Mr. Jones politely asked everyone to make room so he could examine the patient. Mr. Darcy looked like he did not like the idea, but he complied.

Mr. Jones uncovered the leg and poked it a bit, causing Luke to hiss in pain. “The break does not look severe, but it is broken. I believe it is a clean break, though. Setting it properly should restore the bones to good order.”

Elizabeth felt she was intruding where she did not belong and stepped further into the corridor. Close enough to call if she were needed, but not close enough to hear everything being said—or to anger the Darcys for inserting herself in a situation that was none of her affair.

“I shall need some assistance,” Mr. Jones said.

Darcy stepped forward. “What do you need?”

Mr. Jones looked at him in surprise, having forgotten the quiet man was there. “Have you any brandy? If he can drink a little, it will help with the pain and keep him calm. Setting the leg will be painful.”

“I shall get it,” said Mr. Bingley as he rushed out of the room.

Georgiana looked very pale where she hovered near the bed. Sensing things were about to get difficult, Lady Anne said, “Georgianna, dear, please check on the baby. All the noise may have upset her.”

Georgiana looked grateful for the occupation and followed after Mr. Bingley, leaving only Lady Anne and her two sons with the apothecary.

“Would you mind if Miss Bennet assisted me?” asked Mr. Jones, as if he only now realized he was not dealing with tenant farmers who did not care who helped them, as long as the help came.

“Miss Bennet?” repeated Darcy in surprised tones.

Elizabeth winced in the hallway.

“Yes. She often helps me with things of this nature on her father’s estate. There are a great many children at Longbourn, and they are always falling out of some tree or other.”

Elizabeth wanted to sink into the floor. He made Longbourn sound like a jungle filled with monkeys masquerading as children, and she the keeper of them. She began to tiptoe towards the staircase to make her escape.

“Surely I can assist you,” said Mr. Darcy. “We needn’t send for Miss Bennet. It would be nearly an hour before she could arrive.”

“She is already here, sir!” said Mr. Jones, perplexed that they did not know this information, and triumphant with what he saw as a victory. “I brought her upstairs with me. She is just in the corridor. Miss Lizzy!” he called.

Elizabeth cringed and halted her escape. She turned around and stood near the door, saying perhaps the family would prefer she not be the one to assist Mr. Jones.

“Nonsense,” said Lady Anne firmly. “If you have done this before, you know more than my son and I do. Please, Miss Bennet, assist as you will.”

Elizabeth curtsied to the great lady and made her way to Mr. Jones’s side. Mr. Darcy was clearly not happy about this turn of events, but he made way for her without objection.

Poor Luke was drowsy, she supposed from laudanum, and looked at her with glassy eyes before drifting into what looked like a light sleep. Mr. Jones told Elizabeth what to do, how to hold the limb, what to fetch from his bag, and she moved about mechanically, as she would do in any tenant’s home. Mr. Jones looked at her quizzically once or twice but said nothing of her unusual silence. Normally, she would chatter with the

patient, keep them distracted and calm. Now, she said not a word.

As they set the leg, Luke roused with a great cry. He sat up in the bed, struggling to be free, and Mr. Darcy immediately sprang into action. He pressed Luke's shoulders into the bed to keep him from thrashing as Lady Anne brushed Luke's hair from his face and told him to lie still, all would be well.

Elizabeth did as she had always done in such situations: she stroked his good leg rhythmically, crooning that all would be well and they were nearly done, that he could hold out just a little while longer, that the pain would not last long. Luke's glassy eyes fixed on her and she stared at him while she held his leg in place for Mr. Jones. She continued speaking in soft tones, little nothings about how very brave he was being and how she knew the pain was awful, but it would be of short duration. He should look at her, just keep his eyes on her. Focus on her voice, nothing else.

Lady Anne watched in astonishment as Luke responded to Miss Bennet with a nod and a stoic expression, biting down on his lips instead of crying out. She looked to Fitzwilliam, and he merely quirked a brow at her, expressing his surprise and suspicions.

Soon enough, Luke's leg was splinted and wrapped and he fell asleep, the pain dulled by laudanum and brandy. The group made their way downstairs in time to see Marianne coming in from the stillroom.

“Did you find what you were looking for at Longbourn?” asked Elizabeth.

At Fitzwilliam’s questioning expression, Marianne said, “Yes, you have a well-stocked stillroom, Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth nodded her thanks. “It is an interest of mine. I’m glad it was of use to you.”

Marianne gestured to the mixture in her hand. “This should help young Luke with the pain. It will not do to have him on laudanum for several weeks together.”

Mr. Darcy looked as if he wished to ask questions of the two ladies, but Marianne was hurrying upstairs to deliver her concoction and Lady Anne was tiredly making her way to the drawing room with Mr. Jones, who was speaking of Luke’s continued care. Darcy found himself alone with Miss Elizabeth at the bottom of the stairs.

“Miss Elizabeth, please allow me to thank you for your assistance with my brother today. Your help was invaluable.”

“I was happy to do it. No thanks are required.”

“Nevertheless, you have my gratitude.”

She nodded. “I should be going home, my mother will want me.”

“Do you have a carriage?”

“No, I walked here.” She looked out and was surprised to see the sun was beginning to set. She had been gone longer than she realized. With a frown at the dimming sky, she said,

“I shall ask Mr. Jones to take me back to Longbourn on his way home.”

“There is no need. I will call the carriage.”

Before she could object, he had summoned a footman and asked the carriage to be brought around.

“There is truly no need. I would be perfectly comfortable with Mr. Jones.”

“It is the least I can do after your service to my family. Besides, I believe Mr. Jones arrived on horseback,” he said with a slight quirk to his lips.

“Oh! Well, in that case, I thank you. A carriage shall be infinitely more comfortable than the back of Mr. Jones’s horse.”

Darcy’s eyes widened as his brows shot up in surprise.

Elizabeth allowed a small smile to escape. “I am only teasing, Mr. Darcy. Mr. Jones has not taken me home on his horse since I was ten years old.”

He smiled in response to her happy expression. “You have known him long, then?”

“My whole life. He grew up with my father. My sisters and I played with his children nearly every day when we were young.”

“And you are no longer young, Miss Bennet?” he asked. His voice was even, but his lips were twitching in one corner and his eyes crinkled where he held back his smile.

“I am exactly the right age, Mr. Darcy.”

He barked out a laugh, the tension and oddity of the day making it more vigorous than it otherwise would have been.

The footman came forward to tell them the carriage was ready, and he led Elizabeth outside and handed her up, placing a hand on either side of the door as he leaned in slightly.

“Thank you again, Miss Bennet. You were of great help today.”

She smiled softly. “Please tell Master Luke I am sorry he was hurt and I wish him a swift recovery.”

“I will relay the message.”

“Good evening, Mr. Darcy.”

“Good evening, Miss Bennet.”

She sat back in the carriage with a strange feeling, as if she were being watched, and when she looked back from the end of the drive, she saw Mr. Darcy still standing on the front steps, watching her departure.

CHAPTER 20



*D*erbyshire, 1794

Pemberley, Derbyshire

12 January, 1794

Dear Marianne,

Winter must be the longest season of them all. I know it is not truly, but it feels it. The snow in Derbyshire is deep this year, nearly to my waist. Poor Nora can hardly walk in it. It will probably take weeks for this letter to arrive.

In answer to the question in your last letter, yes, Nora feels quite like a sister to me now. At first she did not. She was more of a playmate that was frequently here, like one of the Abara children. Then she felt like a cousin, and now, eight months after her arrival at Pemberley, I feel as sisterly towards her as I can, though not having had a sister before, it is hard to tell.

She has finally mastered directing her pony. It took her ever so long. Can you believe she is nearly eight years old and did

not know how to ride a pony? Mama says I should not say such things because Nora was living in a difficult situation and we should show her compassion and kindness and be patient with her. I am trying to be patient, but I did wish you were here when we were walking so slowly around the lake. I know it is only Pepper, but she is capable of going faster than a walk. I had to continually calm Sheba—she wanted to run, or at least canter.

Pepper is a docile pony, but Nora was scared to death of her for the longest time. I do not understand it. How could anyone be frightened of a tiny pony?

Mama is much happier now that Nora has come to live with us. She reads to us both in the evenings as she has always done, but she smiles more, and she has begun teaching Nora how to play the pianoforte. She tried to teach me, but I was never very good (I'm sure you remember how awful I sounded), though Nora makes it look like fun, so perhaps I will ask Mama to try again.

Mr. Thistle is finally satisfied with Nora's progress and is allowing her to have some of her lessons with me now. She has a decent head for numbers. We have begun a new game wherein we give each other mathematical problems to solve. Mr. Thistle found out and has started setting us to riddles. It is very diverting. I am including one at the end for you to try.

You should write Nora yourself, you know. She thinks you do not like her. I told her that you do not dislike her, but you have been as my sister for so long, it is only natural you would feel

displaced. At least that is what Mama told me. Is it true? Do you feel displaced? You must know, Marianne, you are my favorite relation after my parents. A dozen new sisters could not take your place.

I have taught Goliath how to duel. I raise my hand, then he raises his paw, and when I shout, he falls over on his side. Can you believe we did it? I have been working on it with him for months—I thought he would never get it. Cousin Reggie said the trick with dogs is to continue working on it each day without ceasing, so I practiced with him every day after lessons and I have finally been rewarded. Mama was in peals of laughter when she saw it.

I think Nora may be jealous of Goliath. After all, he has such nice dark fur and is very friendly and has lived here longer than her. Nora is terribly quiet. I have told her that the servants are all friendly, but she prefers to stay with Mama or me. She won't even be on her own with Papa! When he offered to help her with riding Pepper, she got all wide-eyed and trembly. I think it is because he is so big. Mama says people are often scared of others who are bigger than they.

George offered to help her and she let him, probably because he is barely bigger than her. He got all pink in the face and smiled at her. Maybe he is sweet on her—that is what one of the grooms at the stables said. I think it is ridiculous. George is only nine, and Nora eight. Mama says that is too young for anyone to be sweet on anybody else. Papa only laughed.

George and I raced across the southern fields yesterday, towards the stream. George won by a hair and I was put out at first, for we had bet a shilling and I had to pay up, but then he used it to buy us both buns at the bakery in Lambton, so I could not be too cross. I won the race on the way home, but we had not bet on that one. When I told Papa about it last night, he said I should not bet with people like George who can ill afford to lose the money. The Wickhams have a very nice cottage, and Mr. Wickham is a kind man, but I suppose they do not live in a house as big as Pemberley because they have less money. Though there are only three of them and a maid—they fit perfectly well in their cottage. Pemberley must be so large because we have so many servants. I'm sure if we had fewer, we would not need such a large house.

Tell me all the news from the manor. Did your father give you the mare you wanted? What will you call her?

Your snowed-in cousin,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Livingstone Manor, Oxfordshire

10 February, 1794

Dear Fitz,

The snow must be awful! Your letter took nearly three weeks to get here! Have you had many snow wars? Who won?

No, I do not feel displaced by Nora. I was rather frustrated with her in the beginning for she was so dull and not at all interested in the right sorts of things, but by the end of the summer, she was much more fun. I am glad you hold me so dear, for you are just as dear to me, even more than my own brothers, though do not tell them such. They are frightfully sensitive.

As for George being sweet on Nora, it would not be so surprising. Remember how he tried to kiss me under the bough last Christmas? I scrubbed my mouth for a week! Is she sweet on him? I think Lady Anne is correct. We are all much too young to be sweet on anyone. Can you imagine it? The idea is revolting.

I cannot wait to see Goliath's new trick! Do you think we could teach him something together this summer? Mayhap he could bark and you could fall over dead. Ha!

Mother said that if I complete my work in good time, she will allow me to come to Pemberley in late May and stay through Michaelmas. Does that not sound grand? Imagine what fun we shall have!

I have been asking Father for my own dog. One of the hunting dogs has just had a litter and they are the most adorable puppies. They have big brown eyes and burrow into my petticoat when they are sleepy. Mother says she refuses to have such creatures in the house and that they do nothing but make messes and trouble. I have said I will take care of it

myself, and it could have a basket in my room to sleep in, but Mother will not hear of it.

Mother has another horrible idea. She is thinking of moving Arabella out of the nursery and into my room. I do not know what I have done now that makes her think I would like to share a room with a two-year-old baby, but apparently I am in trouble again.

She is still angry with me for spilling ink on her favorite rug. I told her I was sorry, and I felt terrible about it, but it was an accident! I did not think Tom would be so clumsy. Truly, why is he not in trouble? After all, he was the one holding the inkpot. Just because it was my idea and he is only five should not mean I am the only one to get into trouble.

She made me write out "I will not use my brothers for mischief" 100 times in perfect handwriting. After my lessons! It took me a week to finish it. I had to throw out an entire page of effort when it got an ink blot on it, so really, I wrote it 120 times.

11 February

I have been so stupid! They do not want to move Arabella into my room with me. Thank heavens! They want to move me into a new chamber, and Arabella into my current room next to the schoolroom.

I asked Father last night why I was being punished by having to share with Arabella, and if it was because Mother was still angry about the rug. He laughed and said I had

misunderstood entirely. Apparently, Arabella makes a dreadful racket when she sleeps. She talks and kicks and sometimes she has bad dreams and wakes up crying. The last part is very sad, but Papa said it was not so often and that I should not worry about it. Anyhow, she is waking up my brothers and everyone agreed they would all be more comfortable if Arabella moved next door into my small room and I moved into the family wing and my own chamber.

Can you imagine? My own chamber! I shall have a small sitting area, and Mother spent half an hour this morning looking at fabric for curtains with me. She presented me with a selection and said I should choose my favorite. I have never chosen my own things before, and Mother never likes the things I ask for when I am getting new clothes.

I chose a blue fabric for the curtains and Mother seemed very happy with my choice. She said it was elegant and ladylike. I simply thought it pretty, like the color of a spring sky, but she may think me elegant if she chooses. It was the most fun she and I have ever had together.

I must dash. I have a riding lesson in 20 minutes. Oh, and I do not have the mare yet, but I am working hard on my new jump. I think if I can master it, Father will gift her to me for my birthday this summer.

Your elegant cousin,

Marianne

P.S. You have so many servants because your house is so big, not the other way around, silly! You should study

household management with your mother. She can tell you all about it.

Pemberley, Derbyshire

19 February, 1794

Dear Julia,

All is well in Derbyshire, though we are still covered in snow. Even the children have tired of playing in it, though F's dog is still happy to frolic in the snow drifts.

Nora is adjusting very nicely and feels truly as one of the family now. George took some time to adjust to her, or perhaps it was more the idea of her than anything else, but he has now come around quite nicely. He even offered to help her with her pony, but she is still frightened of him, the poor thing. She will become accustomed to him in time. Though I cannot truly blame her. She only comes up to his waist—he must seem a veritable giant to her.

With the harsh weather, we have stopped eating in the formal dining room. Our food was cold half the time and my ankles were freezing from the drafts ten minutes into the meal. George and I are now eating in one of the smaller family parlors and afterward, we invite the children to join us. Nora plays a few songs for us, and we have lately begun a tradition of reading stories together.

G and I have often read to the children at night, but this is different. Last night, F took on the male lead and Nora the

female. It was only a children's story, but they were quite entertaining. George laughed so hard you could have heard him outside. They have asked to read a play this evening that we will all participate in. I confess I am quite looking forward to it.

I had the strangest conversation with Fitzwilliam the other day. He asked why we have so many servants, and why Pemberley is so big, and then asked if I might begin teaching him household management for he did not like Marianne knowing something he did not know. Do not tell her he said so, he would never recover. Who knows what those two are writing in their letters to each other—apparently, they have begun covering the management of servants.

I showed him what he needed to know and he seemed so interested, we have continued our lessons every Tuesday and Friday after tea. He has a good grasp of arithmetic, thankfully, so it is not too taxing. I did not have the heart to tell him that household management is usually the purview of the mistress of the house, not the master. Who knows? Perhaps he will have need of the knowledge some day. He may wait to marry, or if his wife is ever ill, he will be able to manage in her stead.

At least that is what I told George when he asked what we were doing. He was quite surprised by the endeavor, but he was not angry. I could tell he was trying not to laugh when we were discussing how often to host parties and teas and budget accordingly. Dear Fitzwilliam took it all very seriously. His forehead was scrunched up in that way it does when he is focusing on something difficult. I resisted the urge to brush his

hair out of his face. The last time I did it, he nearly swatted my hand away before he remembered himself.

I fear my little boy is growing up. I am so very proud of him, yet I shall miss his boyhood. I am convinced he is the sweetest boy who ever lived in Derbyshire and I shall not hear otherwise.

Now, tell me about the children. Is John still causing as much trouble as ever? Did the ink finally come off little Tom's skin or is he still a pale shade of blue? How does Arabella? Has she adjusted to the new room? Is her sleep at all improved?

You may want to consider sleeping with her for a time. I know it is odd, but after we buried little George, Fitzwilliam had a difficult time sleeping. His nurse tried to tend him, but he would only calm for me. I let him sleep with me for a few weeks and he was soon put to rights. Sometimes children simply need their mother.

Your Cousin,

Anne



Rebecca Wickham stood beneath the willow tree near the bank of the brook, waiting for Mr. Darcy. According to the stable boy, he rode his horse every morning. Always the same route, always the same time.

Now was her chance. After all this time, he would finally be hers. Maybe he would set her up with a house in Derby. She would have a cook and a footman. Fine gowns and her own lady's maid. He would buy her a phaeton as a gift, and she would buy a red habit and a matching hat, a jaunty one with a feather in it, and ride through the streets proud as a peacock.

She heard hoofbeats in the distance and focused on her goal, to become the mistress of Mr. Darcy. He would be ripe for the picking. Lady Anne had clearly turned him away from her bed. The great lady probably did not want to go through all the bother of a pregnancy with nothing to show for it. Why else would she have adopted that little urchin last summer? Regardless of her reason, she was clearly denying her husband. Anyone who saw the Darcys together could tell they shared no intimacies. Rebecca knew she was still the prettiest woman in Derbyshire. Whom else should he turn to?

He slowed his mount as he approached the stream. He dismounted in one fluid motion and led the gelding to the water.

"Mr. Darcy," she said softly as she stepped out from behind the willow tree. She was framed elegantly in the draping leaves and she knew she presented a fetching picture.

"Mrs. Wickham. What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for you," she said coyly, letting a draping stem flow through her fingers as she moved towards him.

He stared at her in astonishment. "For me?"

She stopped in front of him and slowly traced her hand down his chest. “Who else?”

He stepped back and bumped into his horse.

She smiled. “We can help each other, you and I.”

He drew himself up straight and looked down at her. “There is nothing you can help me with, Mrs. Wickham,” he said sternly, emphasizing her name.

She laughed gaily and looked up at him through her lashes. She was a very pretty woman, he could admit that, but she was entirely too practiced in her routine. How many others had she tried it on? How many times had it succeeded? He felt embarrassed for her and angry on behalf of his friend.

“Are you certain, Mr. Darcy? There’s nothing at all I can do for you?” she ran her hand up his sleeve to his shoulder, the look in her eyes unmistakable.

He had no doubt that she would have kissed him had she been able to reach him. Instead, she reached her hand around his neck and tried to pull him towards her, unsuccessfully. He grabbed her hand and placed it beside her, then took a long step away from her.

“You forget yourself, madam. I wish nothing from you.”

The disgust in his voice was evident and Rebecca felt herself flushing with anger. “You deny me, deny yourself, for what? For my cripple of a husband?”

“For my oldest friend. And for my wife, whom I happen to respect too much to treat so shabbily.”

Rebecca scoffed. "Respect? What is respect to wild passion? To raw, aching desire," she cried with a step in his direction. She reached for him again, and he stepped away from her, dodging her touch.

"Leave now, Mrs. Wickham, before you disgrace yourself any further. I have no need for your 'wild passion.'"

Rebecca seethed, her breath coming hot and fast, her chest rising and falling heavily. "You will regret this, Mr. Darcy. You won't find another like me," she added with a toss of her hair as she turned to stomp away.

"I certainly hope not."

She paused but refused to look back at him and continued on her way.

She was halfway home before her breathing slowed and her temper became somewhat manageable. Her vanity was bruised, her pride was in tatters, and she had never felt so humiliated in her life. He had refused her. Rebecca Appleby! The prettiest girl in Lambton. No, the prettiest girl in Derbyshire! How dare he refuse her?

She sought some way to regain her sense of order in the world, some balm to her vanity. She was passing the fields belonging to the Smith family. The Smith brothers were all brawny in build and broad in the face, though the two eldest knew their way around a woman's body. Hell, with the mood she was in, she would settle for the youngest brother's bumbling ways. She smiled to herself and made her way to the

barn in the distance. With any luck, one of the brothers would be there.

It wasn't until she lay in the hay loft next to Michael Smith, tired and sated, that she wondered if Mr. Darcy would tell her husband what she had suggested. And if he did, she was sure Samuel would throw her out.

For the first time, Rebecca was afraid.



George Darcy was incensed. Enraged. Furious. He stomped along the side of the stream while his horse drank peacefully, then rode hell for leather across the estate, trying not to think about what had just happened.

What was he to do? His first inclination had been to ban Rebecca Wickham from Pemberley and tell Samuel everything. But banning her would humiliate his friend. Samuel would be called a cuckold, laughed at and whispered about. Rumors abounded regarding Rebecca Wickham, but Darcy sending her off would be irrefutable proof. And what of young George? The scandal would hang over his head when he was older, and if his mother were gone, what kind of life would that be for the boy? Would she try to take him with her? Wickham would not give up his only child. Would young George resent his father for depriving him of his mother?

And what of Anne? Surely she would hear what had happened. People would assume the worst—they always did. They would say he had carried on an affair with Rebecca, then

Lady Anne had found out and angrily ordered her away. The only person who would not be humiliated would be Rebecca Wickham. She would begin again in a new town with an assumed name. With her looks and cunning, she would find a protector in short order.

He growled in frustration. Even banning her from the house would create talk amongst the servants, which would spread to the tenants—people whom Samuel interacted with on a daily basis and whose respect he required in order to do his job well. People he had known his entire life. Rebecca was hardly ever at the house, but she did assist in some of Anne's charity endeavors occasionally.

He could tell Anne. Ask her not to include her in her work. But would she believe him? Things were so delicate between them. He had hope that in a few more years, Anne would no longer be able to conceive and they could come together again. They could be whole.

But if she believed he had been unfaithful, with a woman she knew and the wife of his oldest friend, she would never look at him the same. She would never respect him again. And then what would happen in the future? Would they forfeit their chance at happiness?

Angry at the situation, angry at himself for not having a ready solution, and furious with Rebecca Wickham, he rode back to Pemberley and left his horse with the groom. He would keep his peace for now, and hope for a clearer head in the morning.

His sleep was fitful, but after hours of deliberating and imagining outcomes, George Darcy decided to say nothing to his friend or his wife about Rebecca Wickham's perfidy. Samuel already knew she was unfaithful—knowing she had propositioned his oldest friend would only embarrass him further and put a strain on their friendship.

And Anne—stubborn, impossible, precious Anne—he could not tell her. If it did not break her heart by reminding her of all they had lost in their relationship, it would fill her with doubt and suspicion. Rebecca would not say a word, he was sure of it. She may be cold and calculating, but she was not stupid.

And he would tell no one that for one wild, ridiculous, shameful moment, he had considered her offer.

CHAPTER 21



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 8 November, 1811

“I know my visit was scheduled rather hastily, but I did think you were aware I was coming,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam as he entered the breakfast parlor. He followed closely behind the butler and spoke before he could be announced. No one had been on the steps to greet him, and no one had met him in the entrance hall either.

“Forgive me, Cousin. I have been expecting you, of course, but in all the excitement, I forgot you were arriving today.”

Marianne spoke her apology quietly, which was his first clue that something was amiss. She also looked as if she hadn’t slept at all, though she did have a new babe to account for it. A look around the table showed only Darcy and Colonel Pickering, both of whom looked like they had spent the night in a carriage, not a comfortable country house.

“Is something amiss?” Colonel Fitzwilliam asked carefully.

In typical military fashion, Colonel Pickering spoke clearly and precisely. “Young Luke was in a riding accident yesterday.

His leg is broken, but we believe it will mend well.”

“Good God! Has the doctor come? Has it been set?”

“The local apothecary came yesterday and set it. He is well respected here and I wrote to our physician in Town. He will arrive this afternoon.” Darcy spoke calmly, but Fitzwilliam could hear the fatigue in his voice. “No one was here to greet you because Mother is with Luke, Georgiana is still abed, and Bingley has not come down yet. Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley, whom I assume knew of your impending arrival, went to visit an old school friend of Mrs. Hurst’s in Stoke yesterday and were caught by the rain. They will return some time this morning. In all the excitement, Marianne forgot to tell us you were coming.”

“Think nothing of it. I am not so spoiled I cannot wait a bit for my room to be prepared.”

“I believe it already is. Miss Bingley received your acceptance the day before yesterday. She likely spoke with the housekeeper then.”

All men present were surprised to hear Marianne saying what could be considered a compliment to Miss Bingley’s hosting skills without making a sarcastic comment, but none said anything. Marianne appeared completely drained and they doubted she had the energy for her typical rejoinders. Luke’s accident had taken its toll on all of them.

“It is no matter. I should like to see Luke, if I may,” said Fitzwilliam.

“Of course. I shall take you to him,” said Darcy.

When they entered Luke’s room, he was propped up in bed with his eyes closed, and Lady Anne sat in a chair nearby, quietly reading to him.

She smiled at the two men and stopped reading. “Luke, Richard is here to see you.”

Luke cracked his eyes open slowly and greeted his cousin.

“I hear you have gotten into some trouble,” said Richard.

The colonel settled into the chair on the other side of the bed and began speaking to his cousin while Darcy insisted his mother go eat some breakfast; he would sit with his brother.

Luke proceeded to tell his cousin about the accident, including all the gory details that would have horrified his mother. Richard listened with rapt attention, cringing in all the appropriate places. Soon enough, Georgiana arrived to take their place and the two men left young Luke to his sister’s care.

They went to the sitting room off Darcy’s chamber and sat down. “You look awful.”

“Thank you, Richard,” said Darcy tiredly. He let his head drop to the chair back and closed his eyes. “Believe it or not, I have had more pressing concerns than my appearance.”

“Oh, I believe it! Did the horse truly roll over him?”

“Yes. I was a few yards behind him. I have never been so terrified.”

Richard looked at him with sympathy. “That is only natural. You are like a father to him.”

Darcy opened one eye and looked at his cousin from the side. “I am his elder brother, not his father. He had an excellent father who died before his time. I have not taken his place.”

“I mean no offence, Darcy. Only that Luke is much younger than you. You were nearly sixteen when he was born! My father was only three and twenty when I came along, and I his second child! Our mothers were even younger.”

Darcy dragged a hand over his face. “I know. I simply do not like to think of my father as...,” he hesitated.

“Replaceable?”

He nodded.

“Uncle Darcy was a giant among men.” Darcy shot him a look and Richard smiled kindly. “In more ways than one. You are not replacing him, but if you are compared favorably to him, is that not a great compliment?”

Darcy swallowed thickly. “I suppose.”

They sat in silence for a few more minutes until Richard thought his cousin was ready for a distraction. “Tell me of the local neighborhood. Have you met anyone interesting?”

“There are several families nearby we have socialized with, most of them minor gentry. Sir William Lucas is one of the most verbose men I have ever met, but he is essentially

harmless. His eldest daughter is an intelligent woman. She reminds me a bit of Marianne.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, it is a pity she has a small dowry and even less beauty. She is a practical woman and a good conversationalist. She would make some man a good wife, if he was not intent on a pretty bride.”

“That is very few men.”

“I know. That is why it is unfortunate for her. I believe she is my age. If she has not found a husband by now, she likely will not.”

“You should ask Marianne to invite her for a visit. She knows plenty of officers in want of a practical sort of wife. Some men don’t mind a plain woman, if she has other qualities to compensate.”

“You just said very few men do not want a pretty bride.”

“Men, not officers. We are a different breed.”

Darcy scoffed.

“Marianne said she has made friends with a family called Bennet.”

“Yes, she is friendly with only the two eldest daughters. The eldest, Miss Jane Bennet, is Bingley’s latest angel.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam rolled his eyes. “Of course. How long was he here before he fell head over boots for her? A fortnight? Three weeks?”

“A fortnight.” They laughed. “And he declared her divinity the first night he met her, at a local assembly.”

“Oh, Bingley, may he never change!” laughed the colonel.

“There is another family you should become acquainted with. The Gouldings run a profitable stud from what I understand. Their stables are well known.”

“I will have to meet them, then.”

They lapsed into silence again, but Richard had still not heard the information he was seeking. “What of the other Bennet sister? You said Marianne was friends with the two eldest.”

“The second is Miss Elizabeth. She is... not like anyone I have met before.”

“Oh?”

“She is impertinent, but not rude. She is intelligent, but also sweet. Mother is fond of her, not least because she has befriended Georgiana. Miss Bennet has as well. G is quite comfortable with both of them now.”

“That is saying something.”

“Yes, it is,” Darcy said thoughtfully. “I think Luke may fancy himself in love with Miss Elizabeth.”

“Truly?”

“Yes. I have suspected it for some time, but after yesterday, I am certain.”

“Wasn't the accident yesterday?”

Darcy proceeded to tell his cousin how Miss Elizabeth had assisted the apothecary and calmed Luke when he was panicking. Luke's response to her made it clear he hoped to impress her. Why else would he listen to her and no other?

"She was magnificent, Rich. I have never seen a lady be so calm under pressure."

"Truly? Nora has always struck me as calm under pressure. And Marianne is invaluable on campaign."

"I have never been on campaign with Marianne, though I do not doubt your assertion, and Nora only appears calm. She does not show her emotions to others, especially fear. But when she is safe, or with those she trusts, it comes out all at once, poor dear."

Richard tilted his head in thought. "I don't know if I should be surprised or insulted."

"Neither. You only saw her during the summers and are four years older. You were never very intimate."

Richard looked thoughtful but decided not to pursue that line of inquiry. "So this Miss Elizabeth is a jewel among women."

Darcy rolled his eyes. "I don't know that I would say that. But she is very kind, and generous, and witty. And quite pretty, though don't let Luke hear you saying such. G called her pretty the other day and Luke declared she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen."

"Oh ho, that is how the land lies, is it?" Richard cried.

“I’m afraid it is.” Darcy rubbed his eyes. “He is doomed for heartbreak, I fear.”

“Yes, it certainly seems that way. Unless he changes his mind about her.”

“I doubt that. Why would a man change his mind about Miss Elizabeth?”

He spoke so quietly Richard wondered if he realized he was speaking out loud.

“Then I shall have to meet this paragon. Are you headed to bed? You look awful.”

Darcy rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I probably should. I was up most of the night sitting with Luke.”

Richard looked at him sympathetically. Darcy looked ready to fall asleep in his chair. “I shall leave you to rest then.”



Everyone in the house was caught up in Luke’s care. They read to him during the day and sat with him at night. The night watches would taper off once his bone had begun to heal and he no longer needed help with the slightest movement, but in the meantime, he required constant attendance.

Richard and Darcy took turns sitting with him at first, then Bingley insisted he should help as did Colonel Pickering. The latter took the opportunity to rock his new daughter in the night as he sat by Luke’s bedside. Luke would never admit it for fear of being teased mercilessly, but Rosie was a delightful

baby. He let her suck on his finger when she was distressed and she especially liked it when he hummed a tune; he found it quite took his mind off his discomfort.

Luke was in a tremendous amount of pain. Marianne's remedy helped, but distraction was the most effective. When either of his military cousins sat with him, he made them tell him stories of campaigns and battles across the peninsula. Colonel Pickering had worked directly with the Duke of Wellington and had a knack for storytelling. Naturally, Richard took this as an opening salvo in a test of skills, and he made sure each story he told his young cousin was bloodier and more interesting than Colonel Pickering's.

Lady Anne and Georgiana laughed at the men and their antics while Marianne promised Luke she would tell him the real stories when the men were off riding.

Eventually, Marianne ran out of the supplies she needed for Luke's medicine and determined to go to Longbourn to ask for more. Richard offered to accompany her, and soon they were riding away from Netherfield.

"Oh, look! Miss Elizabeth is in the garden. How convenient."

Richard followed her gaze and saw a lovely young lady walking a garden path with a basket over one arm. "Will you introduce us, Marianne?"

"Of course," she said with a smile.

Elizabeth had joined them on the drive by the time they dismounted. “Lady Marianne, how nice to see you. How are you today?”

“Very well, Miss Elizabeth. Though I do think it’s about time you called me Marianne, after I barged into your stillroom as I did.”

“You did no such thing, I was happy to share. And you must call me Elizabeth.”

“Wonderful. Allow me to introduce my cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam of the Royal Dragoons. He is also the son of the Earl of Matlock, but that part isn’t nearly as interesting. Richard, Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn.”

Elizabeth smiled and curtsied, good humor dancing in her eyes. Colonel Fitzwilliam made a very proper bow and winked at her on rising. Elizabeth could only smirk and say, “Is being in the Royal Dragoons really so much more interesting than being the son of an earl?”

“Terribly so, Miss Elizabeth. Though the House of Lords can be more dangerous than the peninsula.”

She laughed, and soon the three of them were walking through the garden, talking as if they were old friends. Richard and Marianne were not often together when they were on campaign, for her husband was part of a different company, but they occasionally marched together and oh, the stories they told!

“I am glad to be off starvation rations. I was so thin I was mistaken for a boy thrice that month!” Marianne complained.

“It was not because you were so thin but because you were in breeches,” added Richard.

“You try riding side saddle from dawn to dusk and see if you don’t don breeches and ride astride, too!”

Elizabeth laughed at their bickering. If she had not already known they were related, it would have been clear by their behavior. “Did you truly ride astride in breeches?”

“Yes! Mother would have been horrified, but luckily she was too far away to scold me.”

“She was the talk of the encampment,” said Richard.

“I was not! There were plenty more interesting things to discuss than my choice of attire.”

“There were, but sitting around a campfire after a day of marching leaves one longing for distraction, and you, dear cousin, provided it quite handily.”

Marianne huffed. “I never heard anything of it.”

“That is because your husband is a colonel and your father is an earl. If you were married to a lowly lieutenant, I’m sure you would have heard plenty.”

Marianne crossed her arms and scowled as Elizabeth laughed heartily and Colonel Fitzwilliam looked smug.

Elizabeth looped her arm through Marianne’s. “Take heart, my lady. There are much worse things to be known for than

wearing breeches and riding astride.”

“Like Miss Bingley and her feathers,” threw in the colonel.

Marianne tried to continue scowling and not smile, but she couldn’t resist for long. “Richie, you know what Lady Anne would say if she heard you.”

“That just because something is true does not mean we should speak it aloud?”

“I was thinking she would tell you to be more respectful of your hostess, but that will do.”

“You must have had such fun growing up together,” said Elizabeth.

“Oh, we did!” answered Marianne. “We spent most summers together at Pemberley. Lady Anne was the only one in the family with the patience to have all the children around. My mother would not have lasted more than a fortnight with so many children about.”

“Is your family large then?”

Richard laughed. “I am the second of five children.”

“There are worse positions in the family.” Elizabeth smiled and he bowed in response.

“I am the eldest of four,” added Marianne. “My mother and Lady Anne are first cousins, and Richard’s father is Lady Anne’s elder brother.”

“And there are four Darcy children?”

Marianne tilted her head to the side. “Yes, though Lady Anne has a ward who came to live at Pemberley when Fitz and I were nine. So it is really more like five.”

“That is fourteen children. I see why your mother was reluctant to host them for long.”

“Oh, that is not all! Mother and Lady Anne have another cousin, Colin Digby, and he had three children. Uncle did not often join us for summers, but he would send his children. Our eldest cousin Reggie is great fun!”

“Remember when he let the jar of spiders loose in the kitchen?” asked Richard.

“I’ve never seen maids run so fast!”

“Cook ruined an entire pot of soup trying to run away from them,” laughed Richard.

Elizabeth pressed her hand to her mouth to hide her smile. “How awful for those poor maids! Did your cousin get into much trouble?”

Richard snorted. “Uncle Darcy gave him a long lecture, then made him muck out the stalls in the stable for a fortnight. Said that it was to cover the cost of the dishes that broke when the maids jumped.”

“I doubt it covered the cost, but it certainly taught us a lesson,” replied Marianne.

Richard gave them a serious look. “Yes, do not play pranks around expensive china.”



After gathering what was needed from the stillroom and taking tea inside, which was minimally embarrassing due to Mrs. Bennet and her two youngest daughters having gone into Meryton, Elizabeth walked Richard and Marianne back to their horses.

“Thank you for the tea and the herbs. It is lovely of you to allow me use of your stillroom,” said Marianne.

“You are welcome to it any time.”

“It was delightful meeting you, Miss Elizabeth. I hope I will see you again soon,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“And the same to you, Colonel.” She smiled brightly at him as he bowed over her hand. Marianne looked on with a satisfied grin.

“You know, it really is a pity you do not ride,” Marianne lamented as Colonel Fitzwilliam mounted his horse.

“Alas, I have never felt steady on the back of a horse. It is a pity, though. They are such beautiful creatures.” Elizabeth stroked the head of Marianne’s horse, a soft smile on her face.

“You are not afraid of horses?”

“Not at all. I am very fond of them. Just not fond of riding them.”

“Hmm. I could teach you, you know. If you could feel steady on horseback, you might learn to enjoy the activity.”

“You think you can make balancing sideways on a moving animal more comfortable for me?”

“Who said anything about balancing sideways?” Marianne smirked and mounted her horse, then rode off with a jaunty wave, leaving a puzzled but amused Elizabeth behind her.

CHAPTER 22



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, Spring 1795

George Darcy oversaw the loading of trunks onto the carriage with relief. The Darcys were headed to a house party in Buckinghamshire. It would be several days in the carriage and both Nora and Fitzwilliam were accompanying them. He generally preferred not to travel such distances in the rainy spring weather, but a cousin of his was marrying, and the Darcy family was not so large that he felt he could ignore it.

The house party would be two weeks of games and dinners and wedding preparations, culminating in a ball, a wedding ceremony, and a lavish breakfast, after which the majority of guests would head to London for the Season. He thought it all rather extravagant for a wedding, but it was not every day one's only daughter married a wealthy baronet, so he did not begrudge his cousins their celebrations.

They would break their journey at Livingstone Manor in Oxfordshire, the seat of Julia's family, and spend a few days with their cousins. Nora and Fitzwilliam would stay on to play

with Marianne and her brothers while the Darcys continued on to Buckinghamshire.

Darcy was relieved to be leaving Pemberley for the first time in his life. It had always been his favorite place on Earth, but in the last several months, it had lost much of its appeal. It had been a year since Rebecca Wickham's repulsive offer to him, and while she did not renew the offer, she had made herself a nuisance in other ways. Once she realized he would not expose her, she had begun volunteering with Anne's school. She said she wished to help the little children, but he did not believe it for a moment. Her cousin had been running the orphanage for nearly a year before she ever stepped inside it.

Mrs. Wickham made herself available to Anne with a disturbing level of enthusiasm. She seemed determined to worm her way into the Darcy family—and its coffers, with no regard for the method.

She assisted at the school and at the orphanage, but only when she was assured Lady Anne would be there to witness her good deeds. Her stitches were not even enough to help with mending for the poor and her cooking not edible enough to deliver baskets, but she was happy to accompany Lady Anne whenever she wished for a companion, and could manage reading to the children with little difficulty. Lady Anne suggested she assist Mrs. Abara, the vicar's wife, with her charitable visits, but Rebecca found she did not have the time with all the hours she spent at the school and raising young George.

When he heard, Darcy rolled his eyes. He had never seen a woman less interested in her own child. What time she did spend with young George was spent pushing him into a friendship with Fitzwilliam. Darcy allowed it, hoping the boy would have more of his father than his mother in him, but he never trusted Mrs. Wickham. She had been about so much of late that she had made his own lands an uncomfortable place to be. She had a knack for appearing when he least expected her, and she would look at him in a way that tested his resolve as a gentleman. He had never struck a woman, but if he ever began, he knew who he would start with. It was all he could do to not throw her off his land himself. He went so far as to imagine the thump she would make as she landed on her backside in the grass, the angry look she would throw over her shoulder at him. He was ashamed of how satisfying such thoughts were.

She knew he would not expose her, and she enjoyed taunting him. She would say things in such a way that he took her meaning, but anyone who might overhear would be none the wiser. Comments on his manhood, on his ability to please a woman, remarks about his desires. She even called Fitzwilliam's parentage into question, but did it so slyly, he had nothing to overtly accuse her of. He had seen red at that comment, and she had had enough sense to give him a wide berth for some time after.

All the same, Pemberley was not what it once was. Anne spent all her time with their son, Nora, and her school. She could go days without speaking to him now. He missed her

with an ache he could not assuage, but he had to be cruel to be kind. If she was angry at him, she would not wish to be near him. She would be safe. She would stay alive.

And yet, he missed her companionship. The way her lips quirked up and her cheeks flushed when he called her beautiful, as if she had no notion of it. How the light reflected off her golden hair, like a small sun shining in the middle of the parlor. He missed cuddling on the sofa with her, Fitzwilliam nestled between them as they took turns reading him stories. He missed her soft expression across the dinner table, and the exasperated look she gave him when he was being ridiculous.

He missed the way her skin felt under his fingertips, how her breath felt hot and intimate as she panted in his ear when he made love to her. He missed the solace he found in her embrace, the passion he knew in her arms, the love he had always felt radiating from her when she looked at him with soft eyes and told him how very glad she was to be married to him, how very happy he made her. He missed the tenderness between them.

He missed his wife.

And now he was to be in a carriage with her for three days, tortured by her nearness and his inability to touch her.



The visit to the Livingstones was brief and simple, and soon they pulled up at his cousin's home in Buckinghamshire, the

last of the guests to arrive. It was technically the home of his great uncle Timothy Darcy, but as that man had no children, the property would go to the son of his favorite niece, Sara Keith. It was she who was hosting the house party and whose only daughter would be wed in two weeks' time.

Mrs. Keith was a lively woman with a quick mind and an even quicker step. She spent half the year in London with her husband, a barrister of great reputation, and the other half in Buckinghamshire, managing her uncle's home and tending to his eccentric needs.

She met them on the steps and quickly led them to their rooms, chattering all the way. She told them of the other guests, of the family of her daughter's intended (the Baronet Ponsby—quite the catch), and of how Lady Catherine de Bourgh had sent her a most unpleasant letter in response to her invitation to attend the wedding. They were acquaintances of longstanding, and distant cousins on their husbands' sides, in addition to the Darcy connection—it had only been right to invite her. But Lady Catherine could not bear to see the daughter of a barrister becoming a Lady, nor the upstart Mrs. Keith in a position which would require deference from herself.

Lady Anne listened to her hostess with a smile and tried not to laugh at the information about her sister. Catherine was Catherine, and she would never change. It was best to find amusement where it was possible and avoid her when it wasn't. She smiled over her shoulder at her husband who was walking a step behind. He returned it with a wink, and for a

moment, they were their old selves again, sharing private jokes and speaking without using words.

“Here we are. I’ve put you in the Blue Room. It has the best view of the park. Dinner is not for two hours, so you’ve some time to refresh yourselves. One of the maids will be by shortly to see if you need anything.”

George thanked his cousin and pressed her arm, then followed his wife into the room. There was a sitting room with a pair of chairs and a small sofa near the fire, and a chaise by the window. The bedroom was through the far door, and a small bathing chamber through there. There was no dressing room, but a screen in the corner for changing.

Anne looked around the room, feeling unaccountably amused. George had spent the last three and a half years sleeping separately from her, avoiding her at home, and speaking to her as little as possible. Now, it would be his own cousin’s wedding that would throw them together.

“Why have a bathing chamber if there is no dressing room?” asked George, looking about the room with a bewildered expression.

“There are those who value cleanliness above privacy,” she quipped.

He shot her a look.

“It would do very well for a single occupant.”

“Not as well for two.”

She pinched her lips together and took a deep breath. "Shall I call for your cousin and request a room on the other side of the house? It would create talk, and there are a great many guests, but there may be a room available somewhere. Perhaps I can share with one of the maids."

He faced her, searching her expression. "Why would you say such a thing? It is awkward, to be sure, but I shall sleep on the sofa. All will be well."

"And have the servants know you refuse to share a bed with your wife? I think not! Besides, you would not even fit on it! You cannot sleep thusly for an entire fortnight."

He sighed and turned away, rubbing his forehead. "I wonder that she put us in one room to begin with," he mumbled.

"Probably because on every other visit we have made, we shared a room, as she well knows. She likely thought it unnecessary to ask," Anne replied crisply. "And there is the small matter of her six and twenty houseguests."

Darcy sighed again. "Forgive me, my dear. I have been out of temper lately." He nodded and turned for the door. "I'll leave you to change."

Anne watched him trudge towards the door, her heart heavy. She did not wish to quarrel, she did not wish to be this bitter, angry woman. But she could not seem to help herself. She wanted to shake him and demand that he love her like he once had, that he again be the tender husband and lover she had known. But she could not. He would not waver on his

decision, and she had no desire to humiliate herself more than she already had.

Before she could become too maudlin, Lucy bustled into the room and asked what she would like to wear to dinner. Tired of feeling sad and lonely, she told Lucy to prepare the pink silk. It was one of her newer gowns, and she needed the boost of cheerfulness it would bring her.



Dinner was a lively affair, unsurprising given the gregariousness of their hosts and the number of guests present. Anne was lovely in her pale pink silk, and more than one gentleman tried to curry her favor, though Lady Anne was so sure of her lack of beauty that she did not recognize it.

Her husband was another matter. Anne had the type of beauty that only increased with age. She had never been round-faced and full of bloom like the other debutantes, but her cheekbones were high and her nose straight, her eyes clear and bright. She had always carried herself with dignity, but time had added a certain softness to her features and a kindness to her expression that could not fail to attract. In her modesty, she had not noticed her increase in beauty, but Darcy could only be glad of it. He did not know what he would do if she took up with another man, and he did not trust himself to find out.

He supposed it would be within her rights to do such a thing. He was the one who had refused her, after all. She had

done her duty by him. She had given him a fine son and heir and been faithful to him these past twelve years. He should not begrudge her happiness where she could find it. And yet, he wished she would wear a less attractive color.

Finally, the evening's entertainments ended and the guests milled about in the drawing room. The dinner had been sumptuous and the company enjoyable. Sara was a delightful hostess and had long been on friendly terms with Anne, and the ladies took great pleasure in seeing each other again.

"You have been quite popular this evening," Sara said quietly to Anne.

Anne looked at her in confusion. "Why do you say that?"

"Look around you! Half the men here have tried to gain your interest, but you will not give them even a morsel of attention."

Anne laughed at Sara's mischievous expression. "That is ludicrous! You cannot truly believe such a thing."

Sara shot her a look. "I speak as I find. And you do look particularly lovely this evening. Are those your wedding pearls?"

Anne touched the double strand of pearls resting gently about her neck. They had been a wedding gift from her husband. He had given her matching ear bobs when Fitzwilliam was born, and a bracelet on the occasion of their fifth anniversary. She had always seen the set as a symbol of her husband's love for her. She had not worn them in years,

but Lucy had packed them and when she saw them this evening, she inexplicably wished to wear them.

“Yes, they are.”

“They have only grown lovelier with time, but that is the way with pearls, is it not?”

Anne smiled and agreed, her cheer suddenly turned to wistfulness. She continued to play with her necklace as Sara was called away by another guest, and as soon as it was polite to do so, she retired for the evening.

Lucy removed her jewelry and nestled it into its velvet case, then deftly undid the buttons down the back of her dress. Looking in the mirror, Anne realized that her cousin had been correct. She was in looks this evening. Or at least she had been before she began thinking of how odd her marriage had become. Lucy took her gown away to be aired, and Anne was soon settled in her nightgown with her hair in a plait over one shoulder.

She sat on the chair by the fire, toying with the ribbon in her hair and wondering if what Sara had said was true. Had she been the object of male attention that evening? She had certainly conversed with a great many people, but she had put it down to it being the first night of the house party and the fact that she had not seen everyone there for some years. Of course they would have much to say to one another.

Lady Anne had always been proud—no child of Lord Matlock’s could avoid the trait, but she had never been vain. Her sister Catherine had always been prettier than her, and

Julia had outshined them both. She supposed that was why Julia had been snapped up by a viscount in her first season. Anne had not begrudged her cousin her success in life. Julia may have married better, but Anne had married happier. At least she had always thought so. Lord Livingstone was a kind man, and though he and Julia had not been wildly in love when they married, they had been very fond of each other. He had been more than a little enamored of her striking looks, as she was pleased by the idea of being a countess one day. It was an equitable match. Now they had grown rather close and were both devoted to their children.

Meanwhile Anne, of equal station and pedigree as her more pulchritudinous cousin, had married George Darcy, a man of great holdings and comfortable wealth, though nowhere near that of her own family. Some had said she had thrown herself away, that the eldest daughter of such an influential lord could have made a spectacular match, or at least a more political one. But Anne had smiled and ignored them all. She knew that while George Darcy may not have a title, or be the grandest man in the room, he was the most honorable, the most honest, the kindest and most loving. She would leave the political marriages and spectacular matches to her friends—she would be happy.

She would be loved.

And she had been, until fate had seen fit to steal her children, her joy, and her husband.



George entered their shared sitting room to find Anne sitting near the fire, a faraway look in her eye, and looking more desirable than any woman had a right to. She did not seem to notice his presence, so he took the opportunity to observe her. To watch the firelight as it played over her skin, making her hair glow. She toyed with the end of her plait, pulling lightly at the blue ribbon until he thought it would come undone. Her feet were tucked beneath her and her voluminous gown was not thick enough to hide the long legs beneath it.

He had always loved that about her—the long, lean lines, her simple grace. He knew more voluptuous figures were in fashion, and he could appreciate beauty in other forms, but to his eyes, his Anne was perfect. Some might call her figure boyish—he thought it graceful. Her breasts might be small and unremarkable, but he found them delightfully pert and pink. Her height was ungainly to some, but he thought her his perfect complement.

His mother had wished him to marry a distant cousin on her side of the family. He had agreed to meet her, but when he saw that her head barely came above his elbow, he refused to consider her. He did not wish to feel like a giant all his life. Anne was shorter than he, as everyone he had ever met was, but a slight lift onto her toes allowed her to kiss him. Her long arms wrapped effortlessly around his barrel-chested frame.

She was not frightened of him or of his enormous size. He knew it was one of her favorite things about him.

He tilted his head as he continued to observe her, wondering what she was thinking. Was she contemplating one of the gentlemen she had spoken with that evening? Had he made her feel beautiful? Wanted? Desirable?

A blackness bloomed in his heart and he fought valiantly to push it back. She was his. His wife. His Anne.

This was madness. It was their first night and already he was fighting for control, feeling jealous and off balance. His desire was a dangerous thing. He feared he could not master it, could not temper it. Not when she insisted on looking so very fetching.

He tore his eyes from her and stepped towards the bedroom, the floor squeaking under his weight. Anne looked up and their eyes met, hers widening in recognition when she saw his expression.

She knew. He was in her power, and he was helpless to do anything about it.



Anne dressed the next morning with care. She chose a new dress in a flattering blue shade, designed to match the color of her eyes. She pinched her cheeks and allowed Lucy to arrange her hair in a more elaborate style than she usually wore.

She now knew she had been wrong about George. He had not ceased loving her. The love was still there, buried beneath the fear and the rage and the sorrow. She must unearth it, and she was not above using what allurements she had to accomplish her goal. He would be hers again, no matter what it took.



That night, Anne chose one of her more feminine nightgowns. It was not new, but it had a long flounce of lace at the hem. She remembered wearing it once, several years ago, when George had come upon her brushing her hair before bed, recently returned from a trip to a neighboring county. He had not said a word, merely kissed her fiercely, and raised the lacy hem as his hands ran down the length of her legs, smiling wickedly as he sunk to his knees before her, the lace falling over his disheveled hair.

She flushed at the memory.

She left her hair down, the ends curled in long looping swirls that fell to her waist. She climbed onto the bed and leaned against the headboard, the counterpane folded back at her feet, her knees raised to her chest. She settled her book before her to read while she awaited her husband.



George entered the room to find an angel on the bed. Anne's hair was down and flowing over her shoulders. He had not seen it thus in three years. It had grown longer and more tempting than he remembered. Her feet peeked out from the lace hem of her nightgown, her book balanced on her knees.

Did she know what she was doing to him? Had she any idea how he suffered when she looked so damn enticing?

She twisted one finger through a curl and wrapped it close to her head, then released her hand, only to start again. He groaned. Would that those hands were in his hair, stroking it and pulling at the roots in her pleasure.

He must stop this. Refusing to look in her direction again, he stepped behind the screen to prepare for bed.

He did not see Anne's self-satisfied smile.

When George emerged from behind the screen, he kept his eyes averted and made his way to his side of the bed, only stubbing his toe once in the process.

"Are you well?"

"Quite well." He limped onto the bed and examined his toe to be sure it wasn't bleeding, then quickly snuffed out the candle.

Anne's lamp was still burning and he could feel her eyes watching him as he attempted to fall asleep beside her.

"What is it, Anne?" he asked impatiently, keeping his eyes closed.

“You seem distressed. Is there anything I may do for your comfort?”

His eyes flew open and he looked at her warningly.

She pretended not to notice. “Shall I rub your head?”

He had gotten headaches in the spring for as long as he could remember, and the only thing that helped to relieve the pressure was Anne’s delicate touch along his brow, temples, and cheekbones. She would touch him so reverently, so gently, he couldn’t help but feel better. Realizing he was being churlish, he said in a gentler tone, “No, my dear, but I thank you for the offer. I am merely tired and finding it difficult to sleep in a strange bed.”

“I understand you completely.” She smiled kindly and turned out the light, leaning over to kiss his cheek before lying on her pillow and saying sweetly, “Goodnight, George.”

She thought his voice was a bit hoarse when he said, “Goodnight, Anne.”



The next day was more of the same. Anne dressed in a flattering gown, behaved like an angel all day, and taunted him all night. She even went so far as to send an express to Town (they weren’t so very far away, after all) and asked her dressmaker to send her a few new nightgowns, paying handsomely for the rush. Anne never threw her wealth or status about—she had not even left Derbyshire for the last

three years except to go to her brother's home in Staffordshire. She thought she was entitled to a little extravagance after going so long without it.

Each night for the next five nights, she retired before her husband, dressed in a wonderfully impractical nightgown, and awaited him on the bed. Each night he would grit his teeth, furrow his brow, and breathe so deeply through his nose she could see his nostrils flare from across the room. She felt delightfully wicked and was perhaps enjoying torturing him too much, but it would all be to his benefit in the end, so she did not concern herself overmuch.

The fifth night, she waited until he was asleep, pretending to be asleep herself, and rolled over until she was touching him. She nuzzled his arm until he raised it automatically and she rested her head on his shoulder. His arm tightened about her instantly, and he sighed and said, "Sweet Annie," in his sleep. She couldn't keep the Cheshire grin off her face, and it was nearly an hour before she was able to sleep.



George awoke in a wonderful mood, though he could not be sure why. It took him a moment to realize the tickling sensation he felt on his nose was his wife's hair, and the softness in his hand was her nightgown, balled up in his left fist near her waist. His right was clinging rather indecorously to her breast, as if his very life depended on his not letting go. His knees were pressed up behind hers, and her hair had come

loose from its plait and was slowly weaving a web around his head.

He knew by her breathing she was still asleep, and he said a silent prayer for small mercies. What would she have thought if she had awoken and found him thus? All his grand talk would have come crashing down around him and he would be exposed as the worst sort of hypocrite. He slowly extricated his arm from beneath her, then her hair from around his face and what had snuck into the collar of his nightshirt. After disentangling himself, he slid off the bed as smoothly as a man of his size could do and snuck into the sitting room where his valet was waiting to assist him.

Lord, but this would be a long week!



Anne was rather pleased with herself. She had George tied up in knots and she was sure he would break soon. They had now been ten days at his cousin's and she could sense his strength waning.

She had continued her nightly ritual of dressing in something becoming and waiting for him in bed, but after her success of the week before, she had added cuddling up to him after he had fallen asleep. In fact, on the third night of her new behavior, he had initiated contact and drowsily pulled her to him, whispering something incoherent in his sleep as he did so. She smiled and snuggled closer, thinking she was finally breaking through his barriers.

Soon, she would have her husband back.

Tonight, she wore a new nightgown recently delivered from London. It was a pale purple color, with just a touch of pink in it to make her skin appear luminous. The thin silk was held up by the tiniest of straps and it plunged dangerously low in the back. The dressmaker had included a note saying this cut was perfect for someone of Anne's figure—or lack of one, she privately thought—and after slipping it on, she had to agree. Most gowns made her feel her lack of feminine assets acutely, but this one showed off all the best parts of her figure. Her long limbs appeared elegant, not underfed. Her slim hips looked svelte, not boyish.

She couldn't remember when she had felt prettier.

She slipped onto the bed and awaited her husband, hoping he would be as pleased with her gown as she was.

Finally, two hours later and after she had nearly fallen asleep, he came into the room, stumbling just a bit in the dim light. He was already in his nightshirt and she realized he must have changed in the sitting room. She hated that he was so considerate about not disturbing her and making sure she received adequate rest, and yet so resolutely unwilling to give her what she most needed from him.

He sunk onto the mattress and lay back, and she realized belatedly that he must think her asleep. She was lying down, her back to the screen (where she had thought he would go first to change his clothes and see her daring gown) and the

pillows obscured her face from his view. Should she let him know she was awake?

Curious to see what he would do, she closed her eyes and rolled over, stretching a bit as she did so. She made a little hum in her feigned sleep, just to be sure she had his attention, and waited. She felt the mattress dip behind her and suddenly she was covered in warmth. He had pulled the blanket up to her shoulders, then reached across her to turn down the lamp she had left burning on the bedside table.

She sighed when he retreated back to his side of the bed. So her new gown had been all for naught. She should have known it would not be so simple. Just as she began to berate herself for her idiocy, his arms stole around her waist and he pulled her to him, her weight nothing to his strength.

“Anne, my beautiful Anne,” he whispered into her neck. “How I have missed you.”

Then, to her very great shock, he began kissing her! First her neck, then up into her hair, then back down her neck again and onto her shoulders. His hand slid down the length of her side, molding over each contour, as if he was trying to memorize her. Down to her knee then back up to her shoulder, again and again his hand traveled. As if that wasn't wreaking enough havoc on her senses, he began kissing down the length of her back as his hand continued its relentless motion.

She arched her back under his ministrations, her heart bursting with joy. Was he half asleep? In his cups? Merely overwhelmed? Was it possible he was only behaving so

because he thought her asleep? As if she could sleep long through this assault! Or had he finally released his fears and rejoined his marriage?

When he kissed her neck again, he reached further around towards her jaw and she caught a whiff of brandy on his breath. So, he was in his cups.

Oh, well. There were certainly worse things. Some of her fondest intimate memories involved one or both of them imbibing rather heavily. She would not scruple over what it took to bring him back to her.

“We mustn’t,” he mumbled, his face buried in her hair.

“Then do not. There are other pleasures we may enjoy,” she whispered.

She had hinted as much when he first gave his edict, but he had thought they would not be able to stop there. For a short time, they could manage it, but indefinitely? They would eventually go beyond what they had intended. She would become with child. And if he lost her, if he robbed his son of his mother, he would never forgive himself.

In his inebriated exhaustion, he grunted assent and continued kissing her back, his hands becoming bolder and his hips pressing into hers.

She would not push him beyond what he wished. She could not take advantage of his weakened state—it would damage the trust between them and she would not be able to look at herself in the mirror. But she was not above enjoying his

caresses and riding the wave of want she felt crashing over them.

The rest would sort itself out in the morning.



Anne awoke in a fabulous mood and was dressed and seated at breakfast before George awoke.

“You look cheerful this morning,” said Sara with a teasing smile as she sat beside her cousin.

Anne blushed and added milk to her tea. “I had a restful night.”

Sara pursed her lips to keep from smiling and sipped her coffee. “I understand the men depleted the brandy stores last night. John was very late to bed and stumbling all the way.”

“I hope he did not disturb you overmuch.”

“Oh no, I wasn’t bothered at all.” She smiled somewhat wickedly and Anne felt herself blushing.

“Sara!”

Her cousin only laughed in reply.



Anne eagerly awaited her first glimpse of her husband. Tonight was a ball to celebrate the wedding, to be followed by the ceremony itself the next day. Anne had a new gown and was very much looking forward to dancing with George. She

hoped desperately that they would be in accord, that the evening would be filled with delight and magic, but she was also afraid he would be brooding over the night before, most likely angry with himself, and would try to explain to her how it could not happen again in a way that would leave her devastated and hopeless. Wildly she swung between hope and despair, waiting on her husband's appearance.

Finally, when she had given up waiting in the breakfast room and found a book in the library, he entered with his uncle. The older man was telling a story that had George laughing quietly while his uncle gesticulated wildly. George stopped short when he saw his wife in a chair near the window.

“Good morning, Anne,” he said softly.

She smiled and was about to reply when Uncle Darcy said loudly, “Annie! There you are! Come tell me about young Fitzwilliam. George here says he is nearly as tall as me now, but I can't believe it.”

Anne smiled at the eccentric old man and joined him on the sofa. George watched them silently with a small grin on his face and Anne was assured all would be well.

The remainder of the day was much of the same, full of longing looks and stolen touches. It was as if they were courting again, with all the hope and promise of a bright future ahead of them. They separated a few hours before the ball to dress and Anne took particular care with her appearance. She

was young no longer, but she was hardly an old lady. She still had her looks, and she would make the most of them.

The evening was perfect. George looked resplendent in his evening dress, as he always did. Anne's new gown was everything she would wish it to be, and the Fitzwilliam sapphires set off her eyes beautifully.

They danced and drank and made merry, breaking with propriety to dance primarily with each other. The guests were so in their cups they likely did not notice, and the Darcys would not have cared if they did. They stumbled laughingly back to their room where he proceeded to help her out of her gown, breaking only two buttons in the process, and they fell onto the bed in a heap of joy and desire.

George's kisses tasted like the punch they had been imbibing all night, and Anne felt like she was on fire as she returned his caresses touch for touch. They were unstoppable, insatiable, lost to everything but each other, and it was nearly dawn when they fell into a blissful slumber.



Anne awoke to an empty room and a cold bed. The sun was high in the sky as she washed and dressed for the day, wondering where her husband was. As she was preparing to leave their rooms, she saw a letter with her name on it propped up on the table by the door.

She sighed.

So he would not face her. No matter. It had been a perfect evening, and she would not regret it, not matter what the consequences were. With a ghost of a smile, she settled on the sofa to read her husband's letter.

My Darling Wife,

I will not prevaricate and say that I have urgent business I must attend to. We both know that would be a lie. There is business, but it could have waited until we got to Town. I simply cannot resist you, and I did not wish to spoil such a perfect night as we have had with a quarrel. I will go to London to better avoid temptation, then on to the west to look in on the mine I have purchased there. Wickham has suggested I visit several times, but I have never wanted to leave you for so long. Even though we have not been in accord, I have still drawn strength from your presence. You are the sun to my oak, and I would not leave you if I knew a better way.

I hope you know, my dear, that there is none for me but you. You consume me so completely that I could not find room for another even should I wish it. My heart is, and shall ever be, yours.

I hope you will do me the honor of writing while I am away. The journey will take some time, and I will be there at least a fortnight, perhaps longer, before making the return journey to Pemberley. I will write to Wickham—he will look after anything you may need while I am away.

Your husband,

George

So he had gone farther than she expected. She took a deep breath but refused to be upset. All would be well. George merely needed time to sort out his thoughts and he would come back to her. A little distance might do them both some good.

She would forego Town and head back to Pemberley. The children would be happy to skip being cooped up in the house in London and she had not been looking forward to it anyhow. Now she had the perfect excuse to avoid it.



George arrived in London by mid-afternoon and went straight to his study. While Anne had been busy with her school, George had been busy with the management of Pemberley. More mills were popping up in neighboring counties, and he thought he was seeing the beginning of a shifting tide. He knew more than one landowner who had lost his holdings after a bout of bad weather or sickness among the cattle. He did not want that to happen to Pemberley. If he wanted to protect his legacy for Fitzwilliam, he would need to diversify.

He began with simple investments in shipping and building. Then he purchased a small mill and a mine near Wales. He managed his investments from afar, occasionally traveling or sending Mr. Wickham in his place. Pemberley itself brought in a clear ten thousand pounds per annum, and with his

investments over the last few years, he had added another three thousand in income, with hopes it would grow to twice that in the coming years. He and Anne rarely entertained except for local dinner parties, and they did not live extravagantly. They rarely traveled, ate simply as was both their preference, and neither was prone to gambling.

She never exceeded her pin money—she only came close to spending it when she was buying supplies for her school. Her dowry was invested and he told her the interest was hers to do with as she pleased, but so far she had pleased to do very little. The building of the school and Miss Connelly's cottage had come from the interest, but otherwise, it had remained untouched these twelve years. She had set up an account for Nora's dowry out of her pin money. By the time Nora was eighteen, she would have five-thousand pounds. A very respectable dowry for the niece of a butcher. Even with those expenses, Anne still had not exceeded her income—likely because she was not constantly buying new silk dresses and erecting ridiculous follies on the estate.

The Darcy family coffers had never been so full, and George thought it ironic that he had the means to support more children—several more in fact—but not the means to have them.

Deciding that this line of thought was unproductive at best, he redirected his thoughts to the matter at hand. He would head west to visit his mine and look at the property Wickham had suggested on the way there. That should keep him busy for several weeks. Not long enough for him to forget what it

had been like to have his wife in his arms again, but long enough for his blood to cool.



Lady Anne had been at Pemberley three weeks before she began to suspect she was with child. The fourth week, she woke up with a rolling stomach and barely made it to the chamber pot before she began retching horribly. With a shaky hand pressed to her stomach, she tilted her head to the heavens and thanked God for her good fortune. One night had been all it took.

She consulted a calendar and the midwife, and they agreed she would likely be delivered in January, near the middle of the month or possibly later. Anne was concerned that her age would negatively impact the babe—she was now north of thirty—but the midwife assured her that women did such all the time and it was nothing to be worried about.

Anne decided not to mention anything in her letters to George. They had been writing to each other regularly. Once while he was in Town, again from the estate he was considering purchasing in Worcestershire, and twice from the town his mine was located in. He had been gone six weeks and expected to remain at least another fortnight. She would tell him when he returned. She would not be fully certain until she felt the quickening, but having been through this four times before, she was relatively sure a babe was on the way.

All that remained was to tell her husband.

CHAPTER 23



*L*ongbourn, Hertfordshire, 14 November, 1811

Miss Elizabeth,

Between sitting with Luke and listening to my two male cousins, I am in desperate need of female company. My husband is too enamored of our daughter to spare a conversation for his wife, Georgiana is too sweet, and Miss Bingley too much herself. Please say you will spend the afternoon with me at Netherfield. I would be grateful for your company. Bring Miss Bennet with you if you like.

Lady Marianne Pickering

“What does it say, Lizzy?” cried Miss Bennet. Elizabeth had received the letter as the family was finishing breakfast and her mother was all atwitter that Elizabeth had made such influential friends.

“Lady Marianne invites me to spend the afternoon at Netherfield. Jane as well if she would like to.”

“Oh!” squealed Mrs. Bennet. Elizabeth barely refrained from pressing her hands over her ears. Her mother had an alarmingly painful pitch when she was excited. “Of course you must go! I will order the carriage. You cannot arrive on foot. What will they think of you?”

“They will think I wished to enjoy the sunny weather. I am sure Lady Marianne would send us home in her carriage—we may walk.”

Mrs. Bennet protested that they could not arrive to see the daughter of an earl with blowsy hair and mud splattered dresses. Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy were both single men, and she had heard that Colonel Pickering had a brother who was unmarried. They must make a good impression. Elizabeth sighed and agreed, and Mrs. Bennet ran off to see about horses. Unfortunately, Mr. Bennet required the horses for the farm and they could not be spared, no matter how much his wife demanded them.

Elizabeth was glad of it, for she was in need of a long walk. The last few days had rained and she had been cooped inside the house for far too long. Before Mrs. Bennet could tell her daughter to ask Lady Marianne to send a carriage to collect them, Elizabeth gathered her things and her elder sister and practically ran out the door.



“Isn’t it a glorious day?” Elizabeth said dreamily as they walked through the fields.

“Yes, but you would say the same if it were grey and dreary. It has been too long since you have had a long walk.”

Elizabeth breathed deeply of the fresh air. “It has. But the day truly is glorious and not just to me. Are you not glad to be seeing a certain gentleman at Netherfield?”

Jane flushed. “I will be glad to see all the inhabitants of Netherfield.”

Elizabeth shot her a skeptical look.

“We do not even know if the gentleman are home.”

“Where else would they be?”

“Shooting. Riding. In town on business. Visiting a friend. Locked away in the library on estate business, managing correspondence,” Jane listed matter-of-factly.

“Very well! I concede the point,” exclaimed Elizabeth. “But you will be happy to see Mr. Bingley if he is there?”

“Ah!” Jane threw up her hands and sighed in exasperation. “Yes, I will be happy to see him. But I do not know if he will be happy to see me.”

“What? Why would you say such a thing! Of course he will be happy to see you.”

“Lizzy,” Jane said warningly, “we have no understanding. He has not spoken to Father. He has made no declarations or promises of any kind. For all we know, he is enjoying a passing flirtation in the country and nothing more.”

Elizabeth looked at her askance. “This does not sound at all like you, Jane. What makes you think so?”

“Lady Marianne mentioned something about Mr. Bingley falling in and out of love frequently. I do not know if she was trying to warn me or merely speaking freely. But if he is apt to change affections without discretion, I would rather not be an amusing story told to other ladies in the future.”

Now that sounded like Jane. “No, of course not.” Elizabeth thought for a moment. “We shall simply have to ask Lady Marianne. She will tell us the truth of the matter.”

“Lizzy, I couldn’t!”

“You don’t have to. I will.”

Jane looked worriedly at her sister, but she knew Elizabeth well enough to know that there would be no stopping her. And Jane had to admit that she would very much like to know whether Mr. Bingley was toying with her or not.



The walk to Netherfield was accomplished in short time and their gowns suffered minimal damage from the mud, largely because Jane had insisted they stay to the dryer paths. If Elizabeth had been alone, she would have splatters halfway up her skirt, she was sure.

Marianne saw them from the window and stepped out to meet them, and soon the three of them were walking in the garden, hearing all about baby Rosamund, quickly being

dubbed Rosie, and how she had managed the remarkable feat of getting her entire fist into her mouth. Jane was all agog. She had a maternal sort of warmth to her and she was very drawn to children. The feeling was mutual, and children would often be found following her about the estate, doing her bidding without much effort on her part. Elizabeth was never sure how she did it exactly, but she assumed in the end that Jane was pure goodness, and as everyone knew children were excellent judges of character, they immediately trusted Jane and were eager to please her.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, liked children on a case by case basis and they seemed to feel the same about her. Some she enjoyed very much, like her Gardiner cousins in London, but others' company she could happily forego, like the youngest Goulding children. She rather liked Luke Darcy, though she supposed he was not really a child any longer. He was twelve she thought, or nearly so, and almost as tall as her. He would be a veritable giant when he was full grown.

She was brought back to the conversation at hand by Marianne laying a hand on her arm.

“Forgive me, my mind wandered.”

“Think nothing of it. I should remember that no one is as interested in one's children as their parents are. My cousin Reggie used to bore me silly talking about his son, but I quite understand it now.”

Elizabeth smiled. “It shows you are an affectionate mother. That is to be commended.”

“I wish Lady Westbrook agreed with you.” She saw the sisters’ looks of confusion and clarified, “Henry’s mother is the Countess of Westbrook. She makes my mother look like a docile kitten, but she cares for her children and is a good grandmother. She does not approve of me following the drum, especially not now that we have children. She tolerated it when we were first married, but no longer.”

“That must be difficult,” said Jane. Elizabeth could tell that Jane was more in agreement with Lady Westbrook than Marianne, for she could not understand wishing to traipse across a foreign country on horseback, sleep in a tent, and assist in the aftermath of battles, but Jane was too kind to not at least attempt to see her friend’s point of view.

“It is. I am afraid she does not understand me, but that is my lot in life. Very few women understand me. I made peace with it some time ago.”

Elizabeth squeezed her arm in sympathy. “One would think that she would appreciate your desire to be with your husband. After all, he is her son.”

“She does to a degree. But she is so confused about me in general that she cannot truly appreciate my devotion to her son.”

Elizabeth released a rueful laugh. “I understand your feelings. My mother does not understand me either and it has led to much discomfort.”

Jane gave her sister what amounted to a stern look for her, but was more like a kitten trying to look cross. “Are you

anxious to see your boys? They are in Lincolnshire, are they not?"

Marianne and Elizabeth smiled at each other, easily seeing through Jane's efforts to change the subject away from anything that could be considered unpleasant. Marianne answered smoothly, and soon they were headed inside for tea.



"I did not know you were here!" cried Mr. Bingley when he entered the parlor to find the Bennet sisters having tea with Marianne and Georgiana. He greeted them all enthusiastically, then sat on the chair nearest to Jane.

"How odd. I told Miss Bingley they were coming this morning and specifically asked her to let you know I would have guests this afternoon. She must have forgotten." Marianne sipped her tea and made eye contact with Elizabeth, who was desperately trying not to laugh.

Bingley looked flustered and changed the subject, beginning a quiet conversation with Jane.

"How is Master Darcy doing?" Elizabeth asked Marianne and Georgiana.

"He is much improved. Mr. Jones has said he will be able to spend some time outside soon. Luke is very happy about it. He is tired of being cooped up in his room all the time," answered Georgiana.

“I can imagine! It sounds positively dreadful. I have only ever been confined to my bed for illness a few times and never for anything serious, and I could not wait to get out again.”

Marianne nodded. “It is made worse by the dearth of books in the library here. Fitz sent to London for some, but Luke is nearly finished with those. I imagine we will be scouring bookshops next.”

“My father has an extensive library. If you let me know what he has already read, I can see if Longbourn has something else that would be appropriate.”

“That is generous of you, thank you,” replied Georgiana softly.

“Yes, that is a wonderful idea, Elizabeth. Thank you. We will make a list before you leave today.”



When it came time for them to depart, Marianne had the carriage called, as they had expected, and Elizabeth pulled her aside for a moment as they stood in the entrance hall.

“Marianne, please tell me truthfully. Is Mr. Bingley sincere in his pursuit of Jane? Or is she simply a diversion for his time in the country?”

Marianne looked around but saw no one but Miss Bennet tying her bonnet ribbons, deliberately looking away from them.

“I believe he is in earnest. I know my aunt said something to him before I arrived. He told her that he would be careful not to hurt your sister and would make sure his actions mirrored his intentions.”

“Hmm. That is not as straightforward as I would like, but it will have to do.”

“For what it’s worth, I have known Mr. Bingley for some time, or at least known of him. I have never seen him as enamored of a lady as he is with your sister. In the past, he fell in love with a lady in one night, and was back out of love again within a fortnight, mayhap a month. He has known your sister two months now and his affection shows no signs of waning.”

“Perhaps, but I do not like his history,” Elizabeth said as she pulled her gloves on more forcefully than necessary.

Marianne shrugged. “We all behave less than perfectly before we meet our spouses. We mustn’t let it get in the way of a good match.”

“You sound like my friend Charlotte. She says happiness in marriage is all a matter of chance.”

“On that I will have to disagree. I do not mean a good match in the sense of wealth and position, but in admiration and disposition, which is anything but chance. My mother wanted me to marry any number of men before Henry came along, and I will admit I did not always behave as I should have with them. But Henry is utterly perfect for me and I cannot imagine being married to anyone else. *That* is a good match.”

Elizabeth looked at her thoughtfully and nodded. “Very well. I will give Mr. Bingley the benefit of the doubt. But I will keep an eye on him.”

Marianne smiled brightly. “I would be disappointed in anything less.”



The next day saw Elizabeth making her way to Netherfield alone. One of Longbourn’s tenants was taking a wagon to a neighboring town and offered to take Elizabeth as far as the lane to Netherfield. She happily accepted and set the bundle of books she was carrying next to her and let her feet dangle off the back of the wagon. Her mother would be horrified to see her riding thus, but she did not care. The books were heavy enough to make three miles carrying them seem excessively long and she was grateful for the ride.

She hopped off at the end of the lane and thanked the driver with a bright smile and a wave, not noticing the two riders in the distance who had stopped to see who was coming.

“Is that Miss Elizabeth?” asked Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Yes,” answered Darcy. His eyes were glued to the woman who had spritely jumped off the wagon and was now heading down the path to Netherfield as if she did not have a care in the world.

“Shall we catch up and walk with her to the house?”

“I promised Bingley I would check on the drainage on the western border. You may go ahead if you wish.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam held back his eye roll. Only Darcy would prefer looking at field drainage over talking to a pretty girl. “No, you are right, we did say we would. We should check the drainage.”

Darcy looked at him curiously. “I said *I* would. You are not obligated if you would rather be elsewhere.”

“I should learn these things,” Fitzwilliam said after some hesitation.

“Oh? Is there something I should know?”

“Perhaps. My grandfather has been talking of doing something for me, and you know father wishes to as well. They are considering buying a small estate for me.”

“Truly?” asked Darcy, turning to his cousin in excitement. “That’s wonderful! Where is the estate?”

“There is a small property near my father’s estate, but I don’t know if I wish to live so close to Alexander.”

“Is it that bad, then? I thought you got on well enough.”

“We do, but he is best enjoyed in small quantities. Whenever we have spent more than a fortnight together, we have come to blows or nearly so. I cannot imagine sharing a property line with him. And Lord knows what will be going on there once he takes over.”

“It will be a shame if he runs it to ruin, after all your father and grandfather did to build it up.”

“Yes, it would be. Father has done what he can to protect the estate. You know he is increasing Clara’s dowry and tying it up so that it cannot be touched?”

Darcy nodded.

“He is also buying a townhouse for Andrew. It is not much, but it will be stability for him and allow him to marry and have a family when he is ready.”

“Uncle is doing the right thing. Even if Alexander ruins the estate, the rest of you will be well taken care of.”

“If he is able to tie up the money the way he wishes to, there will be a limit to the ruination. But who knows what Alexander will do in the future? He has shown no interest in marrying, but he will need an heir.”

“Do you think he plans to never marry and leave the heirs to you and Andrew?”

“I doubt it. He would view it as losing to us somehow. I could see him waiting until he is forty-five, then marrying some poor young lady who doesn’t know any better for the sake of an heir. I feel sorry for her already.”

Darcy frowned. “Is he really as bad as all that? I know he gets into mischief, but I had thought it was mostly harmless.”

“Not as harmless as it used to be. It *was* drinking and widows and a little gambling. Now it is racing, anything in a skirt, and enough brandy to fill the channel.”

“Good god! Is he ill?”

“If you are asking if he has the French disease, I do not know. It is certainly possible with the way he carries on. I am more concerned about his racing club and the fact that I haven’t seen him sober in over a year.”

“I am sorry, Rich. Is there anything I can do?”

“Keep my room ready at Pemberley. The day may come when I need a quick escape.”

“Consider it done.” Darcy shook his head again. “Poor Aunt Adele. How is she handling it all?”

“Like she handles everything—with the grace of an angel. She is the only one Alexander will listen to. He at least makes an effort for her, but it is not enough. He thinks she does not understand what a man in his position is expected to do, or what temptations he is faced with.”

Darcy snorted. “Did he forget that she was the only daughter of a marquess? She knows a thing or two about expectations.”

Fitzwilliam shrugged. “There is no talking to him. You know he has never listened to Father. I tried years ago and got a sore jaw for my trouble. I have given up.”

“I am sorry. I know it doesn’t help, but I truly am. I don’t know what I would do if Nathaniel or Luke were to behave in the same way.”

“Yes, you do. You would never let it get so far. At the first sign of dissipation, you would dunk them in the horse trough

and set them to work in the stables until they learned to appreciate what they have. The problem with Alexander is that he was the oldest child and the oldest cousin. There was no one around to set him to rights when he began to stray.”

“What about Reggie?”

“He is a second cousin, and far too amiable for Alexander to care about his opinion. He listened to Uncle Darcy, but...,” he trailed off.

“But it has been five years now and Alexander has gotten worse each year that my father has not scolded him into good behavior.”

“Yes, though I don’t think Uncle Darcy scolded him so much as scared the life out of him.”

Darcy chuckled. “Do you remember when he caught us setting a water bucket on Mr. Wickham’s door?”

Fitzwilliam guffawed loudly. “My arse hurts just thinking about it! I hadn’t been whipped in over a year and I’d forgotten how much it hurt.”

“And the lecture he gave us! I don’t remember when he was ever so angry with me,” said Darcy thoughtfully.

“Wickham was his friend. He likely viewed it as a personal insult.”

“Probably. And Wickham was steward of Pemberley. If we were seen to play pranks on him, it would undermine his position in front of the tenants. He had to be respected if he

was to do his job well, and he had to do his job well in order for Pemberley to thrive.”

“So what we thought was a harmless prank was endangering the livelihood of the entire family?” asked Fitzwilliam, surprise in his voice. “I never thought of that before.”

“The steward is the most important person on an estate. You should learn that if you are going to own your own soon,” Darcy teased.

Fitzwilliam acknowledged the rightness of the statement with a grimace and a sigh. “I have much to learn, I am sure.”

“If they have not fully decided on the estate near the manor, where else will you look?”

“I had thought Derbyshire, near your family, or perhaps Oxford near the Drydens. It will be nice to have family close by. Uncle John has always been a helpful sort, and I am sure I will need much advice in the beginning.”

Darcy nodded. “One of my neighbors mentioned selling some time ago. He has no sons and his daughter married a man with an estate in Devon. He would like to be near her and his grandchildren, and they have no need of his estate. He would rather have the money.”

“Really? Would you write to him and ask if he is looking to sell?”

“Of course. I will write today.”

When they arrived back at Netherfield, more than an hour after they had seen Miss Elizabeth on the lane, they heard a

lilting voice coming from the parlor. It was the room where Lady Anne and Georgiana usually spent most of their time, but since Luke had been injured, they were often found upstairs.

Fitzwilliam looked to Darcy in question.

“That is Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy said simply.

Fitzwilliam’s brow raised that he knew her voice so well, but he said nothing and followed his cousin into the parlor. Elizabeth was on a chair with her back to them, reading aloud. Luke was beside her on a fainting couch, his injured leg stretched out in front of him and his eyes locked on Miss Elizabeth’s face. His expression was rapt and Fitzwilliam nearly laughed aloud when he saw how enamored his young cousin was.

“I hope we’re not interrupting?” said Richard jovially.

Elizabeth jumped a little and turned to face them with her hand on her heart.

“We did not mean to startle you,” said Darcy quietly as he approached them.

“I was so caught up in the story I did not hear you come in.” She rose hurriedly and curtsied.

The gentlemen bowed and Richard quickly settled into a seat near his cousin, an eager grin on his face. “What are you reading, Miss Elizabeth?”

She turned the book so he could read the title. “Much Ado About Nothing.”

“Ah, one of my favorites. May I listen in?”

Elizabeth flushed and opened her mouth, her eyes darting frantically towards the window as if looking for escape. The maid sewing in the corner shot her a quick smile then looked back down, making Elizabeth blush a darker shade of red.

“You needn’t entertain my cousin, Miss Elizabeth.” Mr. Darcy’s deep voice startled her, and she was surprised to find he had moved to stand next to her, close enough she could have reached out and touched him.

“I do not mind, Mr. Darcy. I was simply surprised.”

“If you are sure, then.” He looked to her for confirmation and she assured them she was happy to continue.

She picked up where she had left off and read with spirit, the three gentlemen in the room giving her their full attention. She was a little intimidated at first—it was not something she generally did, but she told herself they were just people, like the boys she had played with as a child, and she should not concern herself with Mr. Darcy’s intense gaze or Colonel Fitzwilliam’s beguiling smile.

But was the fire too high? It was so warm in the parlor.

Soon enough, she came to the end of the act and closed the book, promising to come back the following day and read more. Luke thanked her with a bright smile and sparkly eyes, and she could not help but return his grin. She had the urge to rumple his hair, but she knew she should not. He was a sweet

boy, but he was not her little brother and he would not appreciate being treated like it.

She turned to take her leave of the gentlemen but only Colonel Fitzwilliam was there. She paused briefly and wondered what had happened to Mr. Darcy. He had been there only a moment ago. Deciding not to think about him and his vexing ways, she smiled and said goodbye to the colonel and made her way to the front door.

To her surprise, Mr. Darcy was waiting for her with her cloak in his hands. “May I call the carriage for you, Miss Elizabeth?”

“Thank you, but I will walk. I enjoy a long ramble.”

“Yes, I know,” he said.

He flushed a little, but she could not think why. It was well known that she walked all over Meryton—it was not unusual that he should know of it.

“May I escort you?” he asked abruptly.

Her eyes widened, then her mouth opened and hung there like a fish for a full three seconds (Darcy counted) before she responded. He twisted his ring incessantly as he awaited her answer.

“It is three miles.”

“I know.”

“Across the fields.”

“I know.”

She looked at him suspiciously, then said, “Yes, you may.”

He nodded and held out her cloak and she turned her back to him, allowing him to drape it carefully over her shoulders. She wondered at his strange behavior, but buttoned her cloak and tied her bonnet in silence. Once her gloves were pulled on, he gestured towards the door and she stepped through it, wondering if they would walk three miles in awkwardness.

Darcy followed her onto the drive and almost offered her his arm, but then thought better of it. It was a smooth path and her home neighborhood—she hardly needed his arm to steady her or his help with directions. And three miles was a long way to walk so close to each other. He fell into step beside her and put his hands behind his back.

They were nearly out of sight of the house when Elizabeth spoke. “We must have some conversation, Mr. Darcy. It would be odd to be silent for an hour altogether.”

He smiled. “Very well. What would you like to speak of?”

She looked at him in silence for a moment as she searched her mind for a topic, then laughed lightly. “I have not the faintest idea.”

He laughed with her, a short breathy sound that rumbled in his chest. It was short lived, but she was proud of herself for amusing him—it was not easily accomplished.

“I was surprised you offered to escort me home.” Marianne’s boldness must be rubbing off on her.

“Oh? Why is that?”

She shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. I suppose because you so rarely talk to me. I thought perhaps,” she peeked at him from beneath her bonnet and continued softly, “perhaps you disliked me.”

He stopped abruptly and turned to face her. “Disliked you? Why would you think that?”

She smiled, finally seeing the humor in her own silliness. “Has anyone ever told you that you ask a great many questions?”

He smiled sheepishly. “Actually, yes. My tutor used to tell me that all the time.”

They continued walking and after a minute or two of silence, Darcy said quietly, “I do not. Dislike you, that is.”

She looked at him from the corner of her eye and saw him staring straight ahead, a little too focused on their path. His obvious discomfort had the opposite effect on her, and she found herself relaxing.

“Thank you. That is good to know. I do not either, you know. Dislike you.”

He nodded, his eyes still facing forward. “Thank you.”

They walked on without saying a word for another five minutes, Elizabeth fighting the urge to laugh more than once. It was all so absurd! She found herself wishing Charlotte was nearby so that they might laugh at it together, but she was on her own.

Finally, out of desperation and a very real fear that she would begin hysterically laughing from the nerves of this ridiculous walk, she said, “What have you been reading of late?”

He seemed startled she had spoken and it took him a moment to respond. “I have been re-reading Tom Jones. My mind has been so occupied with Luke, I wished for something familiar.”

“I can understand that. When I am ill or out of sorts, I reach for a familiar book. It is like greeting an old friend in some ways.”

“Yes, it is.” He hesitated, then said, “I was the only child for many years, and Pemberley could be very quiet, especially in the winters. I would spend hours on my own, reading in the library. I think I read every adventure book my father owned.”

It sounded rather lonely to her, and his air while speaking seemed unsure, as if he was worried about her response. She said, “There are worse ways to spend a cold day. I have spent many happy hours curled up by the fire in my father’s bookroom in winter. The smell of books has always been comforting to me.”

He nodded. “I agree. There is nothing quite like it.”

“Which were your favorites? Of the adventure books?”

Mr. Darcy began to speak, hesitantly at first, then with more animation as he continued and she showed genuine interest in the conversation. Elizabeth quickly discovered Mr. Darcy’s

secret. He spoke very little in company, but if one truly wanted to hear him speak, one need only ask about books.

The conversation continued apace until Longbourn was in sight. At the gate, Elizabeth turned to him and said warmly, “Thank you for walking me home, Mr. Darcy.”

He bowed before her. “The pleasure was mine, Miss Elizabeth.”

She felt an odd sensation in her stomach and a pulling in her cheeks. She realized she was grinning happily long after Mr. Darcy had returned her smile, and with a nervous bite to her lip and a quick dip of her knees, she turned and skipped towards the house.



Darcy returned to Netherfield and went straight to his rooms, an odd expression on his face. Curious, Richard followed him and greeted him thrice before Darcy finally heard him.

“Did you enjoy your walk?”

“Yes, it was refreshing.”

“I’m sure it was. Was Miss Elizabeth good company?”

“Yes.”

Richard nodded, his eyes squinted in suspicion. “She seems a delightful lady.”

“Yes, she is. Excuse me, Rich. I have a letter to write.”

“Of course.” Richard left the room and sighed to himself. Luke was not the only Darcy brother enamored with Miss Elizabeth, just the only one who knew it.

CHAPTER 24



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, March 1796

Six weeks. The babe beside her had lived six precious weeks and was breathing still. The little girl was plump and pink and perfect. Her lungs were strong and her heartbeat constant. She ate heartily and slept soundly.

Georgiana.

Christened for both her father and her mother. The embodiment of all their hopes and the fruition of their wildest dreams. Their love manifested into physical form—the evidence of their steadfast devotion.

Anne did not know what she had done, how she had sinned to cause such a curse to fall upon her, or how she had escaped its wrath now. But somehow, she had done it. She had atoned. Her price paid, now she was free.

“Are you certain you won’t go to the school? The children have been asking after you,” said George softly. He touched his wife’s arm gently to draw her attention.

“Oh, dearest, I know you mean well, but I am so terrified to leave her. What if something happens while I am away?”

He could not argue with her, for he knew her fear.

“Very well, my dear. You remain here. I shall make arrangements.”

He kissed her cheek, kissed the forehead of the babe sleeping beside her, and turned to leave.

“George, why not ask Mrs. Wickham?” she called as he was nearly out the door.

“Mrs. Wickham?”

“Yes. She has called twice to check on us and has said that she would like to be of help in any way she may. She would enjoy reading to the children. I’ll send a note.”

Lady Anne rose and quickly penned a note that she sent a footman to deliver.

“Do not look like that, dear. She will do an admirable job. The weather is dry so you may ride alongside, you won’t have to be in the carriage with her, and we shall send a maid along.”

She smiled, and he begrudgingly agreed.

Looking at her daughter lying sweetly in the cradle beside her, Lady Anne could not imagine leaving her, not for a moment. Mrs. Wickham would read to the children in her stead. The woman was always hoping to be useful—this would fulfill both their desires neatly.



Anne was rocking Georgiana near the window when she heard a rider coming up the drive. The hoofbeats were heavy and close together, the rider flying hell for leather. Curious, she peered out the window and saw her husband's horse in front of the house. She made her way downstairs to see what all the commotion was about. She was still on the stairs when she heard her husband's voice bellowing through the halls.

She stopped at the bottom step, Georgiana still held tightly in her arms, and met George Darcy's eyes. Instantly, she knew something terrible had happened. She sent the baby to the nursery and followed him into his study.

"What is it?" she demanded.

"There was an accident," he said.

"Not at the school? Are the children well?"

"No, not at the school. On the road from the school."

She shook her head in incomprehension.

"The carriage slipped and tumbled down the hillside."

Lady Anne gasped and pressed a hand to her heart.

"It would not have been so bad had Mrs. Wickham not tried to jump."

"Jump?"

"Yes. The coachman leapt off when it became clear he would be thrown, and he saw it all. He said she looked at him

through the window, and then opened the door and leapt out.”

Anne pressed a hand over her mouth to stifle her gasp.

“She did not jump far enough. The carriage rolled over her.”

Anne sank onto the sofa near the fire. “Is she?” She could not bring herself to ask if the woman who had gone in her place was dead.

He nodded. “She did not survive. If she had stayed in the carriage...”

“Sally!” Lady Anne suddenly remembered the young kitchen maid who often accompanied her to the school to deliver cakes and biscuits to the children.

“Sally is well. Bruised and terrified, and her wrist is sprained, but she is otherwise unharmed.”

Anne sighed in relief. She did not want to say aloud that she would have missed Sally more had events been reversed. Mrs. Wickham had been trying to assist Lady Anne; the least Anne could do was show her respect in death.

“Have you told Wickham?” she asked.

“No, he is riding the north pasture. I’ve sent someone to fetch him.”

Her husband had a strange look. Anne almost let it pass without mentioning, but she decided to press the issue. How many times had she been grateful her husband had pressed her when she would have otherwise remained silent?

“What are you thinking, dearest?”

“I am ashamed to admit to it.”

“There can be no shame between us, my love. We have been through too much together.”

He nodded slowly and looked towards the window. “As horrid as it is, I was thinking that I felt some measure of relief with Rebecca Wickham’s passing, not least for my friend’s sake.”

She stood and moved to where he stared out the window and squeezed his hand. “There is no shame in truth. Even unpleasant truths.”

He nodded and swallowed thickly and pulled his wife into his arms. He kissed her hair. “I am grateful you stayed home today, dearest. I do not know what I would have done if it had been you in that carriage.”

She burrowed her face into his coat and held him tighter. “We must be grateful for our good fortune.” He nodded against her hair and kissed her temple. “And we must be a support to your friend. Relief or no, this will be a difficult time for him and young George.”

“I cannot imagine,” said Darcy.

They stood by the window in each other’s arms for some time, until there was a knock on the door. A servant entered.

“Mr. Wickham has returned, sir. Shall you see him here?”

Darcy cleared his throat. “No. Show him to the blue parlor and send in a decanter of brandy.”

“Very well, sir.” The servant left with a somber expression. Darcy mused that word had traveled fast.

Anne squeezed his hand and gave him a sad smile. “Go. Take care of your friend.”

He nodded and stepped through the door.



Darcy left his study with a heavy heart. If his wife’s feelings had been mixed at the news, he knew his friend’s would be even more complicated. He stopped outside the blue parlor and took a deep breath, choosing his words. He finally nodded to the footman to open the door, and he entered to find Samuel Wickham standing near the mantle, a cheery blaze in the fireplace.

Samuel looked up in expectation, his eyes wide and frantic. “George, what has happened? I heard there was an accident on the road to the school, and everyone has been giving me the strangest looks. It isn’t Lady Anne, is it?” He moved quickly towards his friend, concern etched on his features.

“Sit down, Samuel.” George gestured to the chairs nearest the fire. He poured two glasses of brandy, gave one to his friend, and sat in the chair beside him.

Samuel looked at the glass suspiciously, then back at his friend.

George looked him in the eye and swallowed. “Lady Anne didn’t want to leave Georgiana this morning. Mrs. Wickham

agreed to go in her place. The carriage slipped off the road, and Mrs. Wickham tried to jump to safety. The carriage,” his voice hitched and hesitated, “rolled over her. She did not survive.”

Wickham’s glass fell to the floor. The brandy seeped into the woven carpet, leaving a growing circle of darkness on the floor. Samuel stared in front of him, speechless.

“I will arrange the funeral, of course. You needn’t do anything. I thought you might want to go away for a bit, with young George. The boy will be upset ...” he trailed off.

Samuel muttered something, then turned to look at his friend. “She is dead? Truly?”

“Yes, I am afraid so. I’m sorry, Samuel.”

They looked at each other steadily for several minutes, boys turned to men together, husbands together, fathers together. Samuel had stood beside George when he buried his mother. Now George would stand beside him while he buried his wife.

Samuel nodded and thanked his friend, then walked out woodenly. He barely noticed the fields around him as he rode home; he did not hear the familiar squeak in the gate or the sound of his heels on the stone path. He could only think one thing, to his great shame.

I am free.



“She was never supposed to be there! If your mother weren’t so stupid and lazy, she would have gone herself!”

Fitzwilliam seethed at the insult to his mother, but held his tongue. George had just lost his mother and must be granted some leniency.

“It should have been your mother! It should have been yours!” George cried, his voice growing more distressed and unintelligible with each word he uttered. His chest was heaving with the sobs he refused to release in front of his friends and his face was screwed so tight his eyes were barely visible.

“Come now, Wickham, it was just an accident. These things happen sometimes. It’s devilish bad luck, but it’s no one’s fault,” tried David Abara.

“Easy for you to say, David, your mother isn’t dead!”

David pursed his lips and huffed, and Fitzwilliam sighed silently next to him, but clearly had no intention of speaking. George, however, couldn’t seem to control his tongue.

“If your mother had just gone on her own appointments, none of this would have happened. But Lady Anne doesn’t do anything that might upset her delicate health. The spoiled cow!”

Fitzwilliam’s head snapped up and his hands clenched into fists at his side, but before he could move or say anything, David stood and grabbed Wickham by the collar, his larger size nearly pulling the smaller boy off the ground.

“Your mother was a scheming baggage who was only allowed to show her face at Pemberley because your father is too good to throw out the mother of his child and Mr. Darcy is too good to embarrass his friend. Lady Anne is worth a hundred of the likes of Rebecca Wickham, and if you weren’t so blind to what is right in front of you, you would know it, too.”

“David, that’s enough,” said Fitzwilliam.

David looked to Fitzwilliam, then back to George who looked pale and horror-struck. He let go of George’s collar and took a step back. “It’s been a long week for all of us. Wickham, I’m sorry you’ve lost your mother. Let’s leave it at that.”

They nodded at each other awkwardly and David left, leaving the younger boys on their own.

After a few more minutes of quiet, Fitzwilliam said, “I have taught Goliath a new trick. Would you care to see it?”

George looked at his friend silently for a moment, then recognizing the offer of distraction for the kindness it was, agreed and they left the room to find young Darcy’s dog.

“I’m sorry for what I said about your mother,” said George quietly as they walked through Pemberley’s long corridors.

“It is forgotten,” said Fitzwilliam stiffly.

Pemberley, six weeks later

“What do you think of sending the boy to school?” asked Darcy. He poured a glass of brandy for himself and another for Samuel Wickham, and they settled before the fire in his study.

“What sort of school?”

“He has taken lessons with Fitzwilliam before. He is not deficient. I imagine he could get on well at Harrow or Rugby.”

Wickham guffawed. “You aim too high, my friend. He is not a young gentleman. Best if he doesn’t get too many high ideas in his mind.”

“Do you think he would?”

“His mother certainly did,” Wickham mumbled. “Forgive me. I shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.”

Darcy waved him off. “We are friends—you may speak freely.”

Wickham rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “He is much like Becky. I know he is but a boy, but sometimes,” he looked away and sighed again, “he is so like her in manner and looks. I worry he is like her in other ways as well.”

George understood him immediately. Rebecca Wickham had been unscrupulous at best. If Samuel feared his son would be like her, it was a serious concern. A woman of her nature had been difficult; a man of the same ilk would be dangerous.

“Well, if that is how you feel, perhaps school is the best option. A change of scene for him after all that has happened, and a respite for you. Give the boy a chance to make something of himself.”

“I shall consider it.”



The following September, a week after his eleventh birthday, young George Wickham was packed into a carriage with his father and sent to a boys' school in York. Mr. Darcy had offered to pay the tuition, and much to his shame, Samuel had accepted out of necessity. His wife had been a terrible spendthrift, and though he had tried to curtail her excesses, it had not always been possible, and he would not see shopkeepers lose money due to his inability to manage his wife.

Rebecca had been impossible in so many ways, and if he wanted her to curb her less savory habits, he was forced to give in to her on other things like shopping and the occasional trip. It was not as if he could lock her in the attic with a maid, though the idea held some appeal.

Regardless, in the eight months since her death he had not recouped enough of the money she had burned through to be able to afford George's schooling, so for his son's sake, he had accepted his friend's generous offer. He would not allow young George to go to a fancy school full of little lordlings ready to turn their nose up at the son of a steward. But he would see him well-educated at a respectable school and ready to take his place in the world when the time came for it.

As the carriage was being loaded, George Darcy took aside eleven-year-old Wickham and placed one large hand on his

shoulder, leaning down to meet his eyes. “Are you ready, my boy?” he asked in the deep voice that always made young George more than a little nervous.

“Yes, sir. I believe so,” he replied, proud his voice did not shake.

Mr. Darcy nodded. “I am glad to hear it. Now, mind you listen to your masters and learn as much as you can. Study hard and stay out of any serious trouble.” The last was said with a wink. “Remember, a man is only as good as his behavior. You have a fine name to live up to. See that you do it proud.”

Young George stood a little straighter. “Yes, sir.”

Mr. Darcy gave his shoulder a squeeze and handed him a small purse filled with coins. “Don’t spend it all at once. You must make it last until your winter break when your father will bring you home. Do you think you can manage that?”

George nodded, eyes wide as he placed the purse in his pocket. “Yes, sir. I can manage.”

“Good. Remember to write your father once a fortnight. He will want to hear how you are getting on. And if you want to send me a letter, too, I will be glad to hear from you.”

George Darcy stood straight again, towering over the small boy. Young Wickham looked up at him, his head craned back, and smiled. “I will, sir. Thank you, Mr. Darcy!”

He scrambled into the carriage and Samuel stopped next to Darcy with a breathy chuckle. “You’ll have a devoted follower

for life if you keep treating him like that.”

“There are worse things.” He reached out a hand to Samuel and the men shook, then Samuel climbed into the carriage beside his son and began the journey to Yorkshire.



“He ought to go to school,” said George Darcy, joining his wife at the window where she watched Fitzwilliam practicing a trick with his dog Goliath on the lawn. He wrapped his arms around her middle and pulled her closer to him.

She sighed. “You are likely correct, but I do not want to admit it.”

He smiled. “I know you have not wanted to send him before, and I understood entirely. Schools can be dangerous places for children, and I would not want to see him ill or harmed. But he is strong now. Look at him! He is nearly as tall as Mr. Thistle. He will be as big as me soon.”

She smiled fondly and leaned into him as he tightened his arms around her. “I know you are correct. He is healthy and strong, and his character is such that I am not afraid of him being led astray. But he is my son. My heart does not want to let him go.”

“Then do not let him go, not just yet. Let us reconsider in a few months. He can go in the spring if we are sure, or we can wait until next year if you would rather.”

“If we follow my inclinations, I shall never send him,” she said with a rueful smile over her shoulder.

“He needs to make friends his own age, beyond his cousins. He will eventually need to learn to forge his own way.”

“I know. I simply do not like to think of it.”

“I know, my love, I know.”

CHAPTER 25



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 15 November, 1811

“Marianne!” Richard hissed as he grabbed his cousin by the arm and yanked her into his room.

“Richard! What are you doing? You cannot accost women simply walking down a corridor.”

Richard rolled his eyes. “Forgive me. We have pressing matters to discuss.”

“Oh? What matters?”

“First, I should ask when you are planning to travel to Harkley.”

“We are discussing delaying the journey again. Henry is anxious to see the boys, of course, but we do not wish to leave Lady Anne on her own with Luke. They were to leave for Pemberley a week after we departed, but Luke cannot make such a long journey with a broken leg. He would be utterly miserable the entire time, not to mention the potential damage that could be done. And Rosamund has been especially fussy

of late. It may be wise to wait just a little longer until her sleep improves.”

Richard stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Yes, of course. But you are as yet undecided?”

“Yes. Why? What are you planning?” she asked suspiciously.

“I am worried about Luke.”

Marianne rolled her eyes. “We are all worried about Luke!”

Richard huffed. “I do not mean his leg! You were right about him being enamored with Miss Elizabeth. It is even worse than I feared. I think he fancies himself in love with her.”

“Oh dear.”

“Yes. He will be heartbroken and betrayed if she chooses another. We must help him let her go before she becomes his sister in truth.”

“His sister? Do you not mean his cousin?”

Richard shook his head. “Marianne, do you truly not see? Darcy is half in love with her already!”

Marianne reeled back. “Darcy? In love with Miss Elizabeth! My Fitz? No, it cannot be. He would have told me.”

“Would he?”

She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Are you certain? Absolutely certain?”

“As certain as I can be after one meeting. I should like to see them together more, but he clearly admires her. He’s mentioned her in two of his letters to me while he’s been here, but I admit I thought little of it.”

“Does that not prove you are mistaken?”

“It proves she is on his mind.”

Marianne looked out the window, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“How often has he been in company with her?” asked Richard.

She took a deep breath. “She has called on me here several times, and Fitz often joined us towards the end, or for a walk in the garden.”

Richard shot her a look.

“Henry did the same!”

“Henry was spending time with his wife whom he has not seen in some months while he was away on campaign.”

Marianne huffed.

“What else? Has he joined you in calling on the Bennets?”

“A few times. He has played chess with Mr. Bennet twice, I believe, but only because Lady Anne suggested it. I do not think he likes it at Longbourn. You know how he dislikes noisy places filled with strangers.”

“But he has gone? More than once?”

“Not every time. Not even half the times we have called!”

“But he joined you here each time the Bennets called.”

“Not when the mother called, but when Miss Elizabeth came, yes,” she said with a sinking feeling.

“Has he met her on any walks? Gone riding with her?”

“She does not ride. I know Luke has met her on many walks, but I don’t know about Fitz.”

“She does not ride?” he asked incredulously.

“I know. It is one of the few things I do not like about her. I have offered to teach her myself, though perhaps I should not have as I have just been delivered.”

Fitzwilliam pursed his lips and looked to the wall. He could teach her to ride. Or better yet, he and Darcy could do it together.

“Oh no, I know that expression. What are you plotting?”

“Nothing, I merely had an idea. Let us do nothing for now, merely observe. It is possible I am wrong about Fitz and he is only polite to Miss Elizabeth, or it is nothing but a passing fancy.”

He squeezed Marianne’s arm and rushed out the door, leaving his cousin standing alone and confused in his empty chamber.



“It is not that I wish him to be alone forever. On the contrary, I have long wished he would find a woman to love.” Marianne

pulled her wrapper on rather forcefully. “I simply do not wish to be blindsided.”

Henry turned her to face him and put his hands on her shoulders. “Are you certain that is it?” he asked gently.

“Why didn’t he tell me?” she asked in a small voice.

“It is likely he does not know himself.”

She sighed and looked at the floor. “You are probably right. Or perhaps he intends to do nothing about it, or perhaps he is concerned for Luke’s feelings.”

“Or all of that and more.”

Marianne moved to the bed and sat down heavily. “I know it is odd, but I have never had to share him before. There were our other cousins, of course, and our siblings and parents, but it always felt like it was me and Fitz, and everyone was joining us. I never felt like I was on the outside of his life.”

“It will be an adjustment.”

“Yes,” she said absently.

“He likely felt similarly when you and I wed.”

Her head popped up. “Really?”

“You were incredibly close. Do you not remember how you spent half the season at Darcy House instead of with your parents? Or how he escorted you to every event in Town the Season before we married?”

“Yes, I remember,” she said softly. Fitz had been wonderful. Thoughtful and considerate, always listening, ready with a

good word of advice or a way to make her laugh. “He was afraid my marrying would change our relationship.”

“Has it?”

“Yes. How could it not? He was the most important man in my life besides my father. You usurped them both,” she said with a fond smile. “But I still love him as much as I ever did.”

He sat next to her on the bed. “But you have other responsibilities now. He is no longer your first priority.”

“No, he is not.” She rested her hand on her husband’s arm. “I was terribly insensitive to Fitz when I left him. I am being justly repaid for it now.” She sniffled a little.

“I would hardly call marrying me leaving your cousin.”

“Trust me, he saw it as my leaving him. We had been together our entire lives. You’ve heard the stories. Mother and Lady Anne were pregnant together, and little Fitz was only four weeks old when I came along. Neither of us would stop crying until they put us side by side in the cradle.” Her voice broke and she fiddled with the tie on her wrapper. “Our mothers were inseparable, as their mothers before them. It is a family tradition, you see.” She gave him a watery smile and he stroked her hair.

“Then we should hurry him along to find a wife. How else will our children be inseparable from his?”

She laughed and rested her head on her husband’s shoulder, her gaiety quickly giving way to tears.



Richard placed a card on the table and looked at his cousin.
“Your turn.”

Luke considered his cards carefully, then plucked one out and set it on top of his cousin’s. Richard frowned but continued on, slightly embarrassed to be losing to a boy less than half his age.

“Is Miss Elizabeth coming to visit later?” asked Richard.

“She said that she would.”

“Is it not enough that you have your sister, mother, and cousin doting on you? You need the neighbors as well?” Luke glared at him and Richard laughed. “She seems a very kind young lady.”

“She is.”

He laid another card on the table. “I should like to know her better, I think.”

Luke’s head shot up. “What?”

“She is clever and pretty and amusing. Why should I not wish to know her better?”

Luke squinted at the colonel. “Know her how?”

Richard shrugged. “As an eligible gentleman likes to get to know an eligible lady.”

Luke scowled at him, his face a bright red. Unfortunately, Richard was busy reorganizing his cards and did not notice.

“You will not trifle with her.”

Richard tried not to smirk at the air of command in his young cousin. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Luke grit his teeth, knowing there was nothing he could say that would not sound ridiculous, but inside, he was seething.



Marianne poured Luke a cup of tea and set it on the tray on his lap, followed by a small plate of cake. “There you are. Just the way you like it.”

“Thank you, Marianne.”

“Why so glum? You look like you’ve lost your favorite horse.”

Luke sighed. “It is Richard. He is interested in Miss Elizabeth.”

“Oh?” She set her cup on the side table and leaned forward. “What makes you think that?”

“He told me.”

Her brows shot up. “I see.”

His chin dropped to his chest and he looked utterly dejected. “He has been to the continent, and been to war, and has ever so many interesting stories.”

“And you think you do not compare favorably?”

He nodded.

Marianne grasped his hand and gave it a squeeze. “My dear, she would not choose Richard over you because he has been to war. If she did choose him, and I am not saying she would, it would be because he is a man full grown, in a position to take a wife.” She spoke gently in an attempt to spare his feelings.

Luke sighed again, his shoulders slumping down. “I know she is older than me, but not by so very much. Colonel Pickering is older than you!”

“Yes, by eight years. But I was nineteen when I met him and twenty when we wed. Old enough to know what I wished for in a husband and what I did not. And to have some idea of what kind of wife I wished to be.”

Luke was thoughtful for a moment. He had always thought there were two kinds of wives: good ones and bad ones. “What kind of wife did you wish to be?”

She took a deep breath and looked about to make sure they were truly alone, then said, “I wanted adventure and excitement in my life, and meaning, too. I had no desire to be nothing but an ornament on my husband’s arm, or to spend my time making and receiving calls and doing precious little else. I am an active sort of person. That is why I thought about being a parson’s wife for a little while.”

“Like Nora.”

She smiled, glad he did not know how close he was to the mark. “Yes, exactly like Nora. She takes an eager interest in the concerns of their parishioners and she is involved in the village. Every day, she eases the burden of someone else’s life.

That is commendable. I might have been happy in a similar role, but I am not devout enough to make the church such a big part of my life.”

“So being the wife of an officer was a good idea to you?”

“Yes, it was. The family even considered a match between me and Richard for a moment, but soon they realized we would not be a proper husband and wife, but rather a mischievous pair constantly getting into trouble, and they ceased speaking of that nonsense.”

“I cannot imagine you and Richard married!”

“Imagine how I felt! I have never understood how people could marry their cousins, even second cousins as Rich and I are. It is entirely too strange to wed someone you have thought of as family your entire life. Could you imagine marrying Arabella?”

He made a disgusted face and she laughed, refraining from pointing out that Arabella was even younger than Miss Elizabeth. “I see you understand me then.” She rested her elbows on her knees, leaning forward with an earnest expression. “What you must understand is that a wife’s life is greatly affected by the type of man she marries, and to a lesser extent, a husband’s life is affected by her. If she wishes to go out most evenings to balls and soirees, but he prefers to stay home, they will not be harmonious. If he wishes for a quiet life in the country and she prefers Town, she will be discontent. If she wishes to be useful and involved in the estate but he only

wishes to collect the rents and do as he pleases, it will be difficult for her to respect him. Do you see?”

“Yes.”

“So before you think about marrying anyone, you should consider more than whether or not you get along and can have a decent conversation, or about how pretty she is.” Luke flushed red and she hid her smile. “You must think about all the aspects of your life, and how you wish to live going forward, and whether or not the lady you are considering would be happy with such a life.”

He nodded, his expression serious. “I understand. Thank you for explaining it so clearly.”

“I did have a lesson or two with Mr. Thistle,” she teased. “Now drink your tea before it gets cold.”



As expected, Miss Elizabeth arrived that afternoon to read to Luke. Lady Anne was thankful for the respite and took the opportunity to lie down, thanking Elizabeth for her attention and taking herself off to bed and the tender mercies of her maid. Georgiana, however, was curious about Elizabeth and all the whispers she had heard about her of late.

Like most quiet people, Georgiana had long ago realized that if she said nothing, people would forget all about her presence, or not even realize she was near enough to hear them. In that capacity, she had heard Marianne speaking about

Elizabeth to Richard, Richard speaking about Elizabeth to Fitzwilliam, and Luke speaking about her to everyone. Needless to say, her curiosity was piqued.

“Thank you so much for coming, Miss Elizabeth,” said Georgiana when she met their guest in the entrance hall. “It is very kind of you to take an interest in Luke.”

“It is no trouble at all. When I was a girl, I fell from a tree and broke my arm. It was not as severe as Luke’s accident, but I remember being terribly bored in my room by myself all day. Jane would read to me and bring me books, but my younger sisters could not read well yet or at all, and my parents were too busy for more than a short visit.”

“I can imagine! You poor dear. Well, we are grateful you are here. Do you mind if I join you?”

“I would enjoy that. We can read together if you like.”

Georgiana was pleased with the offer, and soon they were in a sunny sitting room, Luke reclined on a chaise and the ladies in chairs pressed close together so they could share the book, having split the roles between them. They passed a pleasant half hour in this manner until Richard joined them. Luke scowled at his older cousin, but Richard appeared oblivious to his ire.

“Is this a private reading or can anyone join in?” Richard asked jovially.

“Of course you may join us, Richard,” said Georgiana pleasantly. “You can read the male characters. Miss Elizabeth

will give herself a sore throat from straining her voice.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I do not know that it will be so bad, but I would welcome another participant.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam was quick to join in and soon the three of them were reading with spirit, Richard and Elizabeth being similar enough to draw shy Georgiana into their merriment with ease. Luke was caught between enjoying the reading, which truly was quite entertaining—Richard may be a lady-stealing thief of a cousin, but he was clever with voices—and being annoyed that he was not alone with Miss Elizabeth. He had been disappointed when Georgiana joined them, but Georgiana was so sweet tempered and such a kind elder sister that he could not be truly angry with her for more than a minute.

Richard was another matter. Luke had no difficulty being angry with his cousin. Surely Richard knew that Luke liked Miss Elizabeth. Why was he interfering? He could not possibly be serious about her. Or could he?

“Is there a party and I was not invited?” asked Marianne.

Elizabeth stopped reading as her friend entered the room. “Lady Marianne! How nice to see you.”

“It is nice to see you, too, Elizabeth.” She said the lady’s name pointedly and Elizabeth laughed.

“We are just reading to Luke,” said Georgiana softly. “Would you like to join us? There are enough parts.”

“Oh no, I think I would much rather enjoy the show.”

She shot a look to Richard, who ignored her, and sat on the side of Luke's bed and wrapped an arm about his shoulders in defiance of propriety, as per usual.

The reading continued and Marianne watched the participants carefully. Richard was sitting dangerously close to Miss Elizabeth, though she was sure he would say it was so he could see the book she was holding. Luke's eyes were shooting daggers at Richard each time he leaned closer to Miss Elizabeth, but the older man seemed oblivious. Georgiana seemed a touch anxious, though she was so often so it was difficult to tell if it was due to the current situation or to the fact that she was doing an almost-performance in public.

Elizabeth was perhaps the most interesting of all. She was clearly enjoying the reading itself, and seemed quite fond of Georgiana and Luke, but she seemed somewhat uncomfortable with Colonel Fitzwilliam and his physical closeness. Marianne knew Richard was not handsome—he looked too much like a Fitzwilliam for that—but he had an imposing physique, tall and trim with wonderfully broad shoulders, and an engaging personality. He knew how to flirt well and was aware of his own talents. Currently, he was employing them on Miss Elizabeth, smiling at her privately, leaning too close to read his lines, making faces at her as if they were sharing a private joke.

Miss Elizabeth clearly recognized what he was doing but did not know what to make of it. What on earth was Richard thinking?



Elizabeth was never so glad to leave Netherfield. Between Luke's quicksilver moods, Georgiana's anxiety, Marianne's watchfulness, and Colonel Fitzwilliam's unnerving closeness, she felt utterly claustrophobic. She was certain the colonel had been flirting with her, but she was less certain of what it meant. Was he interested in her truly? Having a little fun while in the country? Or was it simply his way, and she was no different from any other female he met?

She had hoped she would see Mr. Darcy on this visit, or that he might offer to walk her home as he had done the day before. She had thought they enjoyed each other's company and were on their way to understanding each other better, but he had not even come out to greet her today, so perhaps she was mistaken. Now that the afternoon had been so strange, she was relieved he had not walked her home. She needed the time to settle her feelings.

She sighed and walked through the fields to Longbourn with more vigor than was necessary, slightly regretting her agreement to return to Netherfield tomorrow and finish the play.



“Richard!” hissed Marianne. She took his arm roughly and pulled him into her room.

“Now who is accosting unsuspecting gentlemen walking down a corridor?”

She rolled her eyes. “What are you doing? You just told me yesterday that you believe Fitz is half in love with Elizabeth, then today you flirt with her like she is a French widow looking for a liaison.”

He scoffed. “It was not so bad as that!”

“Poor Georgiana barely knew where to look! Not to mention Luke. He may never forgive you for this, you know.”

“I am doing this for Luke.”

Marianne’s brow wrinkled. “What?”

Richard sighed. “He is so enamored with Miss Elizabeth that the next man who shows her any interest will be in his brown books. If that man is Darcy, their relationship may not recover. I however—”

“Flirt with anything in a skirt and are not half as close to him as Fitz is,” she interrupted.

“I do not flirt with anything in a skirt!”

“You do, but that is a conversation for another day. Have you thought about how this will all end?”

“What do you mean? Luke will be so angry with me that when Darcy swoops in and wins fair lady, he will be relieved.”

She rolled her eyes. “What of Miss Elizabeth?”

Richard looked confused.

“What if she likes you? What if she falls in love with you? Luke will not be the only angry one then, I can assure you.”

Richard looked utterly baffled. “Do you truly think she would?”

Marianne did not like how he looked intrigued at the notion. She had intended him for Elizabeth at first, but now that she knew Fitz liked her, her loyalty was to him. She loved Richard, but Fitzwilliam was, well, Fitzwilliam. She was loyal to him above all others, and if he wanted Miss Elizabeth, she would not let anyone interfere—including her own cousins.

“Yes! She very well might. You are not as handsome as Fitz, nor as rich, but you are charming and endearing when you wish to be. And Elizabeth is not unlike you in nature. She may feel you are something of a kindred spirit. And I rather think she would enjoy following the drum, so you cannot depend on that to deter her.”

Richard sank slowly into the nearest chair. “Oh dear.”

“Yes, oh dear! I must speak with her before you manage to muck up everything permanently. I will endeavor to get her alone tomorrow when she comes back to read to Luke. We must deal with this before it becomes an even bigger problem.”

Richard nodded absently, his mind wondering whether Darcy truly liked Miss Elizabeth, and if he intended to do anything about it. He had started it all as a bit of a lark, but now that he had gotten to know her a bit better, he rather liked her. She was pretty and clever and amusing—he had not been

prevaricating when he extolled her virtues to his young cousin. And if she truly would be happy following the drum, well... And if his father purchased him a small estate, she would know how to manage one. Whatever he bought would likely be about the size of Longbourn. It could be a felicitous arrangement for them both.

There was nothing else to be done for it. He must ascertain Darcy's feelings. If his cousin was sincere, he would quit the field. But if Darcy was dithering and had no serious intentions, Richard might have some intentions of his own.

CHAPTER 26



*A*utumn 1797

Eton College, Eton

28 October, 1797

Dear Marianne,

I think I have finally begun to accustom myself to this place. I am making friends with one of the King's Scholars here, a boy called David. He is mighty clever, and I feel quite stupid when I talk to him. Father says that is a good thing—he will push me to study more. He is quite short, though, and not as fast as the others, so he often is sent on the most errands. I have told him to attempt to ingratiate himself to one of the older boys so he isn't called to fag on whoever wants his shoes polished.

Nearly everything Richard told us about Eton was correct. Everyone calls me Darcy, and it has taken me some time to

adjust. I kept looking for my father the first few times I heard it.

I am grateful I am fagging for our cousin Digby. I cannot imagine having to do so for Alexander! Digby has been nice and only rung me in the night once, when he got himself locked out of his room and slept in my bed so no one would find out. I had to sleep on the floor, but it was not too awful. He has been helpful with telling me about the tutors and headmasters and showing me around. Many of the other boys seem quite lost, and I am glad to not be alone.

Richard is so busy playing sport that I hardly see him. He is in a separate House from me, and Alexander in yet another. I thought Richard and I would be in the same House, but I suppose it is as it should be. Our younger cousin Digby will be starting next year, and his brother tells me he is like to be in this House, so I will not be on my own.

How are your brothers and Arabella?

Your Cousin the Errand Boy,

Fitz

Rosings, Kent

12 November, 1797

Dear Fitz,

Mother is punishing me. I have been exiled to Kent. She says it is so that I may learn to be friends with Cousin Anne,

but I know it is because she wishes to punish me. Lady Catherine is a termagant and I hate her. Don't tell Mother.

We were all in London, having a perfectly lovely time, I thought, when Mother began talking about her come-out, and how she had had so many suitors, and how everyone adored her and she had her pick of gentlemen. That was how she became a countess. I rolled my eyes at her and was sent to my room, and the next day shipped off to Kent to stay with Lady Catherine. I cannot believe she thinks I do not see how the events are connected!

You are very lucky to be at Eton. I wish I could go to Eton. Lady Catherine has been going on and on about a lady's seminary and how they will teach me to be a good hostess and curtsy properly and do everything as an earl's daughter should. She is horrid.

Anne is a bore. She does not throw, or run, or even ride horses! She has no dog and mine is still at the manor. I slipped out to the stables to feed the horses, and one of the grooms told Lady Catherine. Can you believe it? They are spying on me! I have outsmarted them and gone to the barn. It is not too far, and there is a nice farmer there who promised he wouldn't tell a soul after I gave him a shilling. The barn cat has recently had kittens and they are the sweetest creatures I have ever seen, though their claws are very sharp. One of them has become my favorite. I am considering taking him home with me, but I would have to find a way to conceal him in my trunks.

And of course I do not know that I will ever go home, so long as Mother remains angry with me.

The farmer's daughter comes to the barn in the morning to milk the goats and she has promised to show me how to do it if I come early enough. I will try tomorrow and tell you all about it.

Say hello to Richard and Cousin Reggie for me. Do they truly call him Digby? Not Reggie? How odd. I suppose I would be called Dryden if I went to Eton. I do not know if I like it. I feel very much like Marianne is my name. You do not want me to start calling you Darcy, do you? I do not think I could manage it. Darcy is Uncle, and he is a great big bear of a man who gave me rides on his shoulders when our mothers were not there. You are Fitz.

Your Cousin in Exile,

Marianne

Oh, my brothers are perfectly well, I think. Still at the manor with Nanny. John has not returned my last letter. Probably too busy having fun to think of his banished sister.

Eton College, Eton

21 November, 1797

Dear Marianne,

I won my first prize! It is not a true prize, only an informal contest in our House, but I won and I am very pleased. The contest was a combination of speed and wit, and I believe the fact that I am quite the tallest boy in my class and the inimitable Mr. Thistle combined to make it a foregone conclusion.

I cannot believe you are at Rosings. You poor dear. What was Aunt Julia thinking? Are you certain you did not do something much worse than roll your eyes? Had you been behaving properly at table? Were you listening to your governess? Did you attend your lessons? Surely, you must have done something horrid to warrant such punishment as banishment to Rosings. You have my deepest sympathies.

My friend David is now fagging for Somerset, a friend of Digby's. I asked Digby (Reggie, that is) if he could help as poor David was run ragged with errands and chores. Somerset is a nice enough fellow, but dumb as a doorknob, or so Digby says. Now instead of running errands, David helps him with his lessons. I think it more like that David is doing his lessons than helping with them, but they both seem happy with the arrangement. David has a curious mind and is always eager to learn. I imagine when we reach Digby's year, it will be quite easy for him.

Richard is in trouble. Again. He played some sort of prank on one of his tutors, the details of which I have been kept ignorant, but he is to be punished severely, I believe. I wonder if Uncle will intervene? I imagine not. He is not the

intervening sort. Perhaps his punishment will not be so very bad.

I have had a letter from Nora. Are you writing to her from Kent? She tells me all is well there, and that little Georgiana is growing taller every day. She is running through the house now, blabbering a mixture of baby words and the names of family members she knows, then careening into furniture. I do not describe it well, but Nora said it is all very funny and that everyone is delighted with her.

Sometimes I wish I was still at Pemberley. I enjoy my lessons, and the other boys are decent enough, but it is not home.

What is your plan for smuggling out the kitten? Perhaps you could give it something to make it sleep and hide it in your basket in the carriage. You must ask the apothecary very carefully about the dosage, or you will kill it.

I still cannot believe Aunt Julia sent you to Kent. You must have done something very bad, indeed.

As you know, Mother is increasing again and I am worried about her, but I am not supposed to write about such things. Georgiana came through well enough, so everyone hopes she will be well, but I am concerned nevertheless. Do you know if your mother intends to journey to Pemberley? Will you go with her if she does? I have asked Nora for information, but she does not truly understand my concern. After all, she only witnessed Georgiana.

Your Sympathetic Cousin,

Fitz

Rosings Prison, Kent

29 November, 1797

Dear Fitz,

If I asked you to stage a rescue, would you? Lady Catherine is quite abominable, and Sir Lewis is a very strange man. I overheard the maids talking about him. Apparently he is giving one of them a cottage. She is quite a pretty thing, I suppose, and good at her job, but is a cottage not excessive? And each time he speaks to me, which is not very often, he asks me the oddest questions. Yesterday, he asked if I had been to Pemberley recently. I told him I had spent the summer there with you as I usually do, and he asked if we played much with the estate children and what sort of games we got up to. He asked if we still played with the steward's son, and I told him George had gone off to school, but we saw him on holidays, of course. Is that not odd?

I asked Molly, the girl who taught me to milk the goats, about it. She is two years older than I, and she says that rich gentlemen sometimes put pretty young women in cottages so they might visit them whenever they wish. She made a very strange face and used an odd tone, and I understood that it was not for social visits, but carnal ones. How disgusting! Can you imagine? Sir Lewis!

Though he is married to Lady Catherine, and that might drive anyone to strange behavior. I have been here less than a month and I already wish to never see her again. I cannot imagine how a husband might feel.

Anyhow, perhaps you could borrow a carriage and come rescue me? I would only need to be taken as far as London. I can stay at the house there. Mother has gone back to the manor, but Father is in town. I know he will not mind if I come to stay with him. He has always liked my company better than Mother has.

I know you know how to drive a phaeton. Is a coach so very different? Perhaps I should ask Reggie. He is older and then you would not get into trouble.

I had a letter from Mrs. Brown, the housekeeper in town. You remember her—she is the one who gave us the ginger biscuits when she found us sneaking into the larder. She says that Mother is going to the manor for a spell, then on to Pemberley to be with Lady Anne.

I know you are worried about your mother, and I understand perfectly why. But I do think everything will turn out well. I heard Mother and Father talking about her before I left for Kent. I wasn't going to tell you, but since you are worried, I shall. Mother said that the first babe Lady A. lost would have been perfectly well if she had not been breech. And little George likely had some sort of ailment when he was born. The doctor thought it was his heart, but it had nothing to do with your mother or the birth. And of course twins are

always difficult. I do not wish to be crass, though you know I often cannot help it, but Mother has every faith that all will be well, and you know she is very close to your mother.

I do not know if it will make you feel any better, but I will try to get to Pemberley to look after her if I can find a way out of this wretched place.

Your Desperate Cousin,

Marianne

Eton College, Eton

5 December, 1797

Marianne,

Please do not do anything rash. I have written to your father and told him how much I missed your company and he has agreed to escort us both to Pemberley for the festive season. I was going to travel on my own—my father's valet was coming to collect me—but if your father wishes to join your mother at Pemberley, this is a perfect solution. Your father has written to mine, as have I, and I imagine he also dispatched a letter to you. He will collect you at Rosings, then me from Eton, and we will be on our way north. Huzzah!

Your Victorious Cousin,

Fitzwilliam

Rosings Encampment, Kent

10 December, 1797

My dear Cousin!

You are the truest friend I have ever had! I had a letter from my father directly after yours. He will collect me from Rosings on the 14th, then we will arrive at Eton on the 15th and journey to Pemberley together. Huzzah!

Lady C is beside herself. She had thought I would stay until Twelfth Night at least. I think she is still smarting at not being invited to Pemberley for Lady Anne's lying in. Who would want such a person around at such a time? I am surprised my mother was invited, but Father says saying things like that is unkind and that Mother can be quite useful when the time calls for it.

Lady Catherine has been going on about schools again. She must know how I dislike it. She made us walk into the drawing room according to precedence. She became very angry with me when I said that if we were going by precedence, I should precede Anne since I am two months older and the daughter of an earl, while she is the daughter of a baronet, even if she is the daughter of the house. Lady C turned positively purple. I would have laughed if I hadn't thought she would hit me with her fan.

Do you know she wishes you and Anne to marry? I have never heard anything so outrageous! Firstly, you are much too young to be married. Father says a man should never marry before he is at least four or five and twenty and knows his own

mind. I asked him if I should not marry until I was five and twenty and he said it was different for girls, though he looked odd when I asked why. Lady C said that if I do not behave in a more ladylike fashion, no man will ever want to marry me. Good! I have no wish to marry.

She says proper ladies do not spend all day with horses or ride to hounds or shoot their father's guns. Really, Father only showed me how to shoot because I asked him to. It isn't my fault I was so good at it!

I cannot wait to see you and hear all about Eton and Richard's punishment and how ridiculous Alexander behaves away from home.

I've had a letter from Reggie. He says you are doing very well and that he hopes his little brother will adapt half so nicely. Wasn't that nice of him? I shall send this now so it arrives before I do.

Your Soon-to-be-Free Cousin,

Marianne

Oh, Lady C has some ridiculous notion that I am trying to steal you from Anne. Please tell her in no uncertain terms that you and I shall never marry, as that would be too much like marrying my own brother, and I have no intention of marrying anyhow. She will not listen to me, so I leave it to you!



The carriage bearing Lady Marianne, Fitzwilliam, and Marianne's father, Lord Livingstone, pulled into Pemberley late in the evening on the 18th of December. Fitzwilliam leapt out, eager to see his parents and Marianne would have followed if her father had not blocked her exit and stepped out first, then pointedly turned and offered his hand to assist her down. She rolled her eyes but accepted his offer, careful not to snag her skirt as she left the coach. She missed the smile tugging at her father's lips as she rushed past him and into the house.

"Fitz!" Marianne called as she sped through the grand entrance hall and up the stairs. She knew Pemberley as well as her own manor and made for the school room. Nora would be there and she would know what was happening.

"Marianne," cried Fitzwilliam as he came rushing back down the corridor, "where is everyone?"

"Is Nora not upstairs?"

"No."

Suddenly, they heard a tiny cry and stared at each other before racing off in the direction of the noise. They skidded to a stop in front of the open door to Lady Anne's sitting room, the one attached to her bedchamber.

"Fitzwilliam! Come, my darling. Meet your new brother."

"My brother?" Fitzwilliam whispered.

Marianne prodded him from behind and he stumbled into the room.

“When?” he managed to squeak out when he was standing before his mother where she sat on the sofa, holding a bundle of green blankets.

“Very early this morning. Your poor father nearly slept through the entire thing. Would you like to hold him?”

Fitzwilliam nodded mutely, and sat beside her, holding out his arms for his brother.

“Meet Nathaniel George Randall Darcy.” She placed the babe gently in his arms, smiling ethereally.

Fitzwilliam stared at his brother, in awe that he had a brother at all. “He is so small.”

“Thank heaven!” she said with a smile.

He looked at his mother and saw that she was still smiling. She could not seem to stop. Fitzwilliam shakily returned it.

“Are you well, Mother? Truly?”

She stroked his hair back from his forehead and looked at him tenderly. “Yes, dear boy, I am well. I hardly know when I have been better.”

He nodded briskly as he blinked back tears and swallowed the lump in his throat. He had been so very worried... He held his new brother close and stared into his tiny little face, the shock of it all leaving him dazed. He looked up when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Hello, Son.”

“Father!”

Lady Anne laughed. “You have become so formal since you’ve started school. Are we to always be Mother and Father now? No more Mama and Papa?”

He smiled at her teasing. She would not tease him if she were not truly well.

“He can be frightfully formal sometimes,” said Marianne.

Fitzwilliam scowled at her. He had forgotten she was there in the commotion. Lady Anne was embracing her and asking about their journey. Marianne was not nearly as fascinated by the baby as he was. She had two younger brothers and a little sister at home, after all. This was not so very new for her.

“Where is Georgiana?” he asked.

“I just left her with Nora and her nurse in the nursery. You may go up and greet them if you wish,” said his father.

“I will go up shortly. I’d like to stay with Mother for a little while, if I may.”

“Of course you may. Your mother is glad for your company, I’m sure.”

Lady Anne looked up from her conversation with Marianne and smiled at them—her husband and their two sons—the most important men in her life.

“Dearest, do you think we could commission a painting before Fitzwilliam must go back to Eton?”

“A painting?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t see why not. What has brought on this sudden decision?”

“Fitzwilliam is growing so quickly. If we wait until the summer, he will look like another person altogether. And Nora will be changing soon, and Georgiana is bigger every day.”

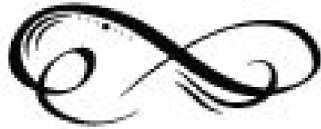
George smiled indulgently at her. “Of course, my dear. Whatever you wish. We may have another done in summer if you desire.”

She gave him a smile that made Fitzwilliam flush and Marianne squirm away uncomfortably.

“I am very happy to be married to you,” she said softly.

“And I to you.”

CHAPTER 27



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 16 November, 1811

Colonel Fitzwilliam was unable to speak with Darcy that day. After he spoke with Marianne, he sought Darcy out only to be told he was out riding with Bingley. They barely returned in time to dress for dinner, and afterward, the men remained with the ladies. After listening to Miss Bingley and Lady Anne play the pianoforte for nearly an hour, Darcy claimed he was tired and said goodnight early, though Colonel Fitzwilliam thought it likely he simply wanted to avoid Miss Bingley.

The following morning, Darcy was up and off on his horse before Colonel Fitzwilliam had even left his chamber. He sighed in frustration, then tucked into his breakfast. He would speak to his cousin soon enough.



Darcy slowed his horse as he approached the property line, breathing heavily from his run. He rubbed the horse's neck and

murmured to the gelding, then led him along the fence that bordered Longbourn's west side. He had been disappointed not to see Miss Elizabeth yesterday. He had been in the southernmost fields with Bingley, examining an empty cottage there and discussing the field's merits and drawbacks. Bingley was taking his consideration of Netherfield seriously, and Darcy would not want him to make such a large purchase without a realistic idea of the costs or work involved.

He had been aiding a friend, but he was sorry have missed Elizabeth all the same. Perhaps, if he was very lucky, he would see her on a morning ramble. She had mentioned that she often walked out in the mornings before breakfast. He knew she intended to return to Netherfield that afternoon, so perhaps she would not walk today. But maybe, just maybe...

He scanned the neighboring fields for a bonnet, then turned to look along the tree line and a path that wound its way along the fence. Was that movement? He lifted out of the saddle to see further. There! In the woods on the other side of the fence. It was a straw bonnet with a blue ribbon. It might belong to any young lady, but what other lady would be up this early and walking in Longbourn's wood?

He chastised himself a moment for his eagerness. He was not a green boy attracted to a lady for the first time. He was a grown man, the master of Pemberley. In fact, he probably should not encourage her. She was not of his circles, and he had heard that she had very little in the way of a dowry. Although, he did not need a dowry, not truly. Pemberley's coffers were full and the family did not live extravagantly.

Georgiana's dowry would not be withdrawn for a few years at least, and it would be even later before Nathaniel took possession of his estate or Luke of the small property their father had purchased for him. In the meantime, Darcy was reinvesting the income with great results. Abara's brother had advised him on several opportunities and he had yet to steer him wrong. A dowerless bride would hurt no one.

But her family. He shuddered thinking of Mrs. Bennet. She was entirely too crass and loud, though he could admit she had no malice in her. He did not enjoy her company, and he would not relish her as a houseguest for more than a fortnight, but she was no worse than his aunt, Lady Catherine. Mr. Bennet was quite a pleasant companion. He was an excellent chess player and did not constantly prattle on about nothing. He was too indolent for Darcy to fully approve of him, but he was not a bad man.

Could he consider Elizabeth seriously? Should he?

Oh sod it! he thought. A walk in the woods was hardly akin to declaring himself.

He led his horse along the fence till he was close enough to hail her. "Miss Elizabeth! Good morning."

She turned in surprise, then a wide smile spread across her face. "Mr. Darcy. Good morning!" She walked up to the fence and stopped, looking up at him on his horse. "And who is this?" She reached out her hand to the grey gelding and let him snuffle at her for a bit, then stroked his forehead gently. The

horse huffed out a breath of steamy air and lifted his head to meet her hand.

“He likes you,” said Darcy.

“I like him!” She smiled brightly and he could not stop his face from breaking into a grin. “Where are you two off to today?”

“Nowhere in particular. I have been riding the perimeter of the property to enjoy the morning. Would you care for company on your walk?”

“If the company is yours, I see no objection.”

He could not quite contain his satisfied smile and dismounted, tying his horse to the post and climbing over the fence.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened at the maneuver. She had thought Mr. Darcy too rigid to do such a thing, yet here he stood before her, offering his arm. She placed her hand in the crook of his elbow and pointed to the wooded path.

“Do you often walk these woods?”

“Yes, ever since I was a small child. I used to pretend there were fairies living in the hollows of the trees who only came out when we weren’t looking.”

“It sounds delightful.”

“What about you? Did you have woods near your home?”

“Yes. Pemberley has a thick wood I often played in as a child.”

“Alone?” she blurted before she could stop herself. She closed her eyes in mortification. It was none of her business why there were no children between him and Georgiana. It could have been mere chance, or worse, something tragic. Regardless, it was none of her affair.

He placed his free hand over hers and gave it a squeeze. She looked up in surprise and he smiled gently, which she took as forgiveness for her faux pas.

“I have a great many cousins. Richard, Colonel Fitzwilliam now, was often there with his brother and sometimes his younger sisters. Marianne was my most frequent playmate, though. Her mother and mine have always been close, and they spent a portion of every year at Pemberley.”

“She mentioned you were like a brother to her.”

“Yes, she is the sister of my heart, if not my blood. Pemberley feels as much like her childhood home as it does mine. She has had a regular chamber there for years.”

“It must be wonderful to have a cousin so close in age whom you get along so well with. My father had a younger brother who never had children, and his sister has three daughters, but they live in Cornwall and are much younger than myself.”

“But you have your sisters.”

“Yes, I do,” she said ruefully. “We do not always agree with one another, but I do love them all dearly.”

“Of course.”

They walked quietly for a minute.

“Pemberley,” Elizabeth said musingly. “I have been wondering about it since I first heard the name. It sounds familiar somehow.”

“Have you ever been to Derbyshire?”

“No, I have not, but my aunt speaks of it all the time. She hails from Derbyshire. Perhaps she has mentioned it.”

“That would not be unlikely. Pemberley is a large estate. Most in Derbyshire have heard of it. Where does your aunt hail from?”

“A little town called Lambton. Do you know it?”

He stopped and turned to face her, surprise in every feature. “Of course! It is but five miles from Pemberley. What is your aunt’s name? Would I know her?”

“I do not know if you would know her. She is a little older than you, I imagine, though not by much. She was the eldest daughter of the vicar, Mr. Abara.” She watched his reaction carefully. “I believe her brother is the vicar in a village nearby.”

“Madeline Abara!”

“Yes. Do you know her?”

“Know her? I grew up with her! My mother opened a school with Mr. Abara in ’92. They were very good friends. Madeline and her brother David were at Pemberley often. Marianne still writes to her, I believe.”

“How extraordinary! I cannot believe it has never come up in my conversations with Lady Marianne.”

“It is an unlikely connection I imagine. But I am somewhat surprised my mother does not know of your family. David Abara married her ward, Nora Mason. They live in Kympton. David is nearly my brother.”

Elizabeth shook her head in astonishment. “I cannot believe it. Do you know my uncle Mr. Gardiner?”

“I have met him once, I believe, many years ago. Marianne and I called on Madeline shortly after she was married. I have not seen her since, but I hear of her through Nora. I suppose I should call her Mrs. Gardiner, but she has been Madeline to me for so long it will take some getting used to.”

“Yes, of course. It took me ages to stop calling the Lucas boys by their given names, and even longer for them to stop calling me Lizzy.”

“Mr. Gardiner is your mother’s relation?”

“Yes, he is my mother’s younger brother. Two more different people have never come from the same family.”

He did not voice agreement, but he smiled guiltily and she laughed.

“So my uncle is married to the sister of your almost brother by marriage. Does that make us cousins, do you think?”

He looked at her in surprise and she smiled impishly, perhaps enjoying teasing him a little too much.

He stared into her dancing eyes for a long moment before saying, "I would not oppose the connection."

She swallowed, unsure of why she suddenly felt very aware of his arm pressing into her side, or the smell of his soap mixed with leather.

They walked on quietly for several minutes, both uncommonly aware of how close the other was standing. He paid too much attention to her hand on his arm, wishing his coat was thinner so he could feel her better, and wondering why bonnets had to do such a good job of blocking one's view of their wearer.

After some time, he said, "Will you be coming to Netherfield today?"

"I had planned to, yes."

"May I send a carriage for you? It is getting colder."

She looked at him hesitantly, then smiled shyly. "That would be lovely, thank you."



"Have you seen Fitz?" asked Marianne when she popped her head into Richard's room.

"No, he went for an early ride. Why?"

She rolled her eyes. "You know why! We must ascertain his intentions towards Miss Elizabeth!"

"I thought I was doing that?"

“You? No. You would muck it up horribly. Besides, you are an interested party. You cannot be objective.”

He scoffed. “I can be objective.”

“When it comes to ladies? I think not. Remember Maria Toppington?”

He flushed.

“Or Lavinia Edgeworth?”

“Very well, I concede I have not always been objective, but that does not mean I am incapable.”

“We shall do it together.”

“Today?”

“Yes! Before Miss Elizabeth comes to read to Luke. You cannot continue flirting with her as you did if you do not mean it, and you cannot mean it if Fitz truly likes her.”

“Why can I not mean it? He may like her, but that does not mean he will do anything about it. And who knows? She may prefer me. Should the lady not have a say in the matter?”

Marianne sighed. “Of course she should, as you well know. But I doubt your current behavior is endearing you to her. She seemed more confused than anything, and she does not strike me as the type to wish for men to fight over her. She is more likely to find it distressing and avoid you both for fear of coming between you.”

He sighed and looked away.

“More importantly, Fitz has known her longer, and unlike you, he does not have his head turned often. If he truly likes her, regardless of his current plans, you owe it to him as your cousin to let it take its course. I think they would do quite well together.”

“A fortnight ago you thought she would be perfect for me!”

“Yes, but that was because I had not considered Fitz at all. He so seldom shows interest in any woman! But now that he has, I see what a good match they could make. Her world would be broadened by his resources and generosity, her mind challenged by his greater information, and her importance increased through his position in life.”

“I have an excellent position! I am the son of an earl, have you forgot? And my mind is well-formed, thank you.”

“He would be made lighter by her liveliness and more talkative by her wit. He would be much more comfortable at parties with her by his side.”

Richard scoffed.

“And most importantly, he would love her passionately,” she said firmly. Richard’s eyes shot up to hers. “And a woman like Miss Elizabeth would appreciate that very much, not to mention what it would do for Fitz to have someone to love in such a way.”

Richard sighed in defeat. “Very well, I relinquish the battlefield.”

She nodded in acknowledgement.

“But I still maintain that we would have done very well with each other.”

“My dear Richie, you would do well with almost any woman.” She squeezed his arm and smiled softly. “Your warmth makes the shyest of ladies feel comfortable, your gregariousness appeals to those who are lively, and your mind is sharp enough to keep the smartest bluestocking on her toes.” She kissed his cheek. “You shall have no trouble at all finding a wife you will get on splendidly with.”

He smiled at her wryly. “Thank you, Marianne.”



“Fitz!” Marianne barged into her cousin’s room, Richard hot on her heels. “We must speak with you.”

Darcy looked up in surprise at the presence of his cousins in his room. He looked at Marianne with a raised brow and she sighed dramatically and returned his stare. Richard looked between the two of them and decided to stop the game before it continued any further.

“Darcy, we must know. What are your intentions towards Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

Darcy started. “What?”

“Miss Elizabeth,” said Marianne. “We know you like her. We wish to know what you are going to do about it.”

“I, well, I had not decided exactly,” he spluttered.

“You should know that Richard is interested in courting her if you are not.”

“Marianne!” cried Richard. “You said you wouldn’t say anything.”

“He needs a push, clearly.”

“Wait!” cried Darcy. “Are you telling me that Richard would like to court Miss Elizabeth, but he is quitting the field because of me?”

“Yes,” said Richard.

“No!” said Marianne at the same time. Richard glared at her. Marianne continued, “You cannot both pursue her. You will scare the poor girl off and leave her thinking the entire family is mad.”

Richard looked at his cousin squarely. “What do you intend to do, Darcy?”

Darcy opened and closed his mouth a few times, his cousins staring at him. “I had thought I would get to know her better and go from there. I do not wish to rush. We may not suit.”

“Of course you will suit!” cried Marianne, throwing her hands in the air.

Richard rolled his eyes. “Let the man take his time, Marianne. This is not the sort of decision that should be rushed.”

Marianne huffed but held her tongue, looking to Darcy for answers.

Darcy looked back at her somewhat defiantly, their old childhood rivalries replaying themselves. “I shall endeavor to spend more time with Miss Elizabeth in order to make my decision more swiftly. Happy?”

“Not entirely, but it will have to do.”

“Marianne! What else do you want from the man?” asked Richard.

“Decisiveness? Initiative? Passion?”

“Enough!” cried Darcy. “Marianne, I appreciate that you wish to see Miss Elizabeth well settled and likely me as well, but I will do this in my own time.”

She nodded with a mumbled, “Very well.”

“And I would appreciate it if you,” he looked directly at Colonel Fitzwilliam, “could keep your charm away from Miss Elizabeth, at least for the time being.”

“Of course. But do not dawdle, Fitz. Ladies like that do not stay available for long.”

Darcy sighed. “I do not intend to.” And with that, he stalked out of the room, leaving his cousins to stare after him.

“Well, I think that went rather well.”

“Oh, shut up, Richie!”

CHAPTER 28



*L*ambton, Derbyshire, January 1798

Samuel Wickham stood in the parlor of Rachel's little cottage, his hat in his hand and his heart in his eyes. "It's you, Rachel. It's always been you."

"I am so sorry, Samuel. I cannot marry you." A single tear tracked down her cheek and he watched its progress slowly, wondering if he had heard her correctly.

"Is it because of Rebecca? Because you were cousins?"

"No, it isn't."

"Becky's been gone nearly two years now. Why can't we be happy together?" Wickham looked desperately at Rachel. "Have you not enjoyed my company this last year? Did you not realize I was courting you?"

She looked down and bunched her skirt in her hand. "I did realize, and I enjoyed your company very much. I always have. You know that."

He looked at her with shame and sympathy and regret in his eyes, each feeling amplifying the others. He remembered how

hurt she had been when he had married Rebecca, how she couldn't even look at him for over a year. He wanted to apologize, to release all his guilty feelings, but he had a horrible feeling it would make things worse rather than better.

She shook her head sadly. "I'm not the same girl I was back then. I'm a grown woman now. With a woman's needs and a woman's responsibilities. I cannot just pack up my entire life and move to Pemberley."

Time seemed to slow as understanding dawned on him. Their chance had passed and she had moved on. She had built a life without him, a good life, a life to be proud of. She no longer needed him.

"I see."

"Samuel, you will always have a place in my heart. I will always be your friend. But I cannot leave the children. I am the only mother they have known. If we married, I would be expected to give up the orphanage and move to Pemberley with you. I would have to leave my cottage and my babies." She shook her head as silent tears coursed down her cheeks. "I'm afraid the most I can offer you is friendship." She gave him a sad smile. "I am a very good friend, you know."

He stared at her silently, wondering how he could feel rejected and loved all at once. "Very well. You will be my dearest friend, Rachel Connelly," he said with the crooked smile she'd always loved.

"I thought George Darcy was your dearest friend?"

“He is my closest friend, and my oldest, but you,” he reached out and tucked a bright red ringlet behind her ear, “you are my *dearest* friend. The dearest person in the world to me.”

She gave him a watery smile and he leaned forward and kissed her cheek, then walked quietly out the door of her cottage.

Six months later

“Whatever have you done to Mr. Wickham?” asked Lady Anne. She poured tea into delicate china cups and passed one to Rachel.

“Nothing, my lady. What makes you think I have done anything to him?”

Lady Anne gave her an eloquent expression. “He’s been moping around here for months after you rejected him, and he looks at you with such desperate, cow-like eyes. It is difficult to watch.”

Rachel choked on her tea. “What? He told you I rejected him?”

Lady Anne smiled slyly. “No, you just did. But I suspected as much. He courted you for a year, and was happy as a lark, then in one day, he became sullen and dull.”

“Has his work suffered?”

“No, I do not believe so. Mr. Darcy has said nothing of it to me if it has. But he was so content when he was courting you.

I had never seen him that way. My husband tells me it was more like he was as a youth. Mr. Wickham has been good to the Darcy family. I would like him to be happy. I would also like you to be happy.” She shot Rachel a look over her teacup. “So why did you reject him? Do you not esteem him? Is there someone else?”

Rachel flushed and fiddled with the tassel on the pillow beside her. “No, there is no one else. I esteem him very much. I admire him greatly, actually.”

“And he proposed?”

“Yes.”

“And you rejected him.”

“Yes.”

“May I ask why?” she asked gently. “I do not mean to pry, Miss Connelly, but we are friends, you and I, at least I feel we are friends, and I would like to help if I may.”

Rachel laughed softly and shook her head. “Yes, my lady, we are friends, as much as the daughter of a bookseller and the daughter of an earl *can* be friends. As for my rejecting Samuel’s offer, it is simple, really. I could not leave the children. And Samuel would not be willing to live at the orphanage.”

“Did you ask him?”

“No! Of course not.”

“Why ‘of course?’ Men move to their wives’ estates all the time.”

“Estates, yes. Orphanages where their wives are employed to look after twenty-seven children, no.”

Lady Anne sighed. “I take your point. I thought you may have expected us to say you cannot run the orphanage as a married woman. I wanted to tell you that Mr. Abara and I have discussed it before—when we were looking for candidates and when we first hired you. We were always willing to consider a married woman for the position. If you ever wished to leave, it would be your choice, not ours.”

“That is kind of you, Lady Anne. Thank you.”

“But you still will not reconsider?”

Rachel looked thoughtful for a moment. “I cannot see Samuel giving up his house here and moving into Lambton with me. And does he not need to be on Pemberley lands to do his work?”

Lady Anne looked away, an idea forming. “I imagine being on the property certainly helps, though I do not know if my husband would insist on it. But this conversation has given me an idea. Why not keep both houses?”

“Pardon?”

“You can keep the cottage at the orphanage and continue to be the mistress there. Mr. Wickham can keep the steward’s cottage here at Pemberley. You can marry and sometimes live

together and sometimes not. The more I think of it, the more I think it may be an ideal situation.”

“I do not understand.”

“Many families have more than one home—it is not so unusual. And cost is not an issue as both cottages come with the jobs. When it comes time for one of you to retire, you can live together if you wish, but in the meantime, you can come and go between your homes.”

Rachel’s thoughts were spinning. Could they do it? Would it work? “Would that not look odd? I fear there would be talk,” she said hesitantly.

“There will be talk regardless. I’m certain there is *already* talk of how you turned down a perfectly eligible man out of guilt for your cousin. We both know that is not your reason, but I also know that gossip seldom cares for facts.” She leaned forward and placed a hand on Rachel’s knee, meeting her eyes with an earnest expression. “Miss Connelly, love is a rare and precious gift. You two have been given a second chance at it. Do not squander it.”

Rachel took a deep breath and nodded her head, wondering if she was mad enough to consider this plan.



Samuel picked her up Sunday afternoon in the curricule as he often did. They drove away from the village and into the

narrow country lanes, content to enjoy each other's company and the summer weather.

"I have a proposition for you," said Rachel.

"Oh? What is it?"

"Do you still want to marry me?"

Samuel looked at her sharply and inadvertently pulled on the reins. "Yes. Have you reconsidered?"

"Not so much my desire, but perhaps my position."

"I do not follow."

"Samuel, would you consider marrying but living separately?"

"What?"

"You could keep your cottage at Pemberley, and I would keep mine at the orphanage. Nights you are not out late, you can join me at my home. We could eat meals together whenever we wish, and we would not have to be concerned about appearances if we were wed. We could come and go as we pleased."

He looked at her in such undiluted shock that she could not help but laugh a little.

"Is it truly such an odd idea? Many couples live apart some of the time. We would hardly be the first. That is what Lady Anne says."

"Lady Anne?"

"Yes, she suggested it."

He continued to gape at her like a trout, his eyes blinking slowly open and closed but not really seeing anything.

“You wish to be married to me?” he finally asked.

“Yes.”

“But we would not live together.”

“Not live together *all the time*. We would be together plenty.”

“And Lady Anne somehow thinks this is a good solution?” he asked incredulously.

Rachel stiffened. “Well if you do not wish to, no one is forcing you!” She straightened her shoulders and wrapped her shawl tighter about her. “I should like to go home now, please.”

It took Samuel a moment to realize she was upset and why. He grabbed her hand from her lap and squeezed it between both of his. “Rachel, that is not what I meant. Forgive me. I was merely surprised, that is all.”

She peeked at him from the side of her eye, not willing to turn and face him. “What did you mean?”

“I was surprised Lady Anne suggested such a thing, or really anything, for that matter. I did not know you two were such good friends, or that she even knew about us.”

“We have tea once a month and discuss the orphanage, you know that. We were bound to form some sort of friendship.”

“Of course.”

“And she is very fond of you.”

“Is she?”

“Did you not know it?”

He shrugged. “I know I was not always her favorite person. A steward being friends with the lord of the manor did not sit so well with her at first. She eventually warmed to me, but I would not have called her ‘fond.’”

“Well, she is, and she would like to see us both happy, which is why she said what she said.”

He nodded. “Would we have a schedule? Sundays at Pemberley, Mondays and Tuesdays in the village?”

“I do not know, we would have to discuss it. But I would be willing to try,” she said softly.

He looked at her with bright eyes filled with hope, but she stopped him before he could speak.

“I must have your word though: you will not insist I quit the orphanage. Not for any reason. If I leave one day, it will be my decision, not yours. Can I have your word on that?”

He pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed it fervently. “Yes, you have my word. I will not insist you leave your children. I will not coerce you, or manipulate you, or try to convince you in any way. Does that suffice?”

She smiled brilliantly. “Yes, it does.”

He kissed her hand again. “When may we wed?”

He could barely hear her answer through her peals of laughter.



The banns were read, the guests invited, and the dress delivered. Rachel looked prettier than anyone ever remembered seeing her. Lady Anne agreed to be her witness and insisted on throwing the wedding breakfast at Pemberley. George Darcy stood up with Samuel, as expected, and as a wedding gift, he sent the newlywed couple to the seaside for a fortnight on a wedding tour.

Rachel kissed the children goodbye with a wide smile and tears in her eyes. The teacher for the school would manage them in her stead, along with a handful of servants sent over from Pemberley. Rachel could not believe so much had been done for her benefit. Altogether, it had been a perfect day, with one exception.

Young George Wickham was not present. He had been invited to go to Scotland with the family of one of his school friends and Samuel had agreed to it and seen him off before he knew there would be a wedding in his near future. The happy couple had not wanted to wait until the end of summer when George would return. It would be a terrible time for a wedding trip, for Samuel would be needed to prepare for the harvest, and Rachel would assist with organizing the school for another term.

Young George understood their reasons and did not blame them at all. There would be no point in them waiting for him to come home for only a few days during which everyone would be busy and distracted and he would be off to school again shortly after. He sent them as eloquent a congratulation letter as any twelve-year-old boy could be expected to do, and sincerely wished them well. Rachel read the letter with hopeful satisfaction. Perhaps the child of her heart would finally be her own.



Lady Anne stood at the back of Pemberley's ballroom, watching the wedding breakfast with contentment.

"You look rather satisfied with yourself," came George's voice near her ear.

"And why should I not be?" she asked with a playful smile. "Two worthy people were brought together today, and I had a hand in it. I consider it one of my finer accomplishments."

"I tip my hat to you, my lady," he said with a bow.

Anne laughed and leaned against him. He had a habit of standing slightly behind her so he could better whisper in her ear and sneak in a quick embrace when no one was looking. The party was well fed and entertained, and no one was paying the least bit of attention to them, so he wrapped his arms around her middle and felt her sigh as she pressed into him.

"Look at her," she said softly.

“Who? The new Mrs. Wickham?”

“Yes. Have you ever seen her more lovely? She is positively glowing.”

“She certainly looks very happy. Samuel looks like the cat who got the cream.”

She laughed gently. “As he should. He has waited a long time for her. They have earned their happiness.”

He kissed her hair. “That they have.”

“George,” she said hesitantly, “you never told me what happened with Rebecca all those years ago. Why did he marry her? It was clear there was no love lost between them. He did not even appear to like her. And she did not like her own child, let alone her husband. Was his head turned by a pretty face?”

George sighed. “It is not a pleasant story, but I will tell you if you truly wish to know.”

“I think I do.”

“Very well. It was the summer after Fitzwilliam was born...”

Lambton, Derbyshire, Summer 1784

Samuel filled up the wheelbarrow and pushed it into the lane behind the bookshop. It would be a struggle to carry the wood up the stairs for Rachel’s grandmother, but it would be even harder for the elderly women to do it. He knew Rebecca Appleby would never think of dirtying her hands with something as low as carrying firewood. Rachel normally took

care of it, but with her gone, and the nights as chilly as they had been, he knew her grandmother would have need of it. They had little in the way of servants; he thought Rachel had mentioned a chore woman or perhaps a maid-of-all-work, but he had never seen anyone about and the wood pile at the top of the stairs near the door was perilously low.

It took him several trips, and his hip and leg were smarting by the end of it, but he eventually had the wood pile large enough to last until Rachel returned from her trip. He had something very particular he wished to ask her when he next saw her. They would need to wait until his year of training was over, but he hoped she would say yes to his proposals. Though he would have to be honest with her about his injuries first. She may not wish to gamble on a man like him. She seemed born to be a mother—she was so very good with children, and the fact that he would not be able to give them to her made his heart ache, but he was not willing to give her up without her express refusal. If she thought he was worth taking without the promise of little ones, who was he to argue with her?

The last piece of wood was set on top of the stack when the door flew open.

“Mr. Wickham!” cried Rebecca.

He tipped his hat. “Good day, Miss Appleby.”

“Have you brought all that wood for us?” she asked coquettishly. She pressed her arms together in front of her to push her bosom upward and her eyelashes were doing an odd fluttering motion.

“Yes, I wanted your aunt and grandmother to be comfortable. I must be getting back.” He tipped his hat again and made for the stairs.

“I hope I’ll see you again soon, Mr. Wickham.”

He smiled awkwardly over his shoulder but did not respond.



Two days later, Samuel was cleaning out the stalls in the stable behind his brothers’ shop. He would not live at Pemberley until the current steward retired and he took on the job permanently. In the meantime, he was still assisting his brothers as he could. He was not one to live with his family and refuse to earn his keep.

He had just finished the last stall, wiped his face and hands, and was sitting down to scrape his boots when he heard someone coming. Thinking it was his younger sister, he called, “Be a love and bring me a drink, Millie.”

“I have just the thing.”

His head shot up at the sound of Rebecca Appleby’s voice. “What are you doing here, Miss Appleby?”

“I’ve brought you dinner,” she said in a lilting voice. She sat on the bench next to him, entirely too close for his comfort, and passed him a bottle of ale. “Here you are. This should set you to rights.”

He looked at her suspiciously, but took the ale and drank, “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Before he could stop her, she had unpacked bread and cheese and a small portion of ham. She arranged it prettily on the battered plate she had produced from her basket and held it out to him. He took it automatically. “Is there somewhere more comfortable where we might sit? Perhaps in the hayloft?”

She stood and made her way over to the small set of stairs that led the way to the loft above. “I used to play in my father’s hayloft when I was a little girl,” she said as she made her way up the steps. “My brother and I would sit in the hay for hours, sometimes until we fell asleep. It is one of my fondest childhood memories. You remind me of him a little,” she said with a disarming smile as she peeked down from hayloft to where he stood below.

He felt relief at thinking she saw him in a brotherly fashion and followed her up the steps, thinking he would eat as quickly as he could and end this encounter before they could be discovered. Ham was costly and he could not ignore her offering, regardless of how odd it all was. He knew not what she wanted, but he would not find out standing below like a dolt. Perhaps she was in trouble of some sort. Mayhap she needed advice. Rachel had told him Rebecca was considering going to Liverpool to stay with her mother’s sister. Could it have aught to do with that?

He settled on the opposite side of the hayloft from her and began to eat. The food was good, and he was hungrier than he

had realized. She chattered on, telling him about her aunt's home in Liverpool and how she ran a millinery shop with her husband. They were willing to take Rebecca on if she would help out in the shop. There was much to do there, and she would have greater marital prospects as there were so many more men to choose from.

He nodded along, wondering why she was discussing this with him, of all people, and then she said she felt just like she was talking to Johnny, her long dead brother. He had died from the same illness that had taken her parents only a week before him. Of the four of them, she was the only one to survive. She looked sad and forlorn and he expressed his sympathy for her loss.

She talked and talked, and Samuel found himself feeling more and more drowsy. He wanted to go to bed, to sleep, for just a little while, just until this exhaustion had passed. He felt his eyes drooping closed, but Rebecca seemed not to notice his inattention. Everything felt a little hazy, and the room began to tilt. He wondered at it until he realized he had lain down on the hay. His plate made a sound as it clattered to the floor, but it sounded far away to him, as if it were across the street. Rebecca continued to talk as if he were not suddenly lying down in the middle of a conversation. Thinking he must not actually be lying down if she did not notice it, or perhaps that this was all a dream, he closed his eyes and drifted off.



He awoke with a start several hours later, the night dark and the moon high in the sky.

“I thought you’d never wake.”

Whose voice was that? He felt something touching his head and turned only to realize his head was in Rebecca Appleby’s lap. He leapt up.

“What are you doing here? What is happening?” he could hear how slurred his own voice sounded. Was he in his cups? He did not remember drinking anything but ale.

“You asked me not to go, silly! Do you not remember?” she said innocently, a sweet smile on her face.

“I do not.”

“You fell asleep, and when I tried to wake you—which was no easy task, I might add—you pulled me to you and asked me not to go.” She blushed and looked down, seeming suddenly shy. “You kissed me.”

“What?”

“I liked it.” She glanced up at him and back to her feet, her cheeks a bright red.

What was she talking of? Had he kissed her? Why would he do such a thing? What were they even doing there? He remembered cleaning out the stalls, then wishing his sister would bring him a drink of water. He remembered nothing after that.

He looked to Rebecca, hoping for answers, and his eyes widened. Her skirt was rucked up over her knees and her dress was disheveled, as was her hair. She was busily relacing the top of her gown, which by the looks of it, had been pulled down in haste. A growing sense of alarm filled him.

“Miss Appleby,” he stuttered her name, unable to ask what he so desperately needed to know.

“We can read the banns this Sunday. Grandmother will be so happy. Though not as happy as I am.”

There was that damn blush again. Why would she not look up? He needed to see her eyes, to see if there was truth in them.

“Banns?”

“Of course. What if there is a babe on the way?” she said sweetly, her hand to her stomach. “We wouldn’t want to cause *too* big of a scandal.”

His eyes widened in horror, and he searched about him fruitlessly for some way out of this. Then Rebecca stood and to his mortification, there was a spot of bright red blood on the hay where she had been sitting. Dear God! Had he taken her virtue and not even remembered it? He smelled of ale and something he couldn’t name, but he did not even remember imbibing. What had happened?



“No!” cried Lady Anne, shocked at her husband’s recitation.
“Did she drug him?”

“He told me he confronted her with it later and she admitted to it all being a fabrication. She put her grandmother’s sleeping powders in his ale, then cut herself for the blood and disarranged her hair and clothes. Samuel did aught but sleep in the hay near her.”

Anne gasped and pressed her hand to her heart. “Poor Mr. Wickham! And poor Miss Connelly! What a vicious thing to do! To everyone! Why did she do it? Was she increasing?” It would not be sufficient excuse for stealing her cousin’s beau, but it would be *some* explanation for the other woman’s actions.

“No, she was not. As I understand it, Miss Appleby was a cruel woman who enjoyed hurting others when she could. She did not even have a brother. It was lies start to finish. She despised her cousin, though why I cannot fathom, and she was angry at Wickham for not preferring her over Miss Connelly. His intimacy with Pemberley was also something she coveted.”

“*That* I knew,” agreed Anne tartly. “She made her wishes for grandeur very well known.” She took a deep breath and looked heavenward, wishing she could go back in time and give Rebecca the set down she deserved.

“I am glad Samuel is finally happy. He deserves it.”

“Yes, he does. He would have been within his rights to refuse to marry her. Though I doubt he would have been able

to prove she did anything wrong. And he must have known it would have put paid to any intentions he had with Miss Connelly.”

“Yes, regardless of the outcome, Miss Appleby was quite sure of a victory.”

Anne shook her head at the other woman’s duplicity. For so much evil to be contained in one person... It was something she had never thought she would encounter. She took another deep breath. “Well, we are here now. Miss Connelly and Wickham are finally together, and Miss Appleby is long gone, thankfully. We must be grateful for the good that has finally come about. Obsessing about the past will not change it.”

“Very wise, my dear.” He bowed and held his hand out to her. “May I have your hand for the next, my lady?”

She belatedly realized that while they had been talking, the assembled guests, mostly tenants and local villagers, had begun to dance. “It would be my pleasure, Mr. Darcy.”

CHAPTER 29



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 16 November, 1811

Caroline Bingley was not pleased. She had been an exemplary hostess, agreeing to allow Darcy's entire family to stay at Netherfield, and yet, she had come no closer to an understanding with the gentleman than she had been before they came to Hertfordshire. She had thought that with the intimacy of sharing a residence and his opportunity to see her gracious hosting skills, an engagement was only a matter of time.

But here she was, six weeks after his arrival, and still annoyingly unattached. He was always so busy with his relations. She did not know why he liked Lady Marianne so much. She was frightfully direct, and she never wore lace, not even as a trim, and her gowns were horribly plain. It was a wonder she was not mistaken for a lady's companion! And yet everyone seemed to dote on her.

Each time Caroline tried to speak to Georgiana or ask her questions about her brother, Lady Anne interrupted and redirected the conversation. She usually sent Georgiana off to

check on the baby after only a few minutes. Did they not employ a nurse? Surely babies did not need to be checked on so very often!

Lady Anne had been all that was lovely. Her gowns were perfection, styled to suit her quite elegantly, and her manners were impeccable. Caroline had finally admitted to herself—she would never dare to say it aloud—that some of her gowns were perhaps a bit overworked. She thought often of what Lady Anne had said. The gown should draw attention to her beauty, not only itself.

Caroline had gone through her wardrobe on a mission. She held every gown to her face and was ruthless about which colors did and did not flatter her. After sending three gowns to her sister Louisa, she had her maid remove the trim from several more.

Following Lady Anne's lead, she was more circumspect in her speech, but she still thought Meryton was a drab little place where no one of quality would ever wish to stop for more than an hour to change the horses, and she could not understand her brother's delight with the place. She thought Sir William a pompous windbag, Miss Lucas a spinster who should become a governess and spare everyone her unpleasant presence, and Mrs. Phillips a positively ghastly woman. The Gouldings always smelled of horses, even the ladies, and Mrs. Long must be a hundred years old if she was a day.

The Bennet family was obnoxious down to the very last member. Jane Bennet was sweet but overly so, Elizabeth

Bennet thought her wit more interesting than it was, Mary Bennet could ward off evil spirits with her singing, Kitty Bennet was utterly forgettable, and Lydia Bennet was wild and boorish. Their mother was a cautionary tale and Mr. Bennet was the picture of paternal neglect.

She thought all of these things, of course, but thanks to Lady Anne's example, she never *said* them.

But what had her superior behavior gotten her? Nothing! Even though the Darcys would be staying longer than planned due to Luke's broken leg, it would do her no good if she did not actually see them outside of dinner.

She would have to think of another way to ingratiate herself to Mr. Darcy.

That was it! Luke Darcy! The one member of the family she had not tried to befriend. He was trapped in his room all day, or on the chaise in that plain little parlor at the back of the house. She would entertain him. She could play for him if he wished to sit in the music room, or if the doors were left open, he might hear her from the instrument in the drawing room. She could read to him—all the Darcys seemed to be book mad, though she could hardly understand why.

With newfound purpose, she hurried to the library to select a book for the boy.



Darcy waited for Miss Elizabeth in the room nearest the entrance hall, trying to look as if he was not waiting for her. His mother had given him a series of eloquent looks, and as per usual, he knew she knew what he was doing, but she was keeping her word and not saying anything to him about marriageable ladies. He knew she would not keep silent forever. Eventually, and he thought it would be rather sooner than later, she would send for him and demand to know what his intentions were, but she would do it in such a way that it felt like sharing a confidence instead of being force-marched into a confession.

Finally, after what felt an hour but was less than twenty minutes, Miss Elizabeth arrived in his carriage. He greeted her near the door and led her to his brother, all gallantry and private smiles. She blushed when he offered his arm and he thought he could become accustomed to the sight rather easily.

Darcy led her to the sitting room that Luke favored near the back of the house and stopped so suddenly Elizabeth was jolted back. Caroline Bingley was perched on a chair next to Luke's chaise, sitting so close to the edge she was nearly falling off it. She held out a picture book before him, reading the story with great exaggeration and voices for the characters, which to Darcy's ear, sounded like a rabbit and a bird of some kind.

Luke's face was the image of longsuffering patience. Darcy knew he was too old for such stories, but Luke would have been too polite to tell Miss Bingley so when she had gone out of her way to entertain him.

Stifling a laugh, Darcy cleared his throat. “Miss Bingley, I did not know you intended to read to Luke today.”

“Oh, well, it must be lonely sitting in here all on his own.” Miss Bingley glanced uncertainly from Darcy to Luke and back again. “I thought he might like a little entertainment. I offered to play for him, but he said he preferred to read.”

Luke covered a snicker with a cough. He had visitors so often a few minutes alone was a precious commodity.

Darcy saw Luke roll his eyes behind Miss Bingley’s back and reminded himself to scold Luke for his rudeness later. It would have been clear to others that Luke’s refusal had been a request to be left alone, but Miss Bingley refused to be daunted.

“That was very kind of you, Miss Bingley. We shall attend my mother while you finish your story,” said Mr. Darcy smoothly.

He turned and left with Miss Elizabeth on his arm before Miss Bingley could protest or Luke’s glares could be seen by their intended recipient, though Miss Elizabeth did give him a conspiratorial wink as she was pulled away.

Caroline Bingley was not pleased that her attempt to attach Mr. Darcy had thrown him into company with Elizabeth Bennet, but she was well and truly cornered. She frowned at their retreating backs and turned back to Luke with a brittle smile.

“Shall we continue?” She held up the book and read, “Tippy the bird was so very tired of flying...”

Luke pasted a smile on his face and sighed inwardly.



“Miss Elizabeth! How nice to see you. How is your family?”

“All well, my lady. Mother sends her regards and wishes to know if you would like to come for tea tomorrow if you are able to leave your youngest son.”

“I would love to! Tell your mother I accept.” Lady Anne gestured to the seat nearest hers and settled in, Darcy sitting across from her. “My son tells me you know young Madeline.”

Elizabeth smiled brightly. “Yes, only I know her as my Aunt Gardiner. I was so surprised to hear she was known to you.”

“Oh, yes. I have known her since she was but four years old when her father received the living in Lambton. He was an excellent vicar.”

“Aunt Gardiner always speaks highly of him.”

“Her brother David is married to my ward, Nora. Did my son tell you?”

“Yes,” she said with a smile in Mr. Darcy’s direction. “We have determined that we are cousins in a roundabout sort of way.”

Darcy smiled back at her as Lady Anne watched them carefully. “Yes, we shall have to have you all to Pemberley. I

shall write Mrs. Gardiner and tell her she simply must come for a visit. She has not been back to Lambton since her father died seven years ago.”

“Yes, she has told me how much she misses it. I’m afraid my uncle’s business and three small children have kept her in London.”

“Well, now that the youngest is no longer a babe in arms, perhaps she will be willing to make the journey.”

“Let us hope, my lady.” She sipped her tea graciously, wondering why Mr. Darcy was not speaking at all. He talked well enough when they were alone. Why be silent with his own mother present?

Suddenly, Elizabeth had a dreadful thought. After their encounter that morning, she was sure Mr. Darcy was attracted to her and romantically inclined her way. If he was not, he was behaving very oddly. Yet he was so silent in front of his relations. And she remembered how he had not joined Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lady Marianne when she was reading to Luke the day before. Could he have no serious intentions towards her? Was he merely enjoying a little female company while he was in the country? Or did he wish to be serious about her but thought his mother would disapprove?

“Miss Elizabeth?” said Lady Anne with the air of someone who had repeated herself.

“Forgive me, my mind wandered.”

Lady Anne smiled gently. “I was only asking what book you are currently reading to my son Luke.”

“Oh! I had thought we would begin Robinson Crusoe now that we have finished the Shakespeare. Lady Marianne said someone read it to him long ago, but I thought it likely he did not remember it very well, or if he did, a familiar story might be of comfort.”

“I think it a splendid idea.”

They heard footsteps in the hall beyond the room and Colonel Fitzwilliam came in.

“Ah, Miss Elizabeth! Just the lady I was looking for. Luke has been asking for you. Might I pull you away from my aunt to read to him?”

“Of course!” She followed him out of the room with a nervous look over her shoulder at Lady Anne and the silent Mr. Darcy.



Lady Anne poured tea for her son and then herself, arranging a few biscuits on a plate and handing it to the man who stood a head above her, but would always feel like her little boy.

They nibbled on their biscuits and drank silently for a few minutes until Lady Anne had had enough and leveled her most maternal stare at her eldest son.

“Fitzwilliam, what are you doing?”

“I thought I was drinking tea with my mother.”

She pursed her lips. “You know very well what I mean. What are your intentions towards Miss Elizabeth?”

“I like her.”

“As do I, which is why I do not wish you to allow her to hope for something that cannot be.”

“Do you find her unsuitable?”

“In some ways, yes. She would be an admirable mistress of Pemberley and would enjoy life in the country, as you do, and Georgiana and Luke both like her immensely. But in Town, I do not think she would fare as well. She is unpolished and unknown. Such a combination can be deadly, and I have no wish to throw her into a nest of vipers.”

“I have thought the same,” he said thoughtfully.

“So what do you intend to do?”

“What do you wish me to do?”

She looked towards the windows, then finally back at her son. “I wish many things. It would be wonderful if you married a daughter of a family known to me, someone who is familiar with our circles and the life we lead. She would have an easier time in society and face far less censure. Though the argument could be made that we spend very little time in Town and that I do not truly care for the opinions of society at large. I believe you feel similarly.”

He nodded.

“She has a small dowry, but Pemberley could weather it well. Though it will mean smaller dowries for your daughters. And a fortune could have gone some way to buying her acceptance.

“However, being married to your father was a tremendous joy, and I would be the worst sort of hypocrite if I were to deny you the same comfort and happiness I had in being wed to someone I loved and who loved me in return. The Darcy family, Pemberley, is what truly matters, and she would be an asset to the estate. In Derbyshire, I’m sure she would be a coveted guest. And after all, we Darcys belong in Derbyshire, do we not?”

He smiled. “That we do.”

“If your heart lies with Miss Elizabeth, I will not stand in your way. I only ask that you do your best to encourage her to love you in return. A marriage of unequal affection is no way to love.”

“What if she cannot love me?” he asked quietly. “As much as I could love her?”

Lady Anne took a moment to think about her answer. “We are not all built the same. Some of us harbor strong passions and can love deeply. Others feel great affection, but little more. However you believe you will love her, make certain she can do the same for you.”

She moved to sit next to him and rested her hand on his cheek. “I know you can love greatly. And for what it’s worth, I believe Miss Elizabeth is capable of the same. You are so very

lovable, my dear boy. Let her close to you, and she will not be able to help loving you in return.”



Elizabeth was on the third chapter of Robinson Crusoe when Darcy joined them. She had been taking turns reading with Colonel Fitzwilliam. The colonel read well and had a lovely deep voice that rose and fell over the words like a ship at sea. He made the action feel as if it was happening right in front of them. She half wished she could sit back and listen alongside Luke.

Darcy was not pleased to see the colonel with Elizabeth. He had thought Marianne would join them as well. He hid his frown and sat next to Richard, trying not to stare too much at Miss Elizabeth as she read.

Finally, after another fifteen minutes, Marianne entered the room looking harassed.

“Miss Elizabeth! Do forgive me. I had intended to join you earlier, but Rosamund spat her lunch all over me and I had to change my dress.”

Darcy and the colonel made matching faces of disgust and Elizabeth laughed at them. “I would have thought you had seen much worse on the battlefield, Colonel.”

“I’m sure I have, but one anticipates such in a war. I do not expect to be confronted with distressing bodily functions while relaxing at a country house!” He said it in a haughty tone with

such a look of mock affront that soon Luke and Marianne had joined Elizabeth in her laughter and Darcy had cracked a smile.

An hour later, Luke was tired and they bid him good rest. Marianne and Richard led Elizabeth out while Darcy stayed behind to carry his brother upstairs to his room.

“How is little Rosamund, Marianne?” asked Elizabeth.

“So much better these last few days! Would you like to see her?”

“Yes, please!”

Richard took this as his cue to leave and the ladies went upstairs to coo over the baby.

“Would you like to be a mother, do you think?” asked Marianne.

Elizabeth looked down at the baby she was holding in the chair near the window. “I think I would like it, if I was in a good situation.”

“What do you think of as a good situation?”

Elizabeth looked at her searchingly, wondering how much she should say. “If I was in a comfortable home, in a marriage of mutual respect, where my husband did not wish to ignore the children until they were grown and useful to him.”

Marianne nodded. “You were very often with your parents growing up, were you not?”

“Yes. Sometimes too often.” They shared a laugh. “But truly, my father was very involved in my education. He never made me feel as if he wished I would go away.”

“A good father is indeed a blessing. My own father spent a great deal of time with me. I correspond more with him now than I do with my mother.”

“Mothers can be complicated,” said Elizabeth.

“Of course. I imagine you would only wish to have a child if you thought your husband would be a good father?”

“Yes, though I rather think it is the other way around. I would not wish to marry a man I did not think would be a good father. Children are rather a given for the women in my family.”

“Oh? Is your family large?”

“No, but my mother has five daughters, as you know. Her sister had three boys, though only one survived to adulthood.”

“I am sorry.”

“Thank you. One occurred before I was born; he was only a few days old. But my cousin Archie was five when he succumbed to influenza. My aunt was beside herself for some time after that.”

“I can imagine,” said Marianne with her hand on her throat, shaking her head lightly. “To lose a child would be unimaginable.”

“Yes, it would. My cousin Timothy Phillips is in London studying the law now. He will take over my uncle’s law office in a few years.”

“It is interesting that one sister had only sons and the other only daughters.”

“Yes, I have always thought so. My father’s sister lives in Cornwall and has three daughters as well, though she may have another. She is much younger than he. He was already away at Cambridge when she was born.”

“Your poor grandmother! I cannot imagine having a child after the age of forty. I know women who have done it, but it seems awful.”

“Do you wish for more children?”

“Perhaps one more, though I feel remarkably content with the three I have.” She smiled and took the sleeping baby from Elizabeth to set her in the cradle.

They walked back downstairs to find Mr. Darcy awaiting them in the entrance hall.

“Miss Elizabeth, shall I call the carriage for you?”

She looked out the window at the bright sunshine—the first truly bright day in nearly a fortnight, and said, “I think I will walk home, but I thank you for the offer.”

“May I escort you?”

“You may.”

She turned to say goodbye to Marianne and was met with the other woman's broad smile and a wink. Elizabeth nearly laughed aloud and clasped her cloak, following Mr. Darcy outside.



Darcy spent the walk wondering if he could love Elizabeth Bennet. He nearly laughed aloud at the thought. Of course he *could* love her. The bigger questions were *should* he love her—which he thought a better idea every day—and if she could love *him*. Would he love her deeply as his mother had said? He knew without having to think about it that he would. Would she be the same?

He watched her as they walked, noting her undiluted pleasure in the simple act of walking out on a sunny day. He had long been fascinated by her, and unlike the mild interest he had felt in various women through the years, he felt an almost rabid curiosity about her. He wanted to know everything he could—stories from her childhood, her favorite memories, what she liked to do on a rainy day, which books she read over and over, how she liked to be kissed.

He could watch the sunlight dancing on her hair all day. Her skin looked particularly luminous in this light, and the way her eyes danced when she said something amusing was enchanting.

“Pardon me?”

“What?” he said inelegantly.

“Did you say I was enchanting?” she asked, her eyes flitting from his coat buttons to his face, her cheeks flushed.

“I, uh, I, that is, I meant, ahem” he cleared his throat and finally met her eyes. “Yes, you are enchanting.”

“Oh.”

She flushed and looked down again and he wondered if he had made everything hopelessly awkward or if she was pleased by his outburst.

“Do you mind?” he asked.

“That you find me enchanting?” she asked, her eyes beginning to twinkle again.

“Yes.”

“No, Mr. Darcy, I do not mind at all. You may pay me such pretty compliments whenever you wish.” She smiled pertly, her cheeks rosy and her eyes sparkling.

It was then, with her face turned up to him and her expression happy, that he realized *could* did not enter into it. He was already in love with her. *What a fool I am!* he thought.

Suddenly, his tongue felt too thick for speech and his feet were not his own. He stumbled, nearly falling headlong onto the path. She grabbed his arm to steady him and he reached out to grasp the elbow of her opposite arm, leaving them in an odd wide-leg stance, each holding the arm of the other, face to face.

“Careful!” she said. He stared at her for so long she began to wonder if he was well. “Mr. Darcy?”

“Elizabeth?”

She squared her shoulders. “Regardless of how enchanting you find me, Mr. Darcy, I must insist you refrain from addressing me so informally.”

It took him a moment to realize what he had done. “I do apologize, Miss Bennet.”

She nodded briskly. “Apology accepted.”

They walked on, neither really knowing what to say to the other.

Finally, Mr. Darcy said, “May I call on you?”

“On me?”

“Yes.”

“Specifically? Not on my mother or the ladies of the house?”

“I only wish to call on you.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.”

“Um, well, yes, you may. But do you understand what it will mean? To my mother? To the neighborhood? It would not be without consequences,” she said, her brow furrowed.

“Yes, I know exactly what it will mean.” He reached out and smoothed her brow. “I am quite looking forward to the

consequences.”

“Oh.”

“You’ve said that already.”

“Have I?”

“Yes.”

“Very well then. Your mother is coming for tea tomorrow. Why do you not join her? We may walk through Longbourn’s gardens.”

“I look forward to it.”

CHAPTER 30



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, Winter 1799

Nathaniel grew quick and tall, and by his second birthday, he was his father's son, all gregariousness and good humor. Georgiana was a sweet four-year-old who never gave her nurse any trouble and had already learned her letters. Lady Anne was sure she would be reading simple words by her fifth birthday. Nora was Georgiana's preferred teacher and playmate, but she was also fond of the adults in the house. At thirteen, Nora was showing signs of being a delicate beauty when she grew into her features a little more. Lady Anne was glad of it. A woman had precious few resources in the world, and beauty was a strong currency.

Madeline Abara and her brother David, the vicar's children, were still frequent guests at Pemberley. Young Madeline had felt protective of Nora ever since she had discovered what was truly happening at the orphanage under the wrath of Mrs. Landry. She was often the ringleader of their young group since Fitzwilliam had gone to school.

Fitzwilliam flourished at Eton. It was awkward at first, but he eventually found his footing and soon had like-minded friends. His cousins Alexander and Richard Fitzwilliam were there as well, though older than he, and his younger Digby cousin was in the same house. He was a diligent correspondent, frequently writing to his parents and Nora, his cousin Reggie Digby, now attending Cambridge, and the odd letter to George Wickham at his school in Yorkshire. But his most frequent correspondent by far was Marianne Dryden. Marianne remained his favorite relation, and had she been a boy, he would have insisted his parents see they were put in the same house at Eton and preferably in the same apartment.

At fifteen, Marianne was the same as she ever was, only more so. She was being educated at home, in part because her mother was terrified of what she would get up to at a school (her greatest fear involved Marianne locking the headmaster in the larder and leading a revolt of the students) and because she thought no school would keep Marianne engaged well enough to prevent her from trying to escape.

Thus Marianne had a dedicated and intelligent governess who taught her the ladylike accomplishments and artistic pursuits her mother wished her to learn, as well as a tutor for the more cerebral subjects like Latin and advanced mathematics which she was truly interested in. She was insatiably curious, and Julia only hoped she would not scare off anyone brave enough to befriend her when it came time for her to come out.

Marianne's father, Lord Livingstone, was her greatest ally in her intellectual pursuits. He had caught her reading what her mother deemed 'inappropriate texts' enough times that he was convinced a tutor was the best way to direct her thirst for knowledge in the right directions. Marianne insisted on sitting in on the interviews for said tutor, much to her mother's horror and her father's amusement. She questioned the candidates relentlessly, largely on what they believed was and was not appropriate for the daughter of an earl to learn.

All but one failed the test. Temperance Spencer, a distant relation of the notorious Spencers, was the daughter of a Cambridge scholar who also happened to be a member of the Royal Academy. He had had no sons, and therefore trained up his only daughter as his apprentice, teaching her everything she would need to know had she been a man preparing to take his father's place in the world. Alas, when Miss Spencer's father died, she was left with much in her mind and little in her purse and was now forced to seek employment.

Marianne was moved by Miss Spencer's story and impressed by her knowledge. She insisted her father hire her immediately.

Marianne and Fitzwilliam's letters were filled with the usual family stories and accounts of their daily lives as well as with the knowledge they were learning in their various courses of study. If Fitzwilliam mentioned something Marianne did not yet know, she would ask Miss Spencer about it and learn all she could. If Marianne conducted an experiment Fitzwilliam

had not yet done, he was soon knocking on his science tutor's door and asking if he might do a similar one.

Their competition was friendly—if it could even be called such. Though it was not strictly proper for them to be writing so much to one another, their parents were not truly concerned, for they were almost as brother and sister. No one who saw them together would assume otherwise. And who could care about something as harmless as a few letters when there were such goings on in the world?

In January of 1800, Pemberley settled into a state of comfortable expectancy. Fitzwilliam had gone back to Eton with his cousins, the new Lord and Lady Matlock had escorted them and gone on to Town, and only Julia and her family remained to await Lady Anne's confinement.

Anne was heavy with child, sure that her pains would begin at any moment. The babe was certainly large enough—she could not remember when she had felt so ungainly—and he had dropped so low she could hardly walk straight. After two successful confinements, everyone was significantly less worried than they had been with Georgiana, but Lady Anne was nearly six and thirty, and this confinement did not sit as easily with her as the last had.

She was reclining in her favorite sitting room, her feet propped on a stool and her head on a cushion, listening to Julia read aloud. It was a lovely way to spend a morning. George and Lord Livingstone were in the study, discussing a recent investment, or at least that is what they told their wives. Anne

thought it was more likely they were smoking pipes and talking of horses, but she did not truly care.

The pond to the east of the house had frozen over entirely and the children strapped skates to their shoes and planned a cheerful morning of torturing their nurses as they glided across the ice. The two eldest Abara children had joined the Darcy and Dryden bunch, and they were a merry party.

Nora and Arabella were middling skaters and went around the pond's edge hand in hand, giggling and talking about silly nothings. Marianne was quite good at skating and busied herself teaching Georgiana to be so as well. They went round and round the pond's edge, very slowly, laughing and falling repeatedly. Madeline finally took pity on Marianne and took over Georgiana's lessons so Marianne could race their brothers around the perimeter.

They raced until they were gasping and pink-cheeked. The other children were cheering for them, even young Nathaniel, who at two years old, could barely make it a few feet without falling onto the ice, though he held his nurse's hand. Luckily, he was a good-natured boy, and each time he fell, he simply laughed and picked himself up to try again. Marianne put him on her back and went around with him a few times as he shrieked and giggled, then passed him off to David Abara who did the same, and then to her brother John for his turn.

Marianne skated over to Madeline and Georgiana, prepared to skate slowly for a while, when she heard a sickening crack and a scream. She looked over her shoulder and there was her

brother John, flat on his stomach, arms and legs splayed out, holding himself perfectly still.

“Get a rope!” he cried.

Instantly understanding what had happened and why her 12-year-old brother was not moving, Marianne raced to the edge of the pond and sat on the snow to rip her skates off. Madeline had quickly gathered the children and gotten them off the ice, trying to keep them calm.

“Where is Nathaniel?” cried the nurse.

Marianne’s eyes widened in horror. Nathaniel had been on John’s back. Where was he now? She looked at the small dark hole next to her brother and gasped. He was in the water! She began to sprint towards the hole when David grabbed her arm and held her back.

“We need a rope. Or a branch. Something for him to hold onto.”

Madeline sprang up and ran towards a tree a few yards away, sifting through the snow for branches. The nurse pulled the other children away from the icy edge, Tom and Arabella Dryden’s faces frozen in terror as they watched their older brother lying on cracked ice.

“I have a branch!” cried Madeline.

David was lying on his belly at the water’s edge, ready to pull John in, and Marianne was contemplating diving into the hole to grab Nathaniel before he drowned when they heard a deep voice echoing off the ice.

“Get back! David, move over there and stretch the branch out slowly to John. My lord, you must grab the branch first with one hand, tight as you can, then the other, and allow David to pull you in slowly. Do you understand?”

Marianne had never been so relieved to see a steward in her life. Samuel Wickham seemed to know exactly what to do and she immediately placed her trust in him.

“What about Nathaniel?” she cried. “He is in the water!”

Samuel’s face froze for a moment, then Marianne saw he had already ripped off his boots and coat. Wickham nodded at her and slid into the jagged hole. The pond was not deep, but the water came to his chest. He held his breath and went below, the water hitting him like a thousand icy nails ripping into his skin. He looked all around, but did not see the boy. He came back up for air and ducked below the ice again, this time swimming further out in the pond, beneath the unbroken ice and where his feet could no longer reach the bottom. There! Lying on the mud, his bright red coat barely visible on the pond’s floor. Samuel’s lungs were burning, but there was no time to go back up. He swam the three yards to Nathaniel, hooked his arm around his middle, and swam as fast as he could towards the opening on the other side of the freezing water.

Finally, he burst through the surface and filled his lungs with air. He passed Nathaniel to Madeline Abara, who was crouched on the bank near them, and told her to lay the boy on his side. He hauled himself out of the water and joined them

on the bank, pounding on young Nathaniel's back, willing him to spit up the water and breathe again.



As soon as John had been safely pulled off the ice, Marianne had run for Pemberley. She could run like a deer and she did not let the snow stop her. She burst into the main hall, dripping wet and heaving, and began screaming for anyone who could hear her.

“Help! We need help! Nathaniel fell in the pond! Help!”

The butler sent servants running several different directions, the housekeeper began ordering rooms to be filled with braziers and fires built up. Lord Livingstone heard his daughter's voice and came out of the study, meeting her in the entrance hall.

“My dear, whatever is the matter?”

“Nathaniel fell through the ice! John was trapped on a cracked spot, but David pulled him off with a tree branch. Mr. Wickham is swimming in the pond looking for Nathaniel.”

“What!” cried Mr. Darcy from where he stood behind her father. He made for the door, not stopping to collect his coat or gloves. He ran across the lawn and through the rose garden, Lord Livingstone hot on his heels.

Lady Anne and Lady Livingstone were coming down the stairs when they saw their husbands tear out the front door.

“What is going on, Marianne?” asked Julia.

Tired and terrified and having not yet learned to be diplomatic, Marianne blurted out to her mother, “Nathaniel fell through the ice!”

Lady Anne gasped, a hand covering her mouth, then looked down in horror. Julia followed her gaze and saw the puddle forming beneath her cousin. Lady Anne’s waters had broken.



Samuel and Madeline continued to pound on Nathaniel’s back. His nurse had taken off his wet clothes and covered him in her cloak, but his face was still blue and he was not breathing. Samuel was trying to calculate how long he had been under the water. He had seen the children playing at a distance and smiled at their antics, wishing George was home and able to join them. Then he had seen John skating around the pond, Nathaniel on his back, laughing with glee. Then suddenly, Nathaniel had thrown himself backwards, as he was wont to do when his father was holding him. But George Darcy was much larger than young John Dryden, and Nathaniel was not generally on his father’s back when he tried such things.

John tried to catch him, but his arms were too short and Nathaniel hit the ice with great force and a sickening crack, splintering the ice around him. John had spun and fallen over and the other children had begun screaming. Samuel whipped his horse into a run and was there by the time Madeline had found a branch, stumbling about in her skated feet.

How long had it been? Two minutes? Three? Then he had removed his boots and gotten in the water—another minute. Then he had swum for some time to find the lad—another two minutes. Perhaps it had not been as long as he thought it was—the cold water made a moment feel like an eternity. He thought it had probably been five minutes, perhaps six altogether. Fewer if they were lucky.

Why wasn't he breathing? A slow trickle of water had been coming out of his mouth since they rolled him onto his side. Samuel stared at the boy's face, willing him to breath, when he saw something dark. Curious, he reached into Nathaniel's mouth and felt something. He pulled and some manner of vegetation came out in his hand, its long stem trailing out of the boy's throat. The nurse watched its progress with wide eyes, then looked back to Nathaniel and hit his back again.

He spluttered. He coughed. She continued to hit his back, more gently now, until water stopped dripping from his lips and his coughing lessened. Gradually, his face lost its blue color, but he was still deathly pale.

Finally, he opened his eyes, sparkling brown like his father's, and met Samuel's gaze.

"Mr. Wickham?" he said, followed by coughing.

Wickham laughed and pulled the boy to his chest, filled with relief. Before any more could be said, Mr. Darcy and Lord Livingstone came rushing over to the pond, calling out questions and looking for their children.

"He's here, George!" cried Samuel.

George's eyes filled with relief when he saw his son safe and out of the water. He gathered Nathaniel to his chest and kissed his hair, closing his eyes against the tears that threatened. "Thank God you are well."

"Mr. Wickham jumped in to save him," said David Abara.

"He was under the water a long time," added John.

"I thought he wouldn't come out!" cried Tom.

George looked to Samuel, who was flushing in embarrassment and looking at the ground. George finally noticed that Samuel was soaked to the bone and not wearing a coat or boots.

"The grooms are coming with a wagon and blankets," he choked out, his eyes filled with gratitude.

The nurse began gathering the children and herding them towards the house with the assistance of Madeline Abara. The children were subdued and wary, looking about them nervously and vaguely wishing for their mothers.

Lord Livingstone found Wickham's coat on the ground and placed it over his shoulders, surprising Samuel.

"Thank you, my lord."

"Thank *you*. John told me you were responsible for getting him off the ice. We might have had two children fall in today."

Samuel looked down and pursed his lips. "I did what any man would do."

“I think you did rather more, but we shall agree not to argue the point.” Lord Livingstone smiled and walked up to the small knoll beside the hill to watch for the wagon.

“Samuel, what do I not owe you?” said George with a wealth of feeling.

Samuel met his gaze and saw George’s eyes were red and filled with tears, his youngest son still clutched tightly in his arms. Samuel could think of nothing to say to that, so he reached out and squeezed his friend’s forearm, looking at him solemnly. “You owe me nothing,” he finally said, his voice raw.

George swallowed thickly and nodded, then climbed up the knoll to meet the approaching wagon.



When they arrived back at Pemberley, footmen and maids were still rushing back and forth. Thinking the activity should have died down at least somewhat and wondering where his wife was—he had thought he saw her on the stairs before he left the house—George asked a passing footman what was happening.

“Jasper’s gone for the doctor, and James for the midwife, sir. We’ve been instructed to take extra blankets and braziers to the rooms for the children, and the gardeners will rope off the pond.”

“The midwife?”

The housekeeper approached him then, dismissing the footman and whispering in the master's ear that Lady Anne's waters had broken when she heard the news and she was laboring hard upstairs as they spoke, regularly asking for news of Nathaniel. Her cousin Lady Julia was with her.

George looked like he did not know where to go. He looked to the stairs, then to his son in his arms, then back to the stairs.

"Give me Nathaniel," said Lord Livingstone, reaching for the boy. "I will see he is warmed up and dry. Go to your wife. She will be worrying."

George nodded and sprinted up the stairs.

As soon as he burst into the room, Anne looked up from the floor, her arms holding the bed post and her hips swaying.

"Is he well? Did they find him? Is he alive?" she cried in a weak voice. She breathed through another pain and George rushed to her side.

"Yes, my dear. He is alive and well. Wickham got him out. Our cousin is seeing to him now and the doctor has been sent for. How are you faring?"

She let out a little sob of relief and fell against his shoulder. "Thank God!"

Another pain rippled through her and he kissed her hair, already damp with sweat. "Do you wish me to stay with you?" he asked quietly. He had never stayed through an entire labor before, but he had come in to see her several times, to let her know she was not alone and lend what support he could.

“No, see to Nathaniel. He will be terribly frightened. Hold him near the fire, and do not let him go.” He saw the fire in her eyes and understood what she was asking of him.

“I will be your arms, my darling.” He kissed her forehead. “I will tend to Nathaniel, you tend to the new babe.” She nodded, tears tracking down her face. “You will be magnificent, I know it.”

He kissed her one last time and left the room to find his youngest son.



The doctor examined Nathaniel and determined he was well and whole, but would likely come down with a cold soon, though he was showing no signs of a fever yet. They were to keep the boy warm and comfortable and feed him well for a few days. They should send for him if there were any difficulties.

George’s relief knew no bounds. He could not stop thinking of how he had sat in his study, smoking a pipe and talking of his newest horse, while his son sank into freezing water, unable to swim and without his father to save him. If he had been there, he would have immediately gotten Nathaniel out. What had he been thinking to allow a group of children to skate on the ice with only two nurses to watch them?

Thank God for Samuel Wickham. George did not know how he would ever repay his friend.



In what was a remarkably quick labor, Lady Anne was delivered of a healthy baby boy. George came in to see her after she and the babe were clean and tucked into bed.

“How is Nathaniel?” she asked.

“He is well and sleeping in Nora’s bed. She will not let him out of her sight.”

She smiled. “Dear girl. And Georgiana? Is she horribly frightened?”

“She was, but seeing Nathaniel well has calmed her, I think. She would like to see you, if you are well enough.”

“Of course I am! Bring her in.”

Georgiana poked her head around the door, her straw-colored plaits disheveled and her face red from crying.

“Oh my darling!” cried Lady Anne when she saw her. “Come to Mama!”

Georgiana sniffled and sprinted across the room, eagerly climbing onto the bed beside her mother where she promptly buried her head in Anne’s lap and began to sob. Anne winced at the contact, then stroked her daughter’s hair, shushing her gently. She looked up at her husband and George gave her a guilty look.

“I thought she was well,” he whispered.

Anne eyed him in disbelief, then shook her head. “Come and meet your son, my husband.”

George smiled and came closer, leaning over to look at the small bundle tucked into his wife’s side. He smiled so broadly it took up most of his face.

“Look at you, my boy.” He touched his finger gently to the little sleeping face, in awe of his child.

“You should hold him.” Anne smiled gently, too tired from all the worries and pains of the day to care about anything but her little family, safe and whole.

Georgiana finally peeked up from her mother’s blankets and watched as her father gently lifted the sleeping babe, tucking him into the crook of his arm and sitting on the side of the bed.

“What shall we call this little fellow?” he asked. They had discussed names before—Richard, for Anne’s brother, though Randall had already named one of his sons that, or Luke, for George’s brother who had died when he was a boy. A girl would have been called Anne, for her mother, or possibly Elizabeth, because they both liked the name and had run out of female relations to Christen her for.

“I think Luke,” she said softly. “He looks like a Luke, does he not?”

“That he does. What think you of Luke Samuel?”

“For your brother and the brother of your heart?” George nodded with watery eyes and she rested her hand on his arm.

“I think it perfect. Mr. Wickham will be a wonderful godfather to young Luke.”

Overwhelmed, George only nodded.

They sat in silence for some time, Georgiana falling asleep snuggled against her mother, young Luke in his father’s arms. Finally, Lady Anne could wait no longer and insisted she see Nathaniel. George protested that she was too weak, but she argued that she had been remarkably strong only a few hours ago, and if he had seen her then, he would not even think of calling her weak now. He smiled at the stubborn glint in her eye and told her to go, he would stay with their two little ones.

Her maid Lucy offered her arm and Anne clutched it fiercely as they made their way upstairs. Lucy pulled her arm tighter, understanding her mistress’s fears all too well.

Anne knocked on Nora’s door and pushed it open, seeing Nora lying on the bed beside a sleeping Nathaniel, humming softly and rubbing his back.

“Are you well, Lady?” Nora asked quietly, worry in her round eyes.

Anne smiled at the name. Nora rarely called her Lady anymore, having grown out of such sweet childhood habits. “I am well, my dear. How are you? Were you terribly frightened?”

Nora’s eyes filled with tears, but she bravely lifted her chin and refused to allow them to fall. “I am well enough. It was frightening, but all is well now.”

“That it is,” said Anne with a smile.

She sat on the bed and stroked Nathaniel’s back, then brushed the hair off his face. “My darling boy,” she whispered. She smiled at Nora and cupped her cheek. “You are doing a fine job of looking over him, my love. You shall make a wonderful mother some day.”

Nora beamed at her, the tears she had been holding back all day abruptly falling out in a rush, in contrast to the smile on her face. Feeling suddenly fatigued, Anne kissed both her children and made her way back downstairs.

George met her at the door and helped her into bed. “You mustn’t do too much, my dear.”

“I know. I only wanted to see they were well.”

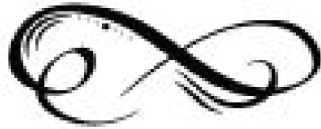
He pulled the blanket over her shoulders and stroked her hair back from her face. “When you wake, we should discuss Luke’s godparents. Marianne told me she wishes to be his godmother.” He laughed lightly. “She is a determined little thing.”

“She will be sixteen this summer. Not so little anymore,” said Anne sleepily.

“Then perhaps we should let her be godmother,” said Darcy indulgently.

“Whatever you say, my love,” she whispered, and drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 31



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 17 November, 1811

Marianne marched into the library where Richard was relaxing by the fire. “Well?” she said impatiently, arms akimbo.

“Well what?”

She rolled her eyes. “How is it going with Luke? Is he still in love with Miss Elizabeth? Is he angry with you?”

“Ah, that. He still holds a tendre for her, but he is beginning to realize the impossibility of it, I think.”

“You *think*?”

“Yes.”

“Surely he recognized the impossibility of it long ago! It is only his youthful foolishness that allows him to overlook such things.”

“I cannot demand that he think of her no more!”

Marianne huffed. “You were supposed to draw his attention to yourself so that he would not be angry with Fitz for

pursuing her.”

“And I have done so!”

“Have you?”

“He has been glaring at me a great deal. And we have hardly had a pleasant conversation since I began speaking of Miss Elizabeth.”

“So, he is angry with you,” said Marianne thoughtfully. “That is good, is it not? It means he recognizes you as a threat. And surely, if he has to give her up to someone, he would rather it be Fitz.”

“Why thank you, Cousin,” Richard said dryly.

She swatted his arm. “Do not play the wounded puppy. Luke is only a boy—you are a thirty-year-old man!”

“I know, I know. But I don’t have to like it.”

“Well with any luck, Fitz will make up his mind soon and we can cease this ridiculous game.”

“You generally love ridiculous games. What has you tired of this one so quickly?”

“I do not know. Perhaps it is Luke, who is my godson whom I love very much. Or Miss Elizabeth, whom I like more each time I meet her and with whom I would like to remain friends. Or Fitz, who has been a brother to me all my life and whom I would like to see happily settled.” She sighed and sank back in the chair. “Or perhaps I am merely tired. Rosamund has kept me up all hours—the nurse tries to manage her, but I am

incapable of pretending to sleep when I hear my daughter crying down the hall. I must go to her.”

He smiled softly at her. “That is because you are a devoted mother. Dinner is not for another hour. Why do you not go lie down for a bit?”

“What a wonderful idea, cousin.” She smiled tiredly and rose to leave, squeezing his shoulder as she passed him.



Lady Anne and Mr. Darcy arrived at Longbourn at precisely one o’clock—Lady Anne was very pleased to find they kept country hours instead of Town—and Mrs. Bennet, generally a fine hostess by most standards, was all aflutter.

“Oh, Lady Anne!”

“My dear Mrs. Bennet! What has upset you so?” She gestured to her son to pour a glass of wine from a decanter on the sideboard. He brought it over and Lady Anne handed it to her friend, encouraging her to have a sip and sitting beside her, chafing her hand between both of hers. “Now why do you not tell me what is going on?”

“Oh, it is in every way horrible! Mr. Bennet informed me this morning that his cousin, a man so distantly related we have not even met him, is to come to our home this very afternoon!”

Lady Anne understood that a last-minute guest was distressing, and him being a stranger was certainly odd, but

she hardly saw why it should send the lady into such a fit.

“It is very cruel of Mr. Bennet to do such a thing. He knows it is necessary for Mr. Collins to think well of us! Else he shall throw us out before Mr. Bennet is cold in his grave.”

Understanding lit Lady Anne’s expression. “So this cousin is your husband’s heir?”

“Yes, the wretched man!”

“Does he say why he is coming?”

Mrs. Bennet spoke in such a high pitch Darcy nearly covered his ears and Lady Anne could not understand her. Finally, Jane and Elizabeth entered the room, alerted to their guests’ presence by their mother’s racket.

Elizabeth’s cheeks burned that her mother was making such a scene in front of the Darcys, but she could do nothing for it. Jane attempted to soothe her mother while Elizabeth greeted their guests.

“Is it really so bad?” Mr. Darcy whispered to her quietly.

“I am afraid so. Though her reactions are less than circumspect, my mother is correct. Mr. Collins is my father’s heir, and he may do with Longbourn as he wishes when my father dies.”

“And he is completely unknown to you?”

“Yes, though he shall not remain so for long. He is due to arrive at four o’clock today.”

“I see.”

“Quite.”

Seeing her mother was calm now and speaking with Jane and Lady Anne, Elizabeth reached into her pocket and pulled out Mr. Collins’s letter. “What do you make of this?”

He met her eyes, asking if she truly wished for him to read another’s correspondence, and she nodded. He took the paper and read through it quickly, his mind latching onto two things. Mr. Collins was his aunt’s parson, and he was seeking a wife from Longbourn.

Darcy’s eyes shot up to Elizabeth’s. “Your father is in agreement with this?”

“With a visit? Yes.”

“No, with Mr. Collins choosing a bride among his daughters.”

“A bride? Surely I did not miss such a thing.” She stood close to him, leaning over his arm to read the letter in his hand. “He says he wishes to make amends and extend an olive branch.”

“He says he wishes to make up for you losing your home. I doubt he means to give up a portion of his income. Just before that, he comments on having heard of the great beauty of the Bennet sisters.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh! I see why you came to that conclusion.”

“Which of your sisters would your father put forward?”

“I do not know,” she said worriedly. “Are you certain? Could he not mean something else?”

He shrugged. “He could, but I cannot think what else a clergyman could do that would be meaningful recompense for losing your home.”

“No, neither can I.”

“There is one other thing,” he said hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“His patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, is known to me. She is my mother’s sister.”

“Really? How odd.”

“Yes.”

With a look, they agreed to join the others. Soon, Darcy was sitting beside his mother and speaking quietly to her.

Lady Anne’s eyes widened in surprise, then she nodded. “Yes, that sounds like something Cathy would do.” She turned to face Mrs. Bennet, who was now subdued, but still unhappy. “Mrs. Bennet, my son has just told me that your cousin Mr. Collins was gifted his living by my sister Lady Catherine.”

“Your sister?” Mrs. Bennet was unsure if this new information made her circumstances worse or better, so she fretted constantly by twisting her handkerchief and speaking in indecipherable half-sentences.

Eventually Lady Anne sent the younger generation to walk in the garden and did her best to calm Mrs. Bennet. She told

her what her son understood from the letter, that Mr. Collins was likely seeking a bride from among Mr. Bennet's daughters. This perked Mrs. Bennet up considerably, and before she could become carried away, Lady Anne sought to redirect her new effusions.

“You must consider very carefully, Mrs. Bennet. Are any of your daughters suited to be the wife a parson? Is it a life they would enjoy and thrive in?”

“What does it matter if she is suited? She will enjoy being married well enough, and one day she will be mistress of this estate.”

Lady Anne gave her a hard look, and Mrs. Bennet quailed under her gaze. “Mrs. Bennet, a daughter's happiness is nothing to be cavalier about. I know you are afraid for the future, but you cannot throw away a daughter only to save yourself. Does Longbourn not have a dower house? Do you not have a sister in Meryton and a brother in London? Do you truly believe they would turn their backs on you and allow you and your daughters to go hungry?”

Mrs. Bennet shrank back into the sofa cushions, unsure what to do with this new side of her elegant friend. “No, they would not, my lady.”

“Then I insist you cease this fretting at once and focus on what you may actually do to better secure your future. You might practice economy. You could take your eldest two daughters to Town for a season. You need not have all five girls out at once and that would allow you to focus on fewer at

a time, and afford more gowns for those who are out. Those are things within your power. Your cousin's intentions are not. You may be as kind and considerate a hostess as is possible, and God willing he will thank you for it and show you kindness in return, but his actions are not guaranteed. You should not waste precious energy on things you cannot change."

Mrs. Bennet watched her with wide eyes throughout her set-down, shocked her friend—who seemed so quiet and ladylike—would speak to her in such a way, and awed at Lady Anne's magnificence. She thought it must be the result of having an earl for a father. How else would she have become so commanding?

She swallowed. "I understand, my lady."

"Good. Now, how can I best help you to prepare for this visit? Is the chamber prepared? Has the menu been finalized?"

Mrs. Bennet nodded. "Yes, all is in order."

"Well that is good. I might help you later with the other things we discussed, if you wish."

Mrs. Bennet's eyes were still alarmingly wide, the whites about her irises visible all the way around. She nodded slowly, "I will think on what you have said, my lady."

"Very good. Now, which of your daughter's do you intend to put forward to Mr. Collins?"

"Jane is receiving so much attention from Mr. Bingley. She may be engaged soon," she offered tentatively.

“Quite right. Miss Bennet is not an option for Mr. Collins. I do not think she would suit regardless. Miss Bennet is sweet-tempered and so very beautiful. I feel confident that if things do not come to a satisfactory conclusion with Mr. Bingley, it will not be long before someone else snatches her up.”

Mrs. Bennet was gratified by this praise to Jane and nodded, speaking more strongly. “Elizabeth is the next choice, being the second eldest.”

“She is an active sort, and of a practical bent, but I do not think she would enjoy living in Kent,” Lady Anne said carefully.

“Whyever not? It is as good as any other county.”

“True, but it is not the countryside I object to. Lady Catherine is an...involved landowner, and I believe Miss Elizabeth would chafe under such constant scrutiny. She has such a gift for management and a thirst for knowledge. She would do better with a husband of some means and an estate to run, or perhaps a barrister who kept interesting company. I fear she would be wasted on a parson.” She conveniently forgot to mention that Mr. Collins’s wife would eventually be the mistress of Longbourn.

Mrs. Bennet nodded along absently, already planning a wedding in her mind. Which daughter played the bride in her imaginings was interchangeable.

“What of your next youngest daughter? Miss Mary?”

“She might do,” said Mrs. Bennet, more animated now. “She is very devout, and she is always reading religious texts and quoting scripture.”

“It sounds as if she might be happy as a parson’s wife. What of Miss Kitty?”

“She is so lively, and only just turned seventeen. She might do well for Mr. Collins. She is partial to a red coat, but she would change her mind soon enough if she had the chance to run her own home.”

Lady Anne silently disagreed and said, “I believe we can rule your youngest daughter out. She is full young to be married. In London, she would not even be out in society. And she is much too lively to live in a quiet country village all her life. She would likely prefer an officer, someone in the regulars where she could follow the drum perhaps?”

“Oh, yes! That would be just the thing! Do you know of someone, my lady?”

Lady Anne laughed. “Mrs. Bennet! Did we not just agree that Miss Lydia is too young to be married?”

Mrs. Bennet looked down with what would have been called a pout in a child.

“So it is settled. It is between Miss Mary and Miss Kitty. Miss Mary is older, of course, and should therefore have precedence, but perhaps you wished to allow the gentleman to choose?”

Mrs. Bennet shifted in her seat like a hen on her roost and said, "I do not see why he should be able to choose! He will have this house and everything in it, he may take the daughter he is given."

Lady Anne was torn between praising her and reminding her friend that the entail was no more Mr. Collins's fault than it was hers. Instead she said, "Why do you not ensure both girls are turned out well to greet their cousin? And if I may make a suggestion..."

"Yes, my lady?"

"I wish to invite Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth to come spend a few days at Netherfield with me. They can visit with my niece and daughter, and of course Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. We would be a merry party, and Mr. Collins might come to know your middle daughter with fewer, shall we say, distractions about?"

Mrs. Bennet's face brightened in comprehension. "Ahh, I see! Yes, best to get the pretty ones out of the way or Mr. Collins will only want what he cannot have."

"I think we can both agree that Miss Mary is pretty in her way, but Miss Bennet is so very lovely that the prettiest girl will look plain beside her. Let Miss Mary have a chance to shine on her own," she said diplomatically.

"Of course, of course. How clever you are! I shall see to it right away."

“Why do you not prepare Miss Mary while I send a note to Netherfield to make the arrangements. If I may borrow a pen and paper?”

Soon, a note was dispatched to Miss Bingley, couched in the nicest terms and hinting at a great reward for doing this favor, and before long a reply came inviting the two eldest Miss Bennets to stay a few days at Netherfield.

Mrs. Bennet set to work preparing Mary to look her best, insisting she borrow a green dress from Kitty, then hovering as the maid dressed her hair. Jane and Elizabeth were soon informed of the plan, though they did not quite understand why they were being sent away, and they packed their trunks and were piled into the Darcy carriage by half past three.

Mrs. Bennet was so distressed over the arrival of Mr. Collins that she did not even notice that Mr. Darcy had come with his mother when he normally stayed at Netherfield, or that he had walked a half hour in the garden with Elizabeth while Jane trailed rather far behind them.

Elizabeth was more than a little relieved by this, of course.

CHAPTER 32



*L*ambton, Derbyshire, Summer 1801

George Wickham was fourteen the first time he heard his mother called a whore. He was so shocked he could only stare blankly ahead and follow when Fitz herded him away from the crude farmers. He was fifteen when he heard a group of men in the tavern lamenting the loss of ‘Buxom Becky.’ He asked someone who they were speaking of, thinking to join in on the joke, and was met with silence and uncomfortable glances. A month later, some men at the stable in the village were speaking of his father. Curious, he listened and soon wished he hadn’t.

They made crude comparisons between his mother and his aunt, one wondering why Samuel Wickham would go for the homely Rachel Connelly after he had had the prettiest girl in the village. Another chimed in that it was understandable—now he finally had a wife no one else would chase after.

George did not know who he was more angry on behalf of—his aunt for being spoken of so meanly, or his mother for

being besmirched after her death when she could no longer defend herself.

In a fit of righteous anger and youthful stupidity, he burst in on the gossiping men and told them to shut their filthy mouths. He was fifteen and skinny, and there were five of them all in their cups. After they beat him soundly while calling him unspeakable names and laughing uproariously, he limped to his Aunt Rachel's cottage with a busted lip and two blackened eyes. His knuckles were bloody and every inch of his body felt bruised.

Rachel took over, knowing immediately what to do. She sent a note to the vicar's and another to Pemberley. Samuel was away on business, but she knew Mr. Darcy would want to know.

Soon George Darcy was knocking on her door. He looked at his godson in consternation, then like a storm of fury, he left for the stables. He loomed over the stablemaster, making it clear in no uncertain terms that five grown men beating up a boy who only weighed ten stone soaking wet would not be tolerated and if they hoped to keep the patronage of Pemberley and the Darcy family, he would see to it that it never happened again.

Darcy was terrifying in his anger. His deep voice and formidable size had the stablemaster shaking in terror and promising to put a stop to anything of the kind in future, and that any man in his cups would be watched carefully lest he misbehave. When Darcy left, the stablemaster was only glad

the larger man had not known that he had watched the entire thing, thinking it all a good joke. No serious harm had come to the boy. What was wrong with having a little fun and putting the uppity little bastard in his place? But he was not stupid enough to say that aloud.

By the time Mr. Darcy returned to Rachel's cottage, Mrs. Abara and her daughter Madeline had arrived armed with poultices and tinctures to tend to young George's wounds. They tsked and tutted over him, going to great lengths to ensure he was well cared for, while George stared blankly ahead, his mind too disturbed for conversation.

George had never felt so humiliated in his life. He burned with it, turning it over ceaselessly in his mind. He had been as a rag doll to those men, as nothing. They had hit him and thrown him down, and when he thought they had made their point and he could slink away, they had grabbed him again, kicking his ribs and stepping on his face. For a few terrible minutes, he had thought he might die. He had ended up on the ground in the center of the stables, curled in a ball with his hands over his head, simply trying to stay alive. The horses whinnied and stamped in their boxes, agitated by the goings on, and he had thought how strange it was that horses were more compassionate than humans.

The inn keeper had come to the yard then and the men had run off, laughing and congratulating each other on walloping the impertinent whelp. The innkeeper had known George his entire life and was shocked to find him thus, but George would

not accept help. He pulled himself up and made for his aunt's, wishing only to be away from that terrible place.

Now, sitting there being fussed over while his aunt worried and Mr. Darcy assured her it would all be well, he knew he could never allow it to happen again. He would be no one's whipping boy. No matter what it took, he would never be beaten again.



George knew there was safety in numbers, so in his quest to ensure his further protection, he befriended as many of the young men in the village as he possibly could—especially the large ones. He would never be as big as Fitz, but he could be strong. He knew Mr. Douglas, the innkeeper, had an interest in pugilism and he asked him to teach him a few things, enough to protect himself if necessary. George tried not to notice the man's understanding gaze when he agreed.

For the remainder of the summer, George worked with Mr. Douglas every day, practicing endlessly until his punches were strong and accurate and his reactions were quick and precise. He avoided the stables assiduously and refused to talk of the incident with Rachel or his father, though both watched him with wary eyes and spoke carefully around him.

Summer eventually ended and George returned to school in Yorkshire, his heart heavy. What kind of woman had his mother been? He had hazy memories of her slathering butter on a piece of bread for him or walking with him to Pemberley

when he was small and wished to ride ponies with Fitzwilliam. But he could not really remember her voice; her countenance was beginning to fade in his mind.

He remembered her arguing with his father, generally about money. Rebecca always wished to spend it; Samuel wished to save it. George could understand his mother's feelings. It would have been nice to have more clothes or another servant. But now that he was older and nearly a man, he understood his father as well. Samuel wished to pay for schooling for George—it would be essential for him to make his way in the world. He could hardly fault his father for wishing to provide for him. His parents' rows had been loud and frequent, and George could not remember a single incident of them all being happy together.

After a month of fretting and falling behind in his classes, George decided to focus on his studies and put thoughts of his mother aside. This was his last year of school, after all. He would not get another chance.

For winter break, he accepted an offer to go home with Martin Whitehead, a young man from York. His father was a prominent businessman there and the family lived very comfortably. George could not help but recognize the difference between the Whitehead's home and his father's simple cottage. He knew his father held a respectable position, but it would have been nice to have a larger chamber and another servant or two.

George had spent much of his childhood at Pemberley playing with Fitz, but the house was so very grand that it almost did not seem real. To reach for something like Pemberley seemed so utterly ridiculous that he could not even consider it. But a home like the Whitehead's, that was a possibility.

Newly inspired, he redoubled his efforts at school when he returned. He was not a model student, but he tried diligently and was able to finish his final term with his head held high. Samuel traveled to Yorkshire to collect him for the last time, though George was now old enough to make the journey on his own. They both felt a little nostalgic at the thought that this would be the last time Samuel ever did so.

When George greeted his father, Samuel barely recognized him. When George had last been in Lambton, he had been a lanky young boy, all knees and elbows, with hair that seemed to have a life of its own and a nose just a bit too big for his face. Now, he had grown into his features. He was still slim, but no longer knobby. His face was perfectly proportioned and handsome to boot, and he had done something with his hair that made it look smooth and rakish instead of like an animal's nest had somehow landed on his head.

Samuel stared at him for a solid minute before George said, "Are you not going to greet me, Father?"

Samuel laughed and pulled his son into his arms, noting how they were now the same height. "How are you, my boy?"



Derbyshire, Summer 1802

Returning to Lambton was odd. His father spent roughly half his time at Rachel's cottage, but it was much smaller than their house at Pemberley and George did not want to be on top of the couple, nor sleep on the sofa in the parlor. He stayed in his usual room at his father's cottage, feeling oddly like a stranger. It had been ten months since he had last been there, but it was more than just the passage of time. He felt somehow like he did not belong, like he was in the wrong place altogether.

Now that he no longer had the distraction of his studies, his worries from the previous summer came back in full force. He walked into his mother's room, wondering why he had never thought anything of his parents having separate rooms. They were not a grand couple living in a mansion with an image to maintain. If they slept separately, it was because they wished to. He could not remember a time when his parents had shared a room. He could barely remember them sharing a meal!

Had they hated each other? Were the rumors true?



No matter how much he tried not to think about his mother, George could not stop. Finally, he decided to find some answers. He would ask his cousin in the village. Joseph was

two years George's senior and knew everything that went on in Lambton. He would know if there was any truth to what the men had said, or he would know how to find out.

Joseph was more than willing to help George discover the truth of the matter. He was not entirely sure himself, though he had heard rumors. Joseph assisted by asking questions of local shop keeper's sons, a few matrons he was friendly with, and even his own mother. After a handful of conversations with various people in the village, George was astonished.

His mother had been a horrible woman. Crass, manipulative, and cruel. Joseph told him some things he had heard his father say about Becky. Joseph meant well—he thought it would be better for George to hear the truth from someone in his family than to hear it in a tavern some day, but at eighteen, Joseph was not the most tactful person to deliver such news.

George stared at him with mouth agape and eyes the size of saucers. Had his mother truly entertained other men in her own husband's home? Had she publicly mocked his Aunt Rachel, her own cousin? Rachel was one of the kindest women he knew.

His head spun with the knowledge. Each rumor was worse than the last. Had his mother really done all of those things?

Joseph looked guilty at seeing George so upset and said they need not speak of it any further, but George demanded to know all. Looking at the floor and stumbling over his words,

Joseph said, "There was some talk that maybe you were not Samuel's son."

George's jaw dropped low.

"Some even say you are Mr. Darcy's by-blow."

"Mr. Darcy!"

Joseph nodded. "He has always been attentive to you, and he did send you to school." Joseph trailed off uneasily.

"He is my godfather, it is only natural he pay attention to me. And he and Father are friends. I look nothing like him!"

"You are the spitting image of your mother," Joseph said with a shrug.

George understood what his cousin was not saying. Because George looked so much like Becky, he could be anyone's son. There was no way to know.

Joseph apologized for upsetting him and George walked home to Pemberley with a troubled mind. Was it possible Samuel Wickham was not his father? He could not believe it. His hair was sandy colored, like Samuel's, and curly, like his Aunt Rachel's. Even Samuel had some curl to his hair. Rebecca's had been nearly perfectly straight. Surely that proved something! He had his father's hair! But there had never been any more children, and even after being married to Rachel for two years now, she had not fallen with child, and she was a healthy woman.

He knew he had his mother's complexion, a creamy white that turned more gold than brown in the summer and that he

was slightly embarrassed by as he thought it made him look younger than his age. He also had her bright blue eyes and long thick lashes. His jaw was more square than Rebecca's had been and his chin stronger, but was that not expected of a man? Nearly every man he knew had a more prominent jaw than his wife. He could not rely on that.

He turned over every feature he had and every gesture he made, comparing himself to Samuel and his hazy memories of his mother. In the end, he came to no definite conclusions other than that he absolutely could not be George Darcy's son.

Mr. Darcy was dark—dark eyes, dark hair, even darker skin than most. George was fair. Mr. Darcy was broad and thick and strong—when they were little, Mr. Darcy could pick up George and Fitz and Nora all at once when they were playing on the lawn. George was so slight he had been called scrawny by the boys at school. And Mr. Darcy was tall—so tall he had to duck his head to go through the village doorways. Even the biggest man in Lambton seemed small when standing next to Mr. Darcy. George was not short, but he was nowhere near the tallest boy in his class. And every Darcy child had inherited their father's height. Fitz was but a year older than him, yet George only came to his shoulders. Young Georgiana was not even five years old yet and she stood a head above the other little girls.

Most importantly of all, George Darcy and Samuel Wickham were friends. Good friends, the kind that did not sneak around with each other's wives. He simply could not imagine it. There was no way he could be Mr. Darcy's son.

But that did not mean he was Samuel's.



George was tortured by his thoughts—theories and scenarios playing out in his mind constantly. He began to imbibe more frequently, until he fell into bed most nights in a drunken stupor. His old friends were not interested in this side of his nature and soon quit including him in their outings. His newer, rougher friends whom he boxed with did not mind his newfound surliness. It made him feistier in a match and harder to knock down.

George still practiced at pugilism and had begun to excel. It was the perfect outlet for his energies. Every punch was a personal demon knocked away, every dodge a rumor he had escaped from. His mother's ghost haunted him everywhere he went. She had been a devil. A beautiful, heartless devil. And he was the product of her.

When he practiced with Mr. Douglas, he saw her sometimes. Hers were the blows he was dodging, her secrets what he relentlessly pursued around the yard. She taunted him, saying the names of men she had known in the past, refusing to give up her secrets. He fought like a man possessed, every day getting faster and tougher, the anger inside him so strong it consumed every other feeling.

He rarely saw Samuel or Rachel. He could not face his aunt's knowing gaze. She had always known him better than anyone else; she would see he was struggling and would have

it all out of him in short order. He did not know if she knew everything about her cousin, but she must have known something, and a part of him was angry at her for not telling him. Samuel, too. He knew Rebecca had been his mother and they likely did not wish to besmirch her name to her own son, but did they not realize he would eventually hear of it? That their silence would be one more secret pressing on him, causing him to question everything?

Samuel was a good man—everyone said so. One of the best men they knew, the most loyal friend, the most honest steward, the most attentive husband. George had been proud of that. Even when they had occasionally disagreed, he had been proud to be a Wickham, proud to be Samuel’s son. And now... now, he was no one’s son. The bastard child of an unscrupulous woman who did not even have the decency to tell her own son who his father was.

What was he to do with that?



Samuel heard a crash and stepped into the hall. George was drunk again. He stumbled through the hall towards the stairs, his eyes blind to everything in his path. He stubbed his toe on a chair and cursed. Samuel lit a lamp and looked at George.

“Father!” cried George. “I didn’t mean to wake you. Forgive me.”

His words were slurred and Samuel looked at him with disgust. “At the tavern again, George?”

George hiccupped and smiled. “Celebrating.”

“And may I ask what you were celebrating?”

“Of course!” he cried, too loud for the small room. Realizing he was making too much noise, he dropped his voice to nearly a whisper and said, “Timothy got a new horse.”

“A new horse?”

George nodded.

“And this required celebrating late into the night?”

George grinned in that way that made him look like his mother and tilted his head. “S’not that late!” he protested.

Samuel looked at his watch and replied, “It’s nearly three in the morning. The sun will be up in a few hours.”

“S’just a little harmless fun,” replied George, testily.

“Go to bed, George. And when you rise, try to do your name a little more credit.” Samuel turned away to go back to his room and George stumbled after him.

“Old cripple, never has any fun!” he mumbled.

“What did you say?” said Samuel, turning to face his son.

“Nothing, sir,” said George, slightly frightened of the look on his father’s face.

“See that you don’t. Now go to bed.”

George shuffled off to his room and Samuel shook his head and returned to bed, praying for wisdom. Since George had returned from school, Samuel had not known what to do with

him. The boy had seemed happy at first, excited for his future and willing to work hard to attain it. But he was so irritable and feckless now. What had happened?

Samuel did not know if it was the friends he had made while at school, or his mother coming out in him. She had filled the boy's head with nonsense for years, telling him he would make a good friend for young Darcy, that if he could ingratiate himself enough, the master would see him set up for life. Samuel had tried to correct her teachings with common sense and a good example, but she was his mother and the picture she sold looked more appealing than Samuel's promise that a life of hard work would bring its own rewards.

Samuel rolled over and tried to sleep. He would have to sort out what to do with his son soon enough, but he would come to no conclusions tonight.



In the morning, the two awkwardly circled each other as they prepared their morning meal. Samuel sliced bread and slathered it with butter, George cut an apple down the middle and gave half of it to his father. They sat by the fire, quietly eating. George moved slowly and spoke little, his head hurting and his body weak. He did not know what his father was thinking, but he knew by Samuel's uncharacteristic silence that he was angry, or worse, disappointed.

Eventually, George could take the censuring looks no longer and said, full of resentment, "You might think a little better of

your only son.”

Something compelled him to look up at his father. Samuel was looking back at him with a look he could not name, but George saw doubt in his father’s eyes.

Samuel looked away, saying nothing, and suddenly George knew. Samuel Wickham doubted George was his son.

He had always doubted it.



“Young George came to see me,” said Mr. Darcy to Samuel a few days later.

“Oh? What did he want?” replied Samuel.

“He wishes to study further. We discussed the church but agreed he has not the temperament for it. He suggested the law.”

Wickham looked at him carefully. “And what was your response?”

“I told him that if he would apply himself diligently to his studies and remain in good standing with his tutors, I would support him.”

“You do not have to do that,” protested Samuel.

“I know, but he is your only son, and you are my oldest friend.”

Samuel sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t know if that’s best,” said Wickham carefully.

“What do you mean?”

“University or something similar is a great expense, and if you are doing it only because George is my son...” he hesitated, and Darcy looked at him in expectation. “Have you ever wondered why there were never more children? Or why young George looks suspiciously like Byron Hobbs?”

“The tavern keeper?”

“One and the same.” Wickham swirled his brandy around slowly, watching the light play off the cut glass.

“Do you truly think he is George’s natural father?” Darcy’s eyes were wide as he sat forward, all attention.

Wickham shrugged. “Like as not. Could be anyone, really. George looks an awful lot like Becky—her nose, her eyes, her smile. But I’ve seen Byron with his shirt off. Something in the set of his shoulders.” He trailed off, his mind drifting.

“But surely that is thin evidence to hang your theory on! Why, any man might have his shoulders!”

Wickham shrugged again. “I have reason to believe the boy isn’t mine.”

Darcy leaned back, suspecting they had reached the crux of the matter. “Your injuries?”

Wickham looked to the floor. “At the time, the surgeon said I may not ever sire children. Said he’d seen it in injuries like mine. Something inside becomes disconnected.” He swirled his glass again and studied the pattern in the thick rug. “When Becky told me she was expecting, I thought the doctor must be

wrong, but then no more children came. And Becky, she, well, she had a man's appetites, to put it kindly. It wouldn't surprise me to learn he wasn't mine."

"But will you ever know? Would she have told anyone? Would she have even known herself?"

"I don't know. She may have told Rachel, but I couldn't ask her that."

"I imagine not." George sat back, thinking about his friend's dilemma.

He was not surprised. Rebecca had been terribly indiscreet and had she not been his friend's wife, he would have banned her from Pemberley years ago. She was a fool for entering into an affair before she had had her first child. But if she suspected Wickham was unable to father a babe, could that have been her reason? No! She was not the maternal sort. And would she have known? She was with child less than six months after they had wed. She could not have suspected in so short a time. Unless there were other things Wickham was not telling him... No, he would not ask. What happened between a man and his wife behind closed doors was no one's business but theirs—even if nothing much was happening.

"Regardless, you have accepted him as your son and he bears your name. We will never know otherwise. I mean to do what I can for him. Even if you are not his father, I am his godfather and I have the means to be of assistance."

Samuel looked at him with some surprise, then nodded in resignation. It was his friend's money to do with as he pleased,

whether Samuel felt right about it or not. “Nothing I say will change your mind, will it?”

George smiled brightly. “No, my mind is set. Let us talk of more pleasant matters. Have you found me another estate?”

Wickham sighed and laid a paper on the desk between them. “I think this one might do for Master Luke. It is only thirty miles away, and the owner would like a discreet sale, quick, if possible...”



Rachel stepped into her dark cottage and hung her shawl on the peg beside the door, then mechanically reached for a candle and lit it.

“Hello, Aunt.”

She leapt into the air and clutched her heart. “George Wickham! You scared me half to death!”

“Forgive me, I did not intend to startle you.”

She looked to where he sat by the empty fireplace, his clothes disheveled and his hair falling across his eyes. Ruffled, sandy hair, curled just like hers.

“Would you build a fire? I’ll make us some tea.”

He stacked the logs neatly and lit them while she shuffled about her small kitchen, preparing a tray. She set the kettle on the fire and sat beside her nephew.

“What brings you here, dear boy?”

He choked on a laugh. “You are the only who has ever called me that.”

She looked at him, her bright blue eyes searching his, and he hung his head.

“Have you always known Samuel Wickham isn’t my father?” he asked, his eyes on the carpet.

Rachel took a deep breath, then said steadily, “I have long suspected, yes.”

He raised red eyes to hers. “How could you not tell me?”

“What good would it have done? And I could not be sure. I doubt even your mother was certain. You look so much like her... She likely thought your looks would eventually give it away, but you are an Appleby through and through.”

He swallowed. “It is certain. Samuel knows. He knows he is not my father.”

She gasped. “He told you this?”

“In a way.”

She sat beside him silently, one hand absently tapping against the other. The kettle whistled and she poured water into the teapot, setting it to steep.

“Do you know who he is? My true father?”

“Samuel Wickham is your father as sure as I am your aunt. He sheltered you, clothed you, fed you, gave you a name and an education. You are his son, in all but blood.”

“What if my blood is the problem? What if I am rotten to the core, like my mother?”

“Who told you that about your mother?”

“It’s amazing how much people will talk with enough brandy in them.”

Rachel sighed. “Your mother was a very unhappy woman. She did not know how to be content. No matter what she had, it was never enough for her. That does not mean she did not love you, in her way.”

He snorted. “‘In her way.’ You know that is always what people say when someone is found lacking. ‘He tried in his way,’ ‘he is clever in his way,’ when we all know he is dumb as a post.”

Rachel rubbed his back, searching for a response. “I have known you since the day you were born, George Wickham, and you are not rotten. You were a sweet, generous boy, and I know that boy is in you somewhere.”

George hung his head lower and released a ragged breath. “I fear I have lost that boy forever, Auntie.”

She smiled sadly at the childish name. “That is impossible,” she whispered. “We are none of us irredeemable.”

“Tell me who he is.”

She did not have to ask who he meant. “I believe he was a guest of the Darcys. They hosted a family party over the festive season and Rachel had a few new baubles. When I

asked her about them, she smiled coyly and said they were from a friend. I knew what kind of ‘friend’ she meant.”

“You do not know his name?”

“From something Rachel said, I gather it was a relative of Lady Anne’s. She mentioned her sisters.”

Wickham thought of the Fitzwilliam family he knew. Lady Anne had an extensive family, and she often referred to her cousin Julia as the sister she wished she had had. It could be any number of men. Lord Matlock, Lord Livingstone, General Fitzwilliam, Sir Lewis de Bourgh. There were too many to choose from.

“How will I ever know?”

“You may not ever know. We do not get to know everything in this life. You must find what peace you can.”

“But what if—” his voice broke.

“George Samuel Wickham, I’ll not have you obsessing over things you cannot change.”

He sniffled, dragging a breath into his lungs to quell the need to bury his head on his aunt’s chest and cry his heart out.

“You were raised by a good man, an honorable man. And if one of Lady Anne’s relations sired you, you have nobility in your blood.” She squared her shoulders and took his chin in her hand and turned him to face her. “And regardless of how your mother behaved, you are my family. My blood is in your veins as sure as you sit before me. And the Connelys are good, honest people. You remember *that*.”

He nodded shakily, his jaw trembling. She pulled him to her, as she had done so many times when he was a child, and stroked his hair as he cried on her shoulder.

“I wish you were my mother,” he said so quietly she almost didn’t hear it.

“You are the son of my heart, if not of my body. And that just might be better.”



Breakfast the next morning was subdued. Rachel smiled at her nephew softly. She knew she was the only one he didn’t pretend with, the only person he showed his softer side to.

She passed him the toasting rack and he held it over the fire as she placed a crock of butter on the table.

“Do the oranges come from Pemberley?” he asked as he sat across from her, slathering jam on his toast.

“Yes. Lady Anne is always sending over something or other. She is a generous lady.”

He nodded and ate his toast in silence.

Her steady blue gaze, eyes that matched his own, stared back at him until he confessed, “I have made a great mess of things, Aunt.”

She continued to regard him frankly. “Tell me.”

“I’ve lost Fitz.”

She frowned. She had heard nothing of it. The friendship between George Darcy and Samuel Wickham was legendary. Their sons could not fall out without people talking of it. “I know you and young Darcy have not spent as much time together as you used to, but I did not know you’d had a falling out. What happened?”

George flushed and looked down, shame all over his face. “Nora. Eleanor, that is. She, I, uh, I... importuned her.”

“George!” she gasped. “You didn’t...” she couldn’t bring herself to finish the question.

He met her horrified gaze and held up his hands. “No! Not that! No! I...” he looked down, searching for words. “I kissed her, and she did not wish it, so she slapped me. Quite rightly. But I became angry and grabbed her arms, then Darcy pulled me off.”

Rachel’s eyes were wide. “Mr. Darcy discovered you?”

“Fitzwilliam, not his father.”

Rachel nodded, her mind reeling. “George Darcy likely would have seen you horse whipped.”

Wickham nodded and looked away. “I’ve no doubt of it.” He swallowed and added quietly, “But my punishment was much worse.” He met her gaze. “I’ve lost my oldest friend.”

“Oh, George,” she said softly. She reached across the table and placed her hand over his.

“I don’t know why I...” he shook his head and looked to the ceiling. “Father and I had quarreled, and I thought to prove I

was a man. That a man goes after what he wants, that he..."

"Takes what he wants?"

He nodded. "And Nora... I had always... liked her," he said awkwardly. "I knew it was wrong as soon as I looked into her eyes. I frightened her. Sweet little Nora." He hung his head in shame. "I saw something beautiful and I wanted it, so I just took it. I wanted her for myself, and I wanted her to want me. She did not, and I reacted like a spoiled child." He laughed without humor. "Are those the actions of a man?"

She smiled sadly at him. "You are not beyond redemption, George. The fact that you recognize you did wrong, proves that. You would not feel badly about it now if you were truly rotten."

His head popped up at that, a tiny ray of hope lighting his eyes.

"I think a little bit of Samuel might be in you after all." She smiled and squeezed his hand. "I have to get to the orphanage. Will you join me? You haven't visited the children in some time. They would like it if you read to them."

He smiled wearily. "I would like that."



Pemberley, One Week Earlier

"I must tell Father. He will see George banned from the house," Fitzwilliam said urgently.

“What will be his reason? What will the servants say?” replied Nora.

“They do not need a reason. Who cares what they say!”

“They will say I am the niece of a butcher and they expected no better. There will be rumors. I will be stared at, gossiped about. Please, Fitzwilliam, say nothing. Ban him if you must, but do not involve your father.”

Fitzwilliam sighed and looked to the ceiling, then met her earnest gaze. “Very well. I will do as you wish. But if I see George Wickham coming within fifty feet of you, I will lay him out.”

“I’ve no doubt of it, Brother.” She smiled sweetly at him and he returned it wryly, shaking his head.

“You have always been too persuasive, Nora.”

“You say that like it is a bad thing.” He shook his head again and she reached up to kiss his cheek. “Thank you. You are the best brother I could ever wish for.”



Darcy dismounted in front of the cottage and strode up the curving path with purpose, stopping when he reached the bright blue door and banging on the knocker. George Wickham opened the door slowly, looking at his childhood friend with apprehension.

“What can I do for you, Darcy?”

“Step outside, Wickham,” Darcy said coldly.

George obeyed, more out of habit than thought, and stood in the bright sunshine, ready to meet his fate. At eighteen, Darcy was several inches taller than him and easily two stone heavier. There would be no doubt of the winner if it were to come to fisticuffs. And Darcy was filled with righteous anger, while George Wickham was full up of injured pride and wounded vanity.

Darcy stared down at his former friend, then said with alarming clarity, “You are never to set foot in Pemberley House or its surrounds again unless it is by specific invitation. You are never to speak to Nora again. Do not look at her, do not come near her, do not go into a shop she is in. If you see her walking down the street, cross to the other side. If she is attending church in Lambton, go to Kympton. If you are invited to the same party, decline the invitation. Do you understand? Can I be plainer?”

Wickham shrank back from the intensity of Darcy’s voice. The larger man towered above him, and for a moment, Wickham thought he was being lectured by Mr. Darcy Sr. and not the boy he had chased toads with as a child.

“I understand you perfectly, Darcy. I will stay well away from Nora.”

“She is Miss Mason to you.”

Wickham nodded and looked at his shoes. He supposed he deserved that.

Darcy turned to leave without another word and Wickham snapped his head up, springing after him.

“Darcy, wait!”

Darcy stopped and looked over his shoulder, his eyes cold. “Yes?”

“Won’t you come in for a drink? Father’s got a new brandy we could—”

Darcy cut him off. “Do you honestly think I would sit and drink with the man who importuned my sister?” He scoffed when he saw George’s expression. “You do. Let me be frank, Wickham. Our friendship is at an end. You have lost my respect and my good opinion. I can only be ashamed of my own feelings prior to this—I cannot believe I was so blind as to call you friend.”

He turned and walked away, catching only a glimpse of Wickham’s stricken countenance.

CHAPTER 33



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 17 November, 1811

Jane and Elizabeth were not certain why they had been packed off to Netherfield for a few days' visit, but Jane was happy to be near Mr. Bingley, and Elizabeth was happy to miss her father's cousin, who sounded like a pompous boor in his letter. If he truly did intend to take a bride from Longbourn, she knew her mother would serve her up on a silver salver. Not only was she the second eldest (Mrs. Bennet would never waste Jane's beauty on a lowly parson), but she was also her mother's least favorite and most vexing daughter. Mrs. Bennet would congratulate herself on doing the impossible if she married Elizabeth off, especially if it was accomplished by such simple means as hosting her father's cousin. And of course it would keep Longbourn in the family and save her mother from the hedgerows.

They arrived in time for a late tea—Miss Bingley kept Town hours, much to the chagrin of everyone but herself—and went up to their rooms to dress for dinner. They were given linked chambers a few doors down from Georgiana in the

guest wing. The rooms were small but well furnished, and Elizabeth correctly assumed Miss Bingley had put them in the least-nice-though-still-acceptable rooms.

Lady Anne said she would send her maid to tend them, and they dressed for dinner in the fine gowns their mother had insisted they pack. Mr. Bingley was paying Jane a great deal of attention, after all, and Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy were both bachelors. Elizabeth should present herself as best she could. Her mother had tried to remove the fichu from her trunk twice before Elizabeth folded it up tightly and tucked it into her reticule. She would dress well, but she would not put herself on display like wares in a shop window. Once their hair was arranged and their buttons done up, the maid bustled off to tend her mistress and Jane set to adding pins topped with tiny pearls to Elizabeth's hair.

“Do you know why we are here, Lizzy? The decision was made so suddenly,” asked Jane.

“I have a few ideas. I imagine Lady Anne had something to do with it. If Mr. Collins does intend to seek a bride from among us, Mama likely wanted you out of the way so the rest of us would appear prettier without the comparison.”

“Oh, stop it, Lizzy! I have told you many times you mustn't compare us. We are so very different. It is like comparing—”

“Horses and goats?”

“Lizzy!”

“I know, I know, Jane,” she said with an indulgent smile. “We are all pretty flowers in a varied garden, each valued for its own properties.”

Jane tried to cover her sigh with a laugh. “It is true! Each of our sisters is quite lovely in her way.”

“Yes, Mary is a holly shrub, pretty against a dull winter landscape, but will sting you if you touch it, and Kitty is a petunia, delicate and pretty, and droops in a heavy rain.”

“You have forgotten Lydia,” said Jane gamely.

“Lydia is a gladiola. Brightly colored, but top heavy and prone to falling over.”

Jane laughed and flushed, covering her mouth. “You have a wicked tongue, sister.”

“And you love me for it. Now, shall I do?” she asked, turning her head side to side and checking her hair in the mirror.

“You look lovely.”

They left the room and were nearing the staircase when Jane said, “I am curious. If Kitty is a petunia, what kind of flower am I? Or you, for that matter?”

“Do you really need to ask? You are a rose, the queen of the garden, complete with a sweet smell and a preference for sunny mornings.”

Jane rolled her eyes and turned to the stairs. “And you?”

“I am a cowslip. Grown in wild fields and mixed with brandy to make into wine. Too much will make you sick.”

Jane gave her sister a sidelong glance. “You are very clever, sister, but I think you are a zinnia.”

“Oh?”

“Grown in garden and field alike, but bright and cheerful, in a variety of colors and moods.”

Elizabeth looped her arm through Jane’s and smiled sunnily at her. “I have changed my mind. You are not a rose, for you have no thorns at all and are not the least bit fussy. You are a ranunculus, rare and intricate, with a strong stem.”



Dinner was an oddly formal affair. Lady Anne supposed Miss Bingley had made it so in order to keep the Bennet ladies in their place. However, Caroline had not counted on the mischievous behavior of Lady Marianne or Richard, both fond of the Miss Bennets and a good joke, and entitled enough to believe they could sit wherever they liked, despite the wishes of their hostess. Normally, Lady Anne would chastise them for such behavior, but she did not approve of Miss Bingley’s tactics, so she watched quietly from the side as her niece and nephew utterly ruined Miss Bingley’s plans.

Generally, in such a setting and with such a familiar party, each person would have chosen her own seat. In a more formal affair, the two highest ranking gentlemen would have sat on

either side of the hostess. This company, however, presented something of a conundrum. Mr. Darcy was the wealthiest gentleman present and in control of his own estate, thus he should be on Caroline Bingley's right. On her left should be the next ranking gentleman, which would be either Colonel Pickering or Colonel Fitzwilliam. They were of the same rank in the army, and both the second son of an earl. Pickering was married, and his wife was the daughter of an earl, which might have decided the issue, except that Colonel Fitzwilliam's elder brother, the viscount, was unmarried, had no children, and according to reliable gossip, prone to reckless behavior. Meaning Colonel Fitzwilliam might soon be the viscount and then the earl, and if that was so, Caroline ought to take every opportunity to impress him, as well as keep him away from the Bennet ladies. He was entirely too fond of Miss Elizabeth and she would not allow that impertinent miss to become a countess under her roof.

Lady Anne watched Caroline moving the place cards around the table, carefully deciding who would go where. Colonel Pickering ended up on one side of Miss Elizabeth with Mr. Hurst on her other, while Colonel Fitzwilliam was placed to Miss Bingley's left. Lady Anne left the dining room before a giggle could escape her. She was almost looking forward to Richard's antics. There was a reason he was her favorite nephew, after all.



Caroline Bingley was incensed. Had he no respect? No decorum? Could the man not *read*?

After spending nearly a half hour deciding the perfect seating arrangement, Colonel Fitzwilliam had led Jane Bennet directly to Bingley's left, the chair with Lady Marianne's name on it, settled her there, and then sat beside her! How could he? He was meant to sit next to *her*. To find *her* charming and lovely in the candlelight. Not to mention that her brother spent quite enough time mooning over Miss Bennet. There was no need to give him more opportunity.

He then called his cousin Georgiana over to sit beside him, further throwing off her arrangements. Lady Anne was led in by her son, who settled her next to Bingley, thankfully in the correct seat, but instead of moving to the foot of the table to sit next to Caroline, he sat next to his mother in the seat reserved for Colonel Pickering! Miss Elizabeth's name was on the next seat, and she (the little chit) had the gall to sit there! Next to *her* Mr. Darcy!

Mr. Hurst was meant to sit next to Miss Elizabeth, but instead Lady Marianne casually picked up the place card as if it were her table and not Miss Bingley's and placed it in front of the chair to her left, the one that should have been Mr. Darcy's, and sat in the chair intended for Mr. Hurst. Mr. Hurst, not understanding all of the goings on and not caring for much beyond his upcoming meal, took the seat with his name in front of it, ignoring the place card proclaiming it also Mr. Darcy's seat, and happily settled himself between Lady Marianne and Caroline.

Caroline's jaw was clenched so tightly her jaw ached. At least Colonel Pickering was on her left. He was married, but he was a good conversationalist and well connected. She should make of it what she could, but for the entirety of the first course, she was too angry to care and let her sister Louisa, sat on his other side, entertain him.

Lady Anne had some level of pity for Caroline. She was the hostess and her preferences had been flagrantly disregarded. However, she was also a singularly unpleasant woman and a grasping, social-climbing snob. It was difficult to feel too badly for her—especially since she had set her cap at Lady Anne's eldest son. A mother could only take so much, so while she was thankful for the Bingley's hospitality, she was still a Fitzwilliam and her blood ran bluer than the Channel. No son of hers would marry the likes of Caroline Bingley.

Dinner progressed apace, Mr. Bingley doting over Jane as she blushed and looked at her plate more than anything else, Colonel Fitzwilliam entertaining Georgiana with what were likely fabricated stories of life on the peninsula, and Elizabeth and Lady Marianne talking a mile a minute as poor Mr. Darcy tried to keep up.

Elizabeth was sat between the two cousins and spent her time turning back and forth between them, the conversation with one almost always including the other. She found they were very much like brother and sister, somewhat like Charlotte and her younger brother, and she enjoyed watching their interactions. She saw a side of Mr. Darcy she had not seen before. He rolled his eyes, sighed when his cousin teased

him, and often gave as good as he got. She was more intrigued with him than ever, and when the ladies left the gentleman, she gave him a smile that left him rather short of breath.

In the drawing room, Miss Bingley commanded their attention by setting out the card table, hoping to occupy most of the ladies so that when the gentleman entered, she would be free to attend to Mr. Darcy while the Bennet sisters and the obnoxious Lady Marianne would be occupied with their game. Alas, her plans were thwarted when Lady Anne asked Georgiana to perform for them on the pianoforte. Miss Elizabeth offered to turn her pages, and just before they sat down to play—Caroline thinking she would be a good hostess and offer to sit out—a great wail was heard and Lady Marianne rushed out of the room to attend her squalling babe above stairs. Caroline was forced to make up a fourth with her sister Louisa, Lady Anne, and Jane Bennet. She hid her disappointment well, smiling and dealing the cards.

Lady Anne was not fooled. She knew exactly what Caroline was doing. Her own sister had engineered such things for years and Anne was well versed in foiling her schemes. She decided she would take this opportunity to get to know Jane Bennet better. After all, Bingley had said his intentions to her were honorable, and he had promised Lady Anne that the moment he realized he did not wish Miss Bennet for a wife—if he realized it—he would withdraw his attentions and politely take his leave of the lady. In the meantime, he would be circumspect and respectful.

Anne thought she could recognize the look of love in a man, and Mr. Bingley loved Miss Bennet, she was certain of it. He may only need a bit of encouragement from the lady.

“Miss Bennet, do you ride?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Would you like to join me on a ride tomorrow morning if the weather is agreeable?”

Jane smiled happily at her. “I would like that, my lady.”

Caroline looked between the two of them, her mouth hanging open. She had been sharing a roof with Lady Anne for nearly two months and they had not even taken tea alone! How had this creature wormed her way into her good graces? Searching her mind for an explanation to this unprecedented event, she eventually concluded that the great lady must be considering Miss Bennet for Colonel Fitzwilliam, or perhaps as a friend for Georgiana, though there were several years between them. What other explanation could there be for her singling Miss Bennet out so blatantly?

The gentlemen joined them after only half an hour and Mr. Darcy went straight to the pianoforte where Elizabeth and Georgiana were giggling their way through a duet.

“What are you playing, G?”

“Only a little nonsense, brother. Shall you join us?”

“Do you play, Mr. Darcy?” asked Elizabeth.

“A little.”

Georgiana elbowed him. “You play much more than a little.” She twisted to face Elizabeth. “Nora was learning to play and she was becoming quite good, and Fitzwilliam became rather jealous that she was more accomplished than him, so he asked Mother to teach him as well. He is quite good now.”

Darcy rolled his eyes. “I was not jealous, Georgiana. Nora merely made it look more fun than I had previously found it.”

“Then I must hear you, sir!” Elizabeth stood and moved away from the bench to make space for him.

Darcy looked very put upon, but decided there was no point in arguing and sat next to his sister and looked at her expectantly. “What are we playing, Georgie?”

She nudged his shoulder with hers. “You said you would not call me that any longer.”

“And you said you would not goad me into playing in public.”

Elizabeth laughed gaily at their banter.

“Let us play this duet.” Georgiana set sheet music on the stand and they studied it together for a minute before beginning to play.

Elizabeth read along and deftly reached across to turn the pages when they reached the end of the side. Darcy took a quick intake of breath and fumbled the notes a bit, surprised by her sudden nearness. Georgiana smirked but refrained from

commenting on her staid elder brother's nerves around a pretty girl.

On they played until the piece came to an end and the room's occupants broke into a round of applause.

"That was lovely. Will you play another?" asked Lady Anne.

"What should you like to hear, Mother?"

"I have not heard Miss Elizabeth sing in some time. Would you favor us, my dear?"

Elizabeth answered, "If you wish, my lady, though I am afraid you will be disappointed. I do not practice as often as I should."

"I shall be the judge of that."

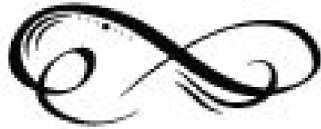
With a shake of her head and a quick conference with Georgiana, who agreed to accompany her, she began to sing a simple tune she knew well and could perform credibly, though it was not particularly challenging.

Darcy was relieved to be out of the spotlight and stood with the colonels, watching the ladies perform. He could not help but think he would like to spend many evenings in such a way. Georgiana got along with Elizabeth wonderfully, and his mother clearly liked her. She would fit into his family perfectly. Bingley would likely propose to Miss Bennet soon, and then they would be brothers. He was not overly fond of the Bennet family as a whole, but he found some members more tolerable than others, and they were not so bad when

taken one by one. His mother had made a friend of Mrs. Bennet, though he could still not understand why. Regardless of the reasons, their friendship would make an alliance easier.

By the time he fell asleep that night, Darcy had made up his mind. He would offer his hand to Elizabeth Bennet.

CHAPTER 34



*W*inter, 1804

3 February, 1804

Dryden Manor

Dear Fitz,

Mother is being insufferable. She insists I marry this season. She truly wanted me to marry last season, but there was no one I could stand to sit through a meal with, let alone live in a house with. Father is being lovely, but he will not tell Mother to retreat. I do not know if this is because he agrees with her, or if he is simply trying to avoid conflict.

Fitz, what am I to do? I have always vowed never to marry. The only men's company I actually enjoy is yours and father's. And my brothers' when they are being well-behaved. All the men in town expect me to simper and compliment them and have no thoughts in my head. Or no thoughts besides those of them. I overheard Mr. Burnes (you remember him—the one who

speaks too loudly and thinks everything he says is wittier than it is) saying men do not want silly wives. But he has recently become engaged to Maria Simpson, and seems quite enamored of her I might add, yet she is one of the silliest women I have ever met. She actually thought Morocco was next to Switzerland. Morocco!

It is all so frustrating. I would be perfectly happy to live out my days at the manor, unmarried. But Mother has some notion in her mind that the family honor will be stained if I do not make a good match. She has been scheming with her friends. She wishes me to set my cap at Timothy Monroe. Besides the fact that he is not as tall as I am (you are the only man who ever makes me feel petite, bless you!), he is a dreadful bore. I am sure he could make some short woman very happy, but I am not she.

Father has promised me that he will not enter into any contracts without my agreement. I was never so relieved as when he gave me his assurances. I cannot believe we have come to this. I knew Mother and I did not agree on most things (very well, nearly everything), but I did not truly think she would wish me to be unhappy in marriage.

What am I to do? Mother will insist on introducing me to every eligible bachelor between twenty and forty-five. It will be a deluge of gentlemen. If I refuse, she will make me as miserable as she possibly can. She might even send me to Rosings if she is feeling especially vindictive. Perhaps I should ask Father to make my dowry available to me so that I may

live on my own. But it would be a very great scandal, and I would miss Arabella and the boys.

Oh bother! Please Fitz, be a good cousin and do something ridiculous to draw Mother's attention away from me, I beg of you.

We shall leave for London Thursday, so send your reply to Livingstone House.

Your exasperated cousin,

Marianne

10 February, 1804

Cambridge

My dear Marianne,

I am truly sorry. I know it must be insufferably difficult. I can only imagine what will happen to me when I enter the marriage mart. I'm sure I will be asking you to cause a diversion while I sneak out the back of every ball Mother forces me to go to.

As far as doing something to distract attention from you, I think Alexander may have accomplished just that. He has gotten himself into trouble with Lord Alsbury's son—the drunken one, not the good one. Apparently, Alexander said something offensive about Alsbury's sister, Alsbury challenged Ally, and of course Ally had no choice but to accept if he ever wished to show his face in Town again. He could have chosen

swords, and he would have stood a good chance of winning. Pistols would have been more dangerous, but Ally is a decent shot, though I do not know about Alsbury. But, no. Our cousin did neither of those things. They are too conventional and Ally never makes a conventional choice when an unconventional one is at hand.

He chose fisticuffs. Fisticuffs!!!

Alexander Fitzwilliam, of the foppish hair and vanity untold, who ordered not one but three silk jackets (one with lace on the cuffs, the horror), who never travels more than ten miles without his valet, and who thinks getting up before noon to be a sign of low breeding, has agreed to box his opponent in a public forum to defend his right to insult whomever he chooses.

Shall that be enough to distract Lady Julia, do you think?

I am certain Alexander will come through it with his health intact, but his dignity may be another story altogether. Though I know Ally will blame the other man (when has he not?), I cannot blame Alsbury. A sister is a sister. I doubt I could refrain if someone insulted Georgiana or Nora. I would say I would do the same for you, but we both know you would say that you are perfectly capable of defending your own honor and as I have seen you shoot, I believe you.

Alexander and his wayward behavior aside, I do feel badly for you. I know things have never been easy between you and your mother. Pemberley is always open to you if you need a respite. You know Lady Anne would do anything for you, and

Father adores you. Darcy House is currently closed, but I believe Mother intends to go to Town for some shopping late this spring. You should ask her if you may stay with her for some time. You and Lady Julia may benefit from some time apart.

I must be grateful to Alexander for causing a scandal and sparing me of the duty of distracting Lady Julia. I fear I would not be good at creating a diversion. I am keeping mostly to my books and the more studious friends I have long had. Do you remember Bingley, the boy who fagged for me at Eton? He is at Cambridge now, and he has quite the head for numbers. He is studying mathematics. The sums he can do in his head make our old games look like child's play. I have introduced him to David (you recall him—the short boy with entirely too much hair and the constantly smudged spectacles) and the two of them are getting on famously. Bingley is much more gregarious than I am—more like our cousin Richard without the penchant for getting into trouble. Perhaps I will invite him to join us for a visit to Town if we come down.

Your boring cousin,

Fitz

Livingstone House, London

20 February, 1804

Dear Fitz,

I have survived the first week in Town intact. Mother dragged me to a musical evening, two salons (where I was not permitted to say a word, even though a few of the topics were actually interesting) and an early ball thrown by some old school friend of hers.

She has secured vouchers to Almac's and has ordered an obscene amount of clothing for me. I hate nearly everything she chose, so as a concession, she allowed me to choose one day's worth of clothing—a gown each for morning and evening, and another for dancing. Three would normally be enough, but as Mother has decided this is "THE Season" for me to wed, she has spent all of Father's money on gowns, parasols, spencers, cloaks, gloves, and shawls. I only wish I liked more of it.

I suppose that would be one good thing about marrying—I would be able to choose my own wardrobe.

Enough about me. Have you had a letter from Nora recently? I cannot believe she is wed! She always seems so young in my mind, but Mother says 18 is a perfectly good age to marry and then looks at me with such an expression that I vow never to mention a married woman again.

Last I heard from Nora, she was settled at the parsonage and in a state of domestic bliss so sweet it gave me a toothache. That was nearly two months ago. Do you have more recent information?

By the by, I heard all about Alexander's latest exploit in Town. Apparently, he was a bloody mess after the brawl, and I

cannot but think he got what he deserved. Several ladies were talking of it and a few were impertinent enough to ask me about it. I said, 'first sons will be first sons' or something to that effect (no offense to you, dear Fitz) and they left off. But you were right—it did an admirable job of distracting Mother. She has been with Lady Adele constantly, trying to mitigate the social damage.

Do you think Alexander is even aware of the work he causes for his mother and aunts when he behaves in such a fashion? Or is he entirely lost to the consideration of others?

I am including a sketch of the apricot-colored gown Mother chose for me. I thought you could use cheering and it is utterly laughable.

Your petulant cousin,

Marianne

Cambridge

3 March, 1804

Dear Marianne,

You are correct. Lady Julia has horrible taste in clothes. Has she actually made you wear that hideous concoction? I no longer think you petulant. You are clearly the victim of a grave crime if she forces you to wear such things when others can see you. Every feeling revolts.

I have had a letter from Nora, but it was short and rather unintelligible. Mother has hinted that she is in a family way, so I imagine that is why her letter was so brief—apparently, she has been ill.

Abara writes that his sister Madeline is to be married. Some fellow from London, I do not know much about him. But he seems to think he is a nice enough man, and that he and Madeline will do well together.

Soon you and I will be the only unmarried ones left of our set. Well, and Richard, of course, but I doubt he will ever marry. He will say it is because he is the second son and that women who prefer to follow the drum and can afford to marry him are few and far between, but you and I know it is because he could not stand to give up his precious freedom. With Ally carrying on the way he has been, Richard may be the one to succeed his father to the earldom, and then he will have to produce an heir. We shall see what he says then.

Luke has begun writing me letters. Apparently, Mr. Thistle is the same disciplinarian he ever was, for the penmanship was perfect and I know Luke well enough to know it could only be so on the third draft, at the earliest. I shall add a note to Georgiana's letter that he may send me shorter missives without fearing I will be offended. He should be outside riding, not trapped in the schoolroom. His letters will improve with time, though I know Mr. Thistle and Father would likely not agree with me.

Other than reporting that my family is safe and well, and that my studies are as engrossing as they ever were, minus one tutor who cannot seem to stay on topic or clearly convey what is in his mind to those who are listening to him, I have nothing much to write of.

Your bore of a cousin,

Fitz

Livingston House, London

15 March, 1804

Dear Fitz,

Why would you say Richard is unlikely to marry? He is affable and kind and terribly funny. Surely there are many women who would appreciate such qualities. And he is the son of an earl! I know he does not have much money of his own, but he is hardly destitute, and he does have his commission. He may not be the most handsome man, but he is hardly hideous!

If I were ever induced to marry, I would not wish for a handsome husband. I do not want to be constantly comparing myself to his superior beauty, nor would I wish to be married to the object of other's admiration. A nice, homely man, taller than myself of course, would do very well for me. Provided he doesn't mind that I prefer riding to needlepoint and am a better shot than he.

You see? This is precisely why I shall never marry. I doubt such a man exists, and if he does, I doubt I would be sensible enough to like him.

I went to a soiree yesterday with our Digby cousins. (Reggie's baby is lovely, by the way—he managed not to inherit his father's nose, lucky boy.) I was introduced to several of Reggie's friends, including a lady I think I may actually make a friend of. It is early days yet, but Jane Pickering seems an honest sort with a good sense of humor. I am hopeful I have found an ally for the ballroom.

I have another party to go to this evening, followed by a dinner and a ball, so I must close in order to sufficiently gird my loins.

Your beleaguered cousin,

Marianne

Cambridge

26 March, 1804

Dear Marianne,

You do yourself a disservice if you think you would compare unfavorably with a handsome man. Just because you do not look like your mother does not mean you are not handsome in your own right. Do stop saying such ridiculous things.

It is official. Nora is increasing, though I imagine you have had a letter from her by now. I can scarcely believe it. I shall

be an uncle. Well, an uncle of sorts. I have always thought of Nora as my sister. How could I not, growing up together as we did? I suppose Mother deserves the credit for treating her as a member of the family and not a poor relation or inconvenient ward.

Georgiana is so much younger than I am—she is my sister of course, but it is not the same as someone of one's own age, is it? Nora is beside me in so many of my childhood memories, almost as many as you are. I cannot see her as anything but family. I hope Nora is spared any heartache with her confinement.

Bingley has fallen in love. The daughter of one of the professors is a comely girl, and Bingley has decided she is an angel and worthy of an excess of his attention. I have cautioned him to be careful—he barely knows her—but he laughed at my concerns. Shall you wager half a crown that he will have forgotten her by the end of May?

Your unrepentant cousin,

Fitzwilliam

Livingstone House, London

4 April, 1804

Dear Fitz,

You have yourself a wager. I will go a step further and say not only will he have forgotten all about the comely professor's

daughter, but he will have fallen in love with someone else entirely. I shall use my winnings to buy a new gown in a more flattering color.

I was right about Miss Pickering. I should say Lady Jane, for her father is the Earl of Westbrook. Mother is happy I have made a 'suitable' friend. I refrained from rolling my eyes at her—I do not wish to be sent to Rosings again. I am too old to tolerate Lady Catherine with any semblance of civility.

Back to Lady Jane. I rather like her. She is delightfully funny and a very straightforward sort of person. I do not feel she is artful as so many people in Town are. We have dined with her family, including her two elder brothers, twice lately. Mother thinks I should try for the eldest brother, for he will be the earl one day, but I cannot like him. As a wife should like her husband, anyhow.

He is a perfectly decent man and I know no harm of him, but neither do I know any good of him. He is well-behaved and does not speak when he chews (you know how I abhor viewing half-masticated meat in a man's mouth—I shudder thinking of it), and he is correct in all his behavior, but that is all I know of him. He does not speak of books or politics or current events. We are in a war and his brother is in the army! How can he have nothing to say on the subject? And yet he does not.

There is nothing so terribly wrong with him, other than the fact that he is frightfully dull, but there is nothing much right

with him either, and I cannot marry a man simply because he chews with his mouth closed and my mother likes his title.

Lady J's other brother, Captain Henry Pickering, is quite entertaining. He regaled us with stories from the barracks and various military marches, and I was quite amused until Mother pulled me away on some fabricated excuse and led me to his dullard of a brother.

Fitz, I despair that Mother and I will never agree on what makes a person worthy, and therefore we shall never agree on whom I should or should not marry, and I am therefore doomed to unhappiness, or at least discord, in some form or another.

Am I being hopelessly dramatic?

Forgive me. You are right—everyone is marrying and while I still feel no burning need to do so myself, I do not wish to be left behind with nothing to do in life but tend to my mother. If I could travel and see the world, I would be quite happy to do so, but it is unheard of for a woman to do so on her own, so Mother says, and it is an unrealistic wish, I know. If only I had an elderly aunt who needed a companion for her travels!

I am doing it again—forgive me. You are a saint for listening to me whine and moan about what is a perfectly normal and in fact quite privileged life. I am terribly fortunate, I know. I could have been born to a farmer or a scullery maid. I should not squander the advantages I have had.

There, do I not sound reformed? Nora has been attempting it for so long—you must tell her of her success. She will be an

exemplary parson's wife. I would not do the position half the justice she shall.

And Madeline, married! I must have her direction if she is to be living in London. I shall call on her.

Your (mostly) reformed cousin,

Marianne

10 April, 1804

Cambridge

Dear Marianne,

I have had another letter from Abara. Madeline is wed and settled in London. Her husband is in some sort of trade, textile imports I believe, though I am not entirely certain. I have included her address here—it is on Gracechurch Street, near Cheapside. I would advise you not to tell Lady Julia where you are going before you set out. She will likely not be pleased with the address.

I cannot help but be impressed with the Abara family myself, despite their lack of connections. I'm sure you remember as well as I how Mr. Abara Sr. assisted Mother with her school, and if it weren't for him, we wouldn't have Nora. I cannot imagine the family without her. It would be such a dull, lonely place. Nora has not told me much of her time at the orphanage, but she always mentioned the old vicar in the

kindest terms, and Madeline has always been kind to her, as you know.

Abara's younger brother is in the Navy now, if you recall. Quite surprisingly, I had a letter from him recently. I hadn't heard from him in nearly two years, so you can imagine my surprise on receiving his last. He has traveled around the coast of Africa, and his stories are so stirring I felt I was there myself. I will share the letter with you when I visit Town next month. You will be amazed, and perhaps it will go some way to alleviating your wanderlust. He has made it to Lieutenant and has hopes of attaining commander. Captain will be difficult for him due to his background, but Mother has said she will prevail on her brother to put in a good word for him with the Admiralty. We shall see if anything comes of it.

We have sugar at last!—though by unusual means. You know how Mother refused to buy sugar from any but freed men, and Pemberley is generally well supplied, but she made me promise that while I was away, I would not use sugar of unsure origins. I thought at the time it was not a difficult promise to make, but I confess I did not think it through thoroughly when she asked it of me. Tea is dreadfully bitter without sugar. I made the mistake of saying as much to Nora in my last letter, and she berated me for three whole pages for even considering having a teacake of unknown provenance. She then involved my mother who forbore to send Lady Anne Approved sugar to the cook here, an act I am sorely embarrassed by, though I know I should not be.

I agree with her actions in principle. I should only like to buy from honest men and freed workers in everything I purchase. But I do wish my mother had not inserted herself at College and made such an ordeal of everything. No fewer than five of my classmates have made mention of my delicate constitution and need to have food supplied by my mother, as I cannot stomach the food of such hearty men as themselves. It is unpleasant.

Enough of me and my ridiculous problems. How goes your friendship with Lady Jane? Are you engaged to her brother yet, or have you escaped that indignity?

Your petty cousin,

Fitz

23 April, 1804

Livingstone House, London

My dear Fitz!

What you suffer at the hands of your unfeeling classmates! I shall play the diplomat and agree with all parties involved. Nora was right to upbraid you, because really, what is a little bitter tea to the freedom of untold numbers of people? But you are also correct that Lady Anne could have sent the sugar to you, not the cook, and avoided any embarrassment that way. Lady Anne is likely so used to managing these situations directly, and unused to a men's college (of course) that she did not think anything of it and did not mean to cause trouble for

you. I daresay she would walk over hot coals for you if she thought it would do you any good. I imagine that is also why you feel so guilty (you know you cannot hide it from me). You love your mother too much to be truly angry with her over something well meant and right besides, and are disgusted with yourself for caring about your classmates' reactions at all. Have I the right of it?

It will all blow over shortly, I am sure. Or you could petition the school to only use Freed sugar in all their own kitchens and dining rooms. They may be amenable.

My friendship with Lady Jane progresses apace. It is too bad that I find her brother utterly unappealing, for she would make a very fine sister. You know I love Arabella, but she is so much younger than I am, and our temperaments so very different—a woman of like mind and age would be just the thing! Alas, her brother is a bore and despite numerous outings and dinners, he has not improved on further acquaintance.

As for her other brother, the good colonel, he is quite entertaining! But he was born second instead of first, so I shall settle for being his good friend and laughing behind the backs of our mothers when they do the ridiculous things they are wont to do at every social occasion.

How goes it with Bingley? Is he still in love with the professor's comely daughter? Or has he found a new object for his affections? I do hope he moves on quickly, for I am in

desperate need of a new frock, one that does not make me look like a moving centerpiece.

Lady Anne writes that she will be in Town next week. I shall beg her to take me shopping. If she buys a gown with me, Mother cannot object, surely?

I am so glad you will soon be in Town! I wish to introduce you to Lady Jane and her brother. Fear not, I do not wish you to wed her, though you could certainly do worse in a wife. I think you far too young to wed. Remember what Father said—not a day before your twenty-fifth birthday. But she is becoming a dear friend and you are my very dearest friend, so of course I should like for you to know one another.

What fun we shall have! I will beg Lady A for an invitation when she arrives. We can sneak into the larder as we used to do. You know Cook always makes extra biscuits when you are home. You are lucky to be the oldest male in your house—everyone spoils you! I am the oldest female AND oldest child, but no one wishes to spoil me—only ask me when I am marrying. Surely there is SOMETHING more interesting to speak of?

Your anticipatory cousin,

Marianne

1 May, 1804

Cambridge

Marianne,

I am quite embarrassed at my latest bout of sulking. Please disregard it as behavior unbecoming of a gentleman and a Darcy.

I shall leave for Town Monday next. Mother wishes me to escort her to some exhibits and the theatre, but I am sure she would be happy to include you in most of our plans. Shall I find you at Darcy House when I arrive? I hope you can arrange it. It has been too long since we have shared a roof. I miss my favorite cousin.

And I cannot wait to meet your friends. I wonder you do not consider Lady Jane's brother, the colonel. You have a large dowry—I've heard your mother speak of it often enough. He has his pay, and he is the son of an earl. You would not live in very grand style, but I doubt Aunt Julia would bar you from the manor and you know you are welcome at Pemberley whenever you wish. You could make your home in Town and have plenty of visits to the country, or you could perhaps purchase a small estate, or lease a house. There must be some way, surely.

If you like him, that is. Do you like him? I cannot help but think you would be uniquely suited to be the wife of a colonel. I imagine you would enjoy following the drum. Perhaps you should consider it.

Your expectant cousin,

Fitz

5 May, 1804

Livingstone House, London

Fitz,

*My trunks are being packed for Darcy House as I write this, but I simply could not leave your last without a reply. I **have** considered the good colonel, as I am sure you have surmised by now, and I do agree that if I must wed, following the drum would be an ideal situation for one of my nature and desire for adventure. However, there is the small problem of us not being in the least bit attracted to one another. I begin to think I am unusual among women, for even those not terribly interested in marrying do seem to be affected at least somewhat by handsome gentlemen.*

The only time I have been interested in the opposite sex was my brief attraction to Abara all those years ago. (You haven't told Nora, have you? You did promise not to.) Even that tendre was short lived—not even a month, if I recall correctly, though you likely remember better than me as you were so appalled by my noticing anyone. And I am sure I was only attracted to him, no matter how briefly, because we spent so much time together that summer, and he talked to me as if I had a mind of my own, as you do, and I was ridiculously flattered by it. The only other men in my life to do so have been family—namely you and our fathers.

Could that be it? Am I not attracted by a handsome face or pretty words, but by respect and the desire to listen to me talk?

How droll!—and how very vain of me. Mama will have a fit—we mustn't say anything of it to her. She shall brand me a bluestocking (which would upset her greatly as she has already decided I am a Tomboy and we would spend hours discussing if a lady could be both), and despair of me forever.

I remove to Darcy House this evening and will be there when you arrive.

Your Bluestocking Tomboy of a cousin,

Marianne



“Fitz!” cried Marianne as she rushed to Darcy as he stepped into the morning room at the back of the house.

He laughed as he caught his flying cousin and used the momentum to spin them in a circle, as he had been doing since he had outgrown her at the age of seven and they had discovered centrifugal force on the lawns of Pemberley.

He squeezed her tightly for a moment, then set her down and looked into her shining eyes. “You look very well.”

“Thank you.”

“All right, you two, let me see my son,” said Lady Anne playfully.

Marianne laughed and stepped aside. Fitzwilliam bowed very properly to his mother. She hugged him tightly and pulled back, his arms still at her waist, and held his face in her hands.

She had done the same inspection each time he had come home for a school break or gone on a visit to his cousins' home. She turned him left and right, looking for scars or evidence he wasn't eating enough.

“Perfect,” she said gently, and kissed him on the cheek.

“It is good to see you, Mother.”

She asked about school and those of his friends she knew, and if his journey was comfortable, and whether he had met anyone new since she had seen him at the festive season. They chatted comfortably until it was time to dress for dinner, then shared a lively meal together, the three of them.

It reminded them all of the long summers they would spend together at Pemberley before Georgiana was born. George Darcy would often be out on the estate, and sometimes would leave for a few days on business, and Fitzwilliam and Marianne would have the run of Pemberley, meeting with Lady Anne for tea and picnics and walks in the garden. They had been idyllic summers, tinged with sadness though they were, and all three clearly felt the nostalgia of the evening as they sipped tea after dinner.

Soon enough Lady Anne went to bed and Marianne followed, giving her cousin a significant look as she left the room. An hour after she had retired, Marianne slipped a serviceable robe over the ridiculous lacy nightgown her mother insisted she wear and slipped through the servant's door. Darcy House had a labyrinth of passages used only by the staff, and she and Fitzwilliam had spent many hours as

children exploring them all. She counted the doors until she reached the one she was looking for and rapped lightly on the wood.

“I was wondering when you would come,” said Fitzwilliam as he opened the door for her. They were in his sitting room, a small room off his chamber. It had been a guest chamber years ago, but when Fitzwilliam came to London for the first time after entering Eton, when Georgiana was a baby, he discovered he had been moved out of the nursery and into the second finest chamber in the house, as befits the master-in-training. He had been ridiculously proud, and he’d solemnly chosen the green wallpaper and plush carpets with his mother, spending hours poring over sample books and design patterns. The small sitting room was for entertaining his particular friends, and while no one was closer to him than Marianne, she was not invited there formally due to her sex and the fact that they were not actually brother and sister, no matter how much they might feel like it.

“My apologies,” she said simply. “The maid insisted on brushing my hair one hundred strokes, to ‘make it shine,’ she said.” Marianne rolled her eyes and fell inelegantly into a chair by the fire. “Tell me everything. How is Cambridge?”

He settled more sedately into the chair across from her. “Cambridge is as it ever was. I owe you half a crown,” he said as he flicked a coin towards her.

She caught it with a smile. “So Bingley is in love with another angel already, is he?”

Fitzwilliam sighed. “Her name is Miss Watters. She is the sister of one of our classmates, and the prettiest girl he has ever seen.”

Marianne laughed happily. “Of course she is! He could not fall in love with a girl who was merely attractive. You will have to introduce me to this Bingley fellow some time. I feel as if I know him already from your accounts.”

“He is amiable. You will like him, though he is a bit younger than we are and it shows.”

She shrugged. “I do not mind a person’s age, so long as they have something interesting to say. I have spent three seasons with women and men alike from seventeen to seventy, and age has nothing to do with personality. Either you have one, or you do not.”

Fitzwilliam laughed quietly and shook his head. “What of you? Still unattracted to the good colonel?”

“I am afraid so,” she said dejectedly, sipping the brandy he had given her when she came in.

He sipped his own brandy in its heavy cut glass, swallowing it slowly. Marianne had the thought that he really was a very handsome man, sitting by the fire in his breeches and shirt sleeves, and a good man besides, and it would have been terribly convenient if they had fallen in love with each other, for she couldn’t think of another man she loved more besides her father, but the moment she even thought of kissing him, her insides coiled up and she felt sick and shuddery, like she would be ill. He would have to remain the brother of her heart,

though she thought he would eventually make a very good sort of husband to the right woman.

“I have been giving your theory some thought,” he said, swirling the amber liquid in his glass.

“Oh?”

“I do not think it so unusual. Many women are not interested in men on sight alone. They must get to know them, become friends of a sort, before they are desirous of more.”

“How do you know this?” she asked, shooting him a look.

“I am not completely inept,” he said with what she might have thought was a rakish smile on anyone else. “Nora talks to me, rather candidly as it turns out, and Mother has told me the importance of making a friend of a lady before entering into anything more serious. She seemed to be hinting at something, though I wasn’t sure what it was at the time. Now I wonder if this is what she meant—that attraction operates differently for women as for men.”

Marianne pondered his words for a moment. “I suppose there could be some truth to that, but I have seen enough ladies swoon over a dandy in a new coat to know that some women at least are attracted on sight.”

He tipped his head in acknowledgement of her response. “But you are not one of them.”

“No,” she sighed, “I am not. More’s the pity! I might have been married last year if I was.”

“How many proposals do you think you will turn down before you choose to accept one?” he asked with a fond smile.

“Oh, dozens! Mother wanted me to make a grand splash, you know.”

“Though I doubt she envisioned you as *The Lady Who Refused the Most Men*,” he replied with a grin.

She sighed playfully. “Poor Mother. Saddled with a daughter who cannot be what she wishes, and unfeeling enough not to care to try.”

“Yes, you are perfectly heartless. That is why you correspond with both your mother’s housekeepers and mine, and why every child at Mother’s orphanage receives a birthday gift from you, and why all the grooms in the stable love you more than their own sisters—Oof!” he cried as a pillow hit him soundly in the side of the head. “I should have never taught you to bowl.”

“You deserved it,” she said, completely unrepentant, her arms folded tightly across her chest.

“Don’t worry, Marianne,” he said softly. “The right man will come along.” He tugged her fingers gently and she allowed him to hold her hand for a moment, then pulled back and looked at the chess board on the table near the fire.

“Fancy a game?” she asked brightly.

“I’m white.”



Two nights later, Fitzwilliam had the opportunity to meet Marianne's mysterious colonel. It took him less than ten minutes to note that any lack of attraction was all on Marianne's side. When she was not looking, the colonel gazed at her with such fierce longing that Fitzwilliam looked away, the tips of his ears burning.

When the gentlemen gathered in the library after dinner, Fitzwilliam made of point of seeking out Colonel Pickering.

"We were introduced earlier. I am Fitzwilliam Darcy."

"Yes, from Derbyshire, right?"

"Yes. You hail from Lincolnshire?"

They chatted for a few more minutes, and Fitzwilliam got the distinct impression he was being questioned for some purpose, though he could not think what.

"I have heard much of your family from my cousin Lady Marianne."

"Yes, she mentioned you are close."

Ah, so that was it! He was concerned that Fitzwilliam was competition. Well, that would be easy enough to set to rights.

"Yes, we have grown up almost as brother and sister."

The colonel's brows rose at that.

"Thankfully, she has promised not to arrange a match with any of her friends for some years yet," Fitzwilliam added. If that did not set the record straight, he did not know what would.

When they rejoined the ladies, Darcy sought out his mother and Pickering went directly to Lady Marianne. He paid her very pointed attention and she seemed surprised at first, but by the end of the evening, she seemed to revel in his attention. All through the carriage ride home, her cheeks were rosy and her smile bright, and she waltzed up the stairs humming a merry tune, ignorant of her aunt and cousin's amusement.

Fitzwilliam looked at his mother and she sighed and smiled. "I wondered when he would get up the nerve to court her," she said.

"I think I was in the way."

She looked at him askance. "How do you mean?"

"I think Marianne mentioned me often enough that he thought a match was in the offing."

"Though her mother was pushing her towards his brother?"

Fitzwilliam shrugged. "He may have thought she preferred me."

"Yes, he seems the sort to not insert himself where he is not wanted. He would not pursue a woman whose heart belonged to another." He followed her into the drawing room and settled on the sofa. "They will do well together, I think."

"Yes, they likely will. She will enjoy following the drum."

"Poor Julia," laughed Anne.

"She will not be happy, will she?"

“No, she will not. But it is hardly a scandalous match, and Marianne could do much worse than the second son of an earl. And he is a good man besides.”

Fitzwilliam sighed. “Yes, he is.”



Over the next month, Darcy watched his favorite cousin and closest friend fall in love. He liked Pickering, and he approved of Marianne’s choice, but he could not but lament the loss of the closeness that had been between them.

He could feel their intimacy slipping away, like an invisible barrier growing between them. The day she announced her engagement, all smiles and happy tears, he congratulated her and wished them well, meaning every word of it, but keeping to himself how much he would miss her, and how he would grieve the passing of their shared youth. He knew there would be no more late-night taps on the servant’s door or sneaking into the larder after Cook had gone to bed. Pickering would not want his wife sneaking about another man’s house in her robe and nightrail.

But that did not mean Darcy did not wish, at least a little, that they could all remain young and carefree for a little while longer.

CHAPTER 35



*L*ondon, May 1804

To George's surprise, Mr. Darcy kept his word to support his study of the law. He packed his trunks and left Derbyshire in September, relieved to be leaving. Summer had been a complete disaster.

He had hurt Nora, a friend he had always cared for and respected. He saw her frightened expression each night when he lay down, during the day when his mind drifted, and every time he thought of Pemberley. He would be angry at himself forever for putting such fear in her eyes. His stupidity had cost him her friendship and that of Fitzwilliam, the closest thing to a brother he had ever had.

His father looked at him as if he were a bug under glass, studying him and trying to understand his inner workings. Rachel looked at him with pity, her eyes all soft and concerned, the way she looked at new children who came to the orphanage.

He could not stand all the stares and the probing looks. He needed a change of scenery.

When he left, he parted from his father on uncertain terms. Samuel did not know what was bothering his son, and George did not wish to speak of it. Rachel told her husband all would be well—George only needed a little time. He was at a difficult age and he had been a remarkably easygoing adolescent. They were due a little difficulty.

Samuel agreed and tried not to worry, but he vowed to write to George more frequently and schedule a visit to his university. Mr. Darcy owned a small estate nearby. He could go on the pretense of business so George would not feel ambushed.

The first two years he was in school, Samuel visited George thrice and wrote at least once a fortnight. Through the distance of letters, the men were able to communicate with less awkwardness and come to know one another in a new way. They were both pleasantly surprised by the camaraderie that sprang up between them.

George loved studying the law. There was a clarity to it, a surety that in the end, right would be done. At least, that was how he felt in the beginning. Once he had completed his first year, he began to change his mind. What had seemed so clear at first was open to interpretation, and many of the laws seemed extreme to him, and exceedingly unfair to women and children. He thought of the children at his aunt's orphanage, without a family to rely on or anyone to assist them in life. The law was most definitely not on their side. And if he were proved to be the bastard he suspected he was, it was not on his either.

In class debates, he focused all his considerable powers of personality on his opponents. He would charm, cajole, and flatter, twisting everything they said into a persuasive argument for his own cause. He looked into their eyes, carefully crafting his claims and watching their responses to see which were having the desired effect and which were not.

Thus George Wickham learned he had another valuable skill in addition to his innate charm: manipulation. He would never call it such, but the talent for directing events to his preferences that had so worried Samuel when George was a boy resurfaced and with much greater outcomes than getting his friends to play the game he had chosen.

He knew from whence this talent had come. His mother had been famous for it. She could charm honey from a bee, his aunt had said. Well, he was not his mother and he had no desire to be like her. But neither would he cut off his nose to spite his face. He would take what she had given him and make something of it. He would leave this wretched world better than he had found it. He would prove he was worthy of his father's name, by deed if not by blood.

He may be Rebecca Appleby's son, but he was a Wickham by name, and the Wickhams were good, honest people.



After his second year in university, George knew it was time to go home. There were apologies to be made and friendships to repair. Most importantly, he needed answers.

He knew the Darcys were in London and he had heard that Fitzwilliam had recently arrived there from Cambridge. With great trepidation, he sent a letter to his oldest friend. He did not know if Darcy would even read it, but he had to try.

To his surprise, he received a reply only a week later.

Wickham,

I will hear what you have to say. Let us meet in London on the 29th.

Darcy

Wickham entered Darcy House with nearly overwhelming nostalgia. Mr. Darcy had brought him and Fitzwilliam here when they were boys to buy their first proper suits for young gentleman. Fitzwilliam was entering Eton and George had been at school for two years already, but Mr. Darcy had thought he would enjoy the trip, and he said every man needed a proper suit of clothes. He smiled at the memory. He owed Mr. Darcy a letter; he would respond as soon as he returned to his hotel.

“Wickham,” Fitzwilliam’s face was blank, so different from how he had looked in years past.

“Darcy.” George nodded and followed him into his father’s study.

“What did you want to speak with me about?”

George swallowed, twisting the brim of his hat in his hands continuously. “Two things, really. I wanted to apologize again, for Nora. I don’t know what I was thinking. I am heartily ashamed of myself.” He hung his head and bit his lip. “I sent her a letter as well. David replied.”

Darcy snorted softly. “That is not so surprising. He is her husband now.”

George nodded. “She accepts my apology and hopes we may one day be on friendly terms again.” He looked wistfully at the bookcase. “David threatened to cut off my bollocks if I looked at her wrongly.”

Darcy chortled while George shook his head with a rueful smile at the trouble he had gotten himself into, and for a moment, it was like old times again.

“What was the second thing you wished to speak about?” Darcy’s voice was lighter, but still not quite friendly.

George took a deep breath. “I need to ask a favor.”

Darcy’s eyes hardened.

“An unusual one. I would like you to help me discover my father.”

“Your father? He is at Pemberley, as expected.”

“Not Samuel Wickham, my natural father.”

Darcy sat forward in his chair so quickly he nearly fell out of it. “Your natural father?”

George nodded.

“You are not Samuel Wickham’s son?”

“It is unlikely,” answered George quietly.

“Blimey.”

“Yes.”

Darcy huffed out a breath, his face a mask of confusion. “How could I possibly help with that? I was barely six months old when you were conceived.”

“I spoke with my Aunt Rachel, and she believes it was one of the visitors at Pemberley the winter after you were born.”

Darcy’s eyes grew large. “And you wish me to find out who was there?”

“I already know. Your mother’s family was visiting. Her brother the earl and his family, her brother General Fitzwilliam, Lord and Lady Livingstone, and Sir Lewis and Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

“And Rachel Wickham believes one of those men is your natural father?”

“I asked her about it a while ago. She said my mother had some new trinkets, expensive things, and that she hinted at a liaison with one of Lady Anne’s brothers.”

“That could be any of those men.”

“Exactly.”

Darcy leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin, deep in thought. “If there had been any trouble with one of the guests bothering the staff, there may be a record of it somewhere, or

the butler may know. Mrs. Reynolds did not come on staff until I was four and the old housekeeper is deceased.”

George scooted to the edge of his chair, feeling more than a little desperate. “Normally I would ask the steward, but...”

“Good God! Of course you cannot ask your father if he knew your mother was sleeping with one of my uncles. What an unholy mess.” He raked his hand through his hair. “Well, we can attempt to narrow it down.”

George nodded hopefully. “Have you any ideas?”

“I strongly doubt it was Lord Matlock. For one thing, all the Fitzwilliams are frightfully slender, and you are not quite tall enough.”

“I was skinny for a long while,” George supplied.

Darcy shook his head. “I cannot see Uncle Randall doing such a thing. He is a gentle man, not one to stir up mischief. A woman like your mother was more like to scare him off than draw him in, no offense meant.”

George waved it off. “I have had to make peace with what my mother was. Please do not tiptoe around me.”

“Very well. It could not have been General Fitzwilliam.”

“How do you know?”

“I simply know. That leaves Lord Livingstone and Sir Lewis.”

George sat back, deep in thought. He had not seen Lord Livingstone in some years, but he remembered that he was

relatively tall, though only a little taller than Lady Anne, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes. Or were they light brown?

“What color are his eyes?”

“Brown, like Marianne’s.” Darcy studied George, mentally comparing him to Marianne, John, Thomas and Arabella Dryden. “I do not see it. I do not see any Dryden in you.”

“Everyone says I look like my mother.”

Darcy nodded, then looked at George with narrowed eyes. Something was niggling in his memory, something he could not quite place. “Turn to the left. Now lift your chin a bit.”

George did as he said. “What? What do you see?”

He slanted his eyes to Darcy, and Fitz leaned back with a gasp.

“What is it, Fitz?” cried George, reverting to their childhood names.

Darcy shook his head, his features pale. “Come with me.”

He rose and hurried out of the room and up the stairs, George nearly running to keep up with him. They entered Lady Anne’s sitting room on the second floor and Darcy made his way to a wall of miniatures. He plucked one off its hanger and looked at it, then held it beside George’s face.

“Darcy what are you doing?” cried George impatiently.

“It is Anne.”

“What?”

“Your profile. Look.”

George took the miniature, seeing a young lady he had never met holding her head in the same odd angle Darcy had arranged him in downstairs. He had never seen her before, but he knew, like a bolt of lightning shooting through his stomach, that she was his sister.

“Who is this, Darcy?”

“Anne de Bourgh, my first cousin.”

George stumbled back, nearly dropping the miniature. “It is Sir Lewis then?”

“It is likely.” Darcy rehung the miniature and led George back downstairs. He poured brandy into two glasses, adding a little extra to George’s. “I am sorry, George. This must be incredibly unsettling.”

George only nodded. “I cannot remember. Is Sir Lewis still alive?”

Darcy looked at him sadly. “He died last summer.”

George nodded and swallowed hard. If only he had asked sooner! If only he had taken less time to sort out his own wretched feelings! Stupid man! Stupid, stupid mistake!

Darcy moved about the room, wrote a note, left the room for a while, came back, and still, Wickham sat in the same chair, staring blankly ahead of him.

“How long has he been like this?”

“It’s been over an hour now.”

“Should we nudge him or something?”

George heard the voices, whispers that sounded as if they were coming from a great distance, but he did not turn towards them. He smelled something awful. He looked down and saw Lady Marianne kneeling in front of him, waving a vinaigrette beneath his nose.

“That is vile.”

“That is the point,” she said succinctly. She stood and leaned against the desk, crossing her arms over her chest. “Fitz tells me you have received awful news.”

George nodded.

“Marianne spent time at Rosings as a child, and she kept journals and wrote frequent letters. We’ve sent for them from her father’s house and we can look through them. Hopefully something will turn up.”

George nodded, still unable to think of anything useful to say.

Finally, the box of letters and journals arrived. Marianne flipped through the journals while Darcy looked at the letters he had received from her while she was in Rosings.

“Here. Do you remember saying that Sir Lewis was asking you about children on the estate and George in particular?” He passed them the letter and both nodded, agreeing it was compelling evidence.

“Listen to this!” cried Marianne. She read from the journal, “*Sir Lewis insists on asking me all about Pemberley, and who Fitz and I play with, and every time I mention George W., he*

asks me all about him. They have never even met! Why is he so curious? Perhaps there is a mystery there!” She rolled her eyes. “I was a very precocious child.”

“To our great advantage now,” said Darcy. “It must be Sir Lewis. We know he regularly had a mistress and was not happy with his wife—”

“Who would be happy with Lady Catherine?” interjected Marianne.

“—he was at Pemberley at the time of George’s conception, and he asked about him for years afterward.” His triumph faded somewhat as his face crumpled in thought. “But if he knew George was his son, why did he do nothing for him?”

Marianne shrugged. “He was being raised in a respectable household by his own mother. That is more than a lot of children in such a situation receive. Maybe he thought George was better off that way.”

“Or he simply wanted nothing to do with me,” said George. “I am beginning to regret this exercise. Forgive me for involving you in such a fruitless chase.”

“It is not fruitless!” cried Marianne. “Look how much we have discovered in only one afternoon! We must go to Rosings. There may be more information there. Fitz, who was the executor of Sir Lewis’s will?”

“I believe it was Uncle Randall and perhaps one of Sir Lewis’s relations.”

“The de Bourgh family was very small, I remember Lady Catherine going on and on about it.” Marianne tapped her chin with one finger. “I still think we should go to Rosings. There may be something there.”

“How would we find it?” asked Darcy.

“You are Lady Catherine’s favorite. You distract her while George and I search Sir Lewis’s papers.”

Darcy rolled his eyes. “Marianne, you have read too many novels. Do you honestly think Sir Lewis would have written down somewhere the details of a child born on the wrong side of the blanket? Sorry, George.”

George waved him off for the dozenth time. “Let us go.” The cousins turned to face him. “To Rosings. I want to meet Anne. If she is my sister, I want to meet her.”

Darcy looked at him steadily for a moment, then nodded. “Very well. I will make the arrangements.”

Marianne squealed. “This will be so exciting! George, would you mind if I brought some of John’s clothes for you to borrow? You are about the same size and Lady Catherine will be less suspicious of your presence if she thinks you are Fitz’s friend from Cambridge.”

George agreed and in remarkably short order, they were packed and headed to bed, ready to leave for Rosings at dawn.



Lady Catherine had been surprised to get the express from her nephew, but she agreed to the visit. When they arrived, the lady was from home but they were told she would greet them in the drawing room in two hours. Left to their own devices, Marianne quickly changed out of her traveling clothes and convinced Fitz to be her lookout while she searched through Sir Lewis's study. George preferred to take a stroll in the gardens.

He wandered through the paths, trying to enjoy the spring air, but finding it difficult to focus on anything but what Marianne might find in Sir Lewis's papers.

“Who are you?”

He turned to see a young lady on a bench, covered with shawls though the day was warm, staring at him suspiciously. He bowed.

“I am George Wickham. I came with your cousins.” He stepped towards her, looking at her face closely. “Are you Anne de Bourgh?”

“Yes, I am.” She raised her nose when she spoke, likely trying to look superior, but she only succeeded in showing George what Fitz had seen the day before. She did indeed have his profile. The line of her jaw, the cheekbones, the brow. His nose was more pronounced, but the lines were the same.

“I am pleased to meet you,” he said, unable to stop staring at her. His sister.

She stared at him appraisingly, apparently decided he would do, and asked him to sit nearby. “What brings you to Rosings?”

He spoke haltingly, not knowing what to say to a relation one has only just met and who does not know they are a relation, but soon they were speaking somewhat comfortably. He learned that she was never well—not always ill, merely never feeling robust. Her mother had called in multitudes of doctors and Anne had confounded them all. She had been frustrated by this for some time—she would like to ride a horse, and dance at a ball, and learn to play an instrument—but she eventually made peace with her limitations and found what joy she could, generally from her garden.

He told her about his study of the law and how his aunt ran an orphanage, and that he would like to make better laws for children in an effort to improve their lives. She was impressed with his passion and asked if he would sit beside her at dinner that night that they might continue their conversation.

She went inside to lie down—long conversations tended to sap her strength—and he went to find Marianne and Fitz.

“Have you had any luck?” he asked when he met them in a corridor.

“Nothing significant,” said Marianne with a frown. “Did you enjoy your walk?”

“I met Miss de Bourgh.”

“Really? How did you find her?”

“More interesting than she appears,” he said thoughtfully.

Marianne was surprised. She had always found Anne to be a bit of a limpet, but that was only her opinion.

“It is time to greet Lady Catherine,” said Darcy. His face looked as if he was walking to the gallows, and George laughed.

“Is she truly so bad?”

“Just you wait,” said Marianne ominously.

George was still smiling at their grim visages when they walked into the drawing room. Lady Catherine was waiting on a large chair on the far side of the room. He found it funny that she wished guests to walk so far to greet her, and that she would only rise once they were directly before her. Did she fancy herself royalty?

Lady Catherine received a kiss on her cheek from her nephew and then her niece before George stepped forward to be introduced.

“Lady Catherine, allow me to introduce George Wickham.”

“You!” Lady Catherine cried. “What do you think you are doing?” She leaned towards George, her finger extended before her and her face tight and red with rage.

George stepped back, utterly confused.

“Aunt, do you know George?” asked Marianne.

Darcy, seeing that his aunt was truly enraged and George had no idea what to do, quickly stepped between them.

“Forgive me, Aunt, I was not aware you had a prior acquaintance with Mr. Wickham. We will take our leave now.”

“I do not ever wish to see your face again, Mr. Wickham, do you hear me? Your mother has done enough! I want no part of that woman in my house!”

Darcy and Marianne hurried George out of the room and up the stairs, leaving Lady Catherine heaving like a charging bull in the drawing room.

“Good heavens! What was that?” cried Marianne as she hurried down the corridor towards their rooms.

“I think that was confirmation of George’s parentage,” said Darcy grimly.

“How did she even recognize him?” asked Marianne as soon as they had closed the door to Darcy’s suite behind them.

“I imagine Sir Lewis eventually told her. And now that I know it, he and Anne do look similar.”

“George, are you well?” asked Marianne.

“She hates me,” he whispered.

Marianne grasped his shoulders. “She hates a great many people, you are far from alone. Do not let her bother you. Now, pack your bags. We must go.”

Thankfully, George had not yet unpacked and was quickly ready. Darcy had the carriage pulled around the front and within three hours of arriving at Rosings, they were on their way back to London.



“Mother, may I speak to you?”

“Of course, Son. What troubles you?” Lady Anne led Darcy into her private sitting room and he sank heavily onto the chair adjacent to hers.

He rested his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. “I may have made a great mess of things.”

It all came out then. He told her about George coming to see him and asking for help discovering his natural father, and how he deduced it was Sir Lewis. He told her about their disastrous trip to Rosings and what Lady Catherine had said when they left and how utterly shattered George seemed afterward.

“What am I to do? I have made an utter mess of things.”

Anne reached out and rubbed his arm. “You have not made a mess. The situation was an enormous tangle before you ever got involved, and you could not turn away a friend when you were in a position to help. You did nothing so very bad, though I cannot condone digging through Sir Lewis’s study without permission.”

Darcy looked guiltily to the floor. “We were looking for evidence of a bequest. Marianne thought there might be a last-minute addition to his will that Lady Catherine would have tried to hide.”

“Marianne has a vivid imagination.”

“I knew it was unlikely we would find anything, but I wanted to try.”

“I think you achieved your objective. You simply confirmed your suspicions in an unlikely way.”

“I have never seen Lady Catherine so angry.”

Anne sighed. “I have.”

Fitzwilliam looked up at her strange tone. “When?”

“When you were six months old, and we had my family to visit for the festive season. Everyone came, including Cathy and Sir Lewis.” Anne looked towards the empty fireplace. “Cathy discovered from her maid that Sir Lewis had been carrying on an affair with a woman on the estate since shortly after their arrival.”

“How long were they at Pemberley?”

“Six weeks.”

Fitzwilliam pulled a face.

“Exactly. More than enough time to get a child on Rebecca Wickham.”

Fitzwilliam could not hide his disgust. “What did she do when she found out?”

“She flew into a rage. She did not know the name of the woman, neither of us did, but from the description her maid gave, I suspected Rebecca Wickham.”

“Why did you not say anything?”

“If you had asked me before tearing off on your little amateur espionage adventure, I would have told you.”

Fitzwilliam looked chagrined.

“As to why I said nothing at the time, I thought it would do more harm than good. Wickham was still in training to be steward at Pemberley. If his wife was already causing problems, your father might have discontinued it, and I knew that would hurt him. I will admit that I also wondered whether your father would believe me.”

“What? Why wouldn’t he?”

“We had only been married a year. Catherine was my sister, and he knew I did not like that he was friends with his steward. He might have thought I was fabricating it to support her accusations or to get rid of Wickham. It would have damaged our relationship irreparably.”

Darcy shook his head, astounded.

“It is not so very uncommon, Fitzwilliam. You are lucky that your father and I love one another, but many marriages are business arrangements and little else. Many children are born on the wrong side of the blanket. I thought it best to say nothing. For one, I could not be certain it was Mrs. Wickham. For another, there was no way to know who George’s natural father was. And for George himself, growing up with a good father who gave him a respectable name was a better situation than being thrown out by that same man and living in some hovel with his scheming mother.”

“Wickham would not have thrown George out. He was just a baby.”

“Many men have done far worse over much less.”

Darcy looked away and took a deep breath. “Do you think it would have been better had George never learned of any of this?”

“Perhaps, but we will never know, will we?”

“I suppose not.”

“You know, it might good for Anne, to have a brother. If she will agree to see him.”

“He met her at Rosings yesterday.”

“Did she know who he was?”

“I imagine not. But he said they had a nice conversation.”

“She will inherit control of Rosings when she is five and twenty if she has not married. In only five years, it will be her decision.”

“Are you suggesting she acknowledge George as her brother?” asked Fitzwilliam, shocked at her suggestion.

“Not necessarily. She could call him a distant cousin and have him to visit. She could give him a stipend if she wished. It is done all the time.”

Darcy shook his head. He knew the world was a complicated place, but this was closer to home than he had ever thought such things would be.

Lady Anne smiled gently at him and ruffled his hair as she had done when he was a boy.

“Let us talk of pleasanter things. I have ordered a lovely cradle for Nora, and more linen than she will need in a year.”

He smiled tiredly at her. “I am very glad you are my mother.”

Anne was surprised by the statement but reached out to embrace him. “And I am incredibly fortunate you are my son.”

CHAPTER 36



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 18 November 1811

“How was your ride with Lady Anne?” asked Elizabeth as she helped Jane change out of her deep blue riding habit.

“It was enjoyable, but rather cold. The sun was shy this morning.”

“What did you talk of?”

“She asked me quite a bit about myself. What I enjoy doing, how I spend my time, my education.”

“So it was an interview?” Elizabeth wondered if she would be subjected to something similar. Mr. Darcy was becoming rather marked in his attentions, and she was certain he would only do so in front of his own family if he were serious in his intentions.

“Somewhat, though it did not feel like it. Oh, Lizzy, she is *such* a lady! She was positively masterful. I did not realize I had told her nearly everything about myself until we were nearly back to the stable.”

Elizabeth found this rather more disturbing than not. “Did she seem pleased with your answers?”

“I believe so. She did not seem displeased.”

Elizabeth nodded, her mind already on the interview she knew was coming her way.



It happened the next day. Elizabeth was preparing to walk out and Lady Anne met her in the entrance hall.

“May I join you?” She was already dressed in her outerwear, her hands tucked neatly in a fur muff.

“Of course, my lady.”

Elizabeth walked along silently for a while, not knowing what to say and thinking Lady Anne should begin the conversation.

“You must be wondering why I asked to join you today.”

“I assumed you wished to enjoy the first properly cold day of the season,” Elizabeth said blithely.

“That is one of the things I like most about you. Your pertness. It could almost be called impertinence.”

Elizabeth was worried for a moment until she saw the other lady’s smile. “I am afraid it is a strong trait in me, my lady. I have tried to curb it before, but to no avail.”

“Of course. One cannot cut away an essential part of one’s nature without becoming utterly unrecognizable. I am glad

your attempts were unsuccessful. I rather like you as you are.”

Elizabeth released a deep breath and Lady Anne did not bother hiding her amused smile.

“Have you ever been to Derbyshire?”

“No, I have not, though I have heard great things about it from my aunt and your family.”

“It is lovely country, though it can be quite isolated. If one favors life in a bustling city, it can be disappointing.”

“I enjoy the city as much as anyone, but I’m afraid my heart belongs in the country,” said Elizabeth carefully. She had the feeling that this conversation was very important and that her answers might affect more than Lady Anne’s opinion of her.

“I am glad to hear it. We do have neighbors at Pemberley, but the estate is so large that in inclement weather, we must amuse ourselves, and most outings require a carriage or a horse.”

She went on to name some of the families in the area and the ages of their members, being sure to mention anyone near Elizabeth’s age or that Lady Anne thought she would particularly like.

“You might like to volunteer at my school or at the orphanage. I read there regularly when I am in the country, though I am not as involved as I was before I had so many children of my own. It is a good way to remain occupied and most find it rewarding. The children can be such dears, and the school is instrumental in preparing them for life. It feels good

to be useful. I imagine you are the sort of lady who does not like to be idle?”

“No, my lady. You are aware I have helped the apothecary at my father’s estate.”

Lady Anne nodded.

“I enjoy assisting my father’s tenants and seeing to their well-being. As you say, it is good to be useful. I am often glad I have no great beauty, for I would be terrible at doing nothing but hanging on some man’s arm as an ornament to show off to his friends.”

“There you are wrong, Miss Elizabeth.” She stopped and turned to face the shorter woman, placing her hand on her chin and lifting her face towards the sunlight, turning it right then left. “You have a great deal of beauty,” she said solemnly. “I think you know it deep down, but you have so often been compared to your elder sister that you have found yourself wanting. You should not.” She released Elizabeth’s chin and began walking again.

Elizabeth stared after her for a moment before hurrying to catch up. She had always wondered what it felt like to be present with the great prophets when they made their proclamations. She had a feeling it felt rather like being declared beautiful by Lady Anne Darcy.



“How was it?” Jane asked the moment Elizabeth stepped into her room.

Elizabeth stopped and unbuttoned her pelisse slowly, searching for the right words. “It was ... odd.”

“Odd?”

“And a little magical.”

“Magical?” Jane’s face was all bewilderment.

“I think Mr. Darcy means to propose.”

“What? Did Lady Anne say so?”

“Not in so many words, but she told me all about Derbyshire, and asked me how I liked living in the country, and suggested I volunteer at her school, as if I were a member of her family.”

Jane sank onto the edge of the bed. “Lizzy!” she breathed. “You will be terribly grand.”

“Will I?”

Jane nodded. “Georgiana was telling me that Lady Anne’s brother is the Earl of Matlock, and they are very close. Her great uncle is the Marquess of Cheshire!”

“Oh?”

“Lizzy! Are you well? You seem in a daze.”

“I believe I am, Jane. I have been flirting with Mr. Darcy, enjoying his company, appreciating that he was attracted to me. But I do not think I followed that to its natural conclusion.

It is so very real all of a sudden.” She sat beside her sister and Jane rubbed her back.

“Do you not wish to marry Mr. Darcy?”

“I hardly know. I barely know the man! I met him two months ago. Should I decide my entire life’s future in such a short time?”

Jane shrugged. “Perhaps not, but it has been two months of talks and dances and dinners. You have seen him in the presence of his family, when he is likely to be acting himself —”

“Or on his best behavior,” Elizabeth interrupted.

“And some women know their husbands for years before they are married only to end up unhappy with the union.”

They both thought of their parents. They had not been close friends, but they had been known to each other nearly their entire lives before they wed and their marriage was far from happy.

“Will you accept Mr. Bingley if he asks you?”

“I will,” answered Jane plainly.

“So soon?”

“I love him. I do not need more time to know that.”

“But is love enough to sustain a marriage? Father says it is not. He thought he was in love with Mama and look how that ended.”

“Lizzy, Mama and Papa are very different people from you or me. I do not wish to speak badly of my own family, but had they tried a little harder to understand one another—”

“Instead of mocking and manipulating one another.”

“—they might have done much better. They could at least have a satisfactory union.”

Elizabeth took a deep breath. “I suppose you are right. If they only treated each other with respect, it would be a vast improvement.”

“Do you believe you can respect Mr. Darcy?”

“Yes, I already respect him a great deal.”

“Do you like him? Enjoy his company?”

“Yes. He is well read and enjoys discussing books, and he does not treat me like a stupid woman, which shows he respects my mind.”

“Exactly. And we have seen how he treats his mother and sister with the utmost courtesy. His mother’s ward receives a letter from him nearly every week. He treats her as another sister, even though they do not share a drop of blood. And you have seen his friendship with Lady Marianne. Surely it is a good sign that he can be such close friends with a lady?”

Elizabeth nodded thoughtfully.

“I believe that if a man’s character is good, and the two of you can respect each other throughout your lives, you can have a good marriage. Even if you do not love him, or think you do

but find you are wrong. You are right that it does take more than love. It takes friendship and consideration and kindness. You are already kind and considerate, and I believe Mr. Darcy is as well. And you seem well on your way to becoming friends.”

“We are friends.”

“See, you are nearly there! If you are not ready, ask him for more time, but please do not refuse him just yet. I believe he could make you very happy if you would let him.”

“You do?”

“I do.”

Elizabeth nodded and said she would lie down for an hour. She had a great deal to think about.



Elizabeth was a very good thinker. She had inherited her father’s penchant for observation and analysis, and she set her mind to imagining a life with Mr. Darcy, using everything she knew about him to inform her musings. She thought about traveling with him, walking with him in the afternoons and taking long drives in the country. She thought about seeing his face over breakfast each morning and across the dinner table each evening. She thought about having serious conversations with him, making decisions about their life together. Would they have a holiday and where would they go? Would they

accept this or that invitation? When to go to Town and when to remain in the country.

Overall, her musings were satisfactory. They were neither of them so agreeable they were in danger of becoming bored, but their arguments to date had been more in the style of a debate than a dispute, and each time she had come away feeling she understood his mind a little better.

Ah, his mind! By far Mr. Darcy's most attractive quality—though his hair did look terribly soft and his shoulders were impressively broad—and he was so very free with it! Her father was an intelligent man, but he would not converse seriously with those less informed than himself, and he could not abide stupid people. They were only to be laughed at and made sport of.

But Mr. Darcy was generous with his knowledge. He was incredibly well-educated, knowledgeable about a wide variety of topics, and he gladly answered any question she asked with respect and consideration. He did not act as if she were too stupid to understand, or dismiss her curiosity as a vagary of the day. He was willing to talk about anything she wished, and he particularly liked to hear her talk, even if it was about the flowers she wished to plant in the garden next spring. She had never had such power over a man. She had never been called enchanting before. She was flattered and pleased and surprisingly happy.

For he was *such* a man. This was no Tommy Goulding throwing mud at her by the pond when they were nine. This

was a man full-grown, with unimaginable resources, who had lived in the world, and yet, he was fascinated by her. She could not fail to be touched by such a thought. She could not fail to be fascinated in return.

CHAPTER 37



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, October 1806

Lady Anne dipped the cloth in the cool water and wrang it out, then laid it on her husband's brow. "Shhh, my love. I am here." She cooed quietly to him as he tossed and turned, changing the cloth out for another and then another.

His fever had been raging for two days, and nothing anyone did could bring it down. She kept the younger children away for fear of contagion, but Fitzwilliam insisted on sitting with his father, as did Nora. Nora had taken up residence at Pemberley, leaving her daughter at the Parsonage in Kympton with her husband. She had had enough fevers at the orphanage that she was sure she had come across whatever Mr. Darcy was battling now—she would be well. Anne was grateful for their company, but she had never felt as alone as she did at her husband's bedside, somehow knowing it was his deathbed.

He had arrived home three days before, feverish and aching. He and Wickham had gone to Derby on business and when Darcy began looking ill, Wickham had insisted they return to Pemberley. By the time they reached the outskirts of Lambton,

George was sweating and shivering, and Samuel was genuinely worried. He had helped him out of the carriage and up the front steps, but when they reached the entrance hall, George dropped to the floor in a dead faint. It took four footmen to carry him up the stairs, Lady Anne and Samuel trailing behind them.

The doctor had said it was likely an infectious fever and would run its course. Mr. Darcy was strong and only seven and forty; he would be well. He should have plenty of rest and a warm fire, and broth when they could get him to drink it.

Lady Anne could not shake off the feeling of dread that sank into her. George had not been himself for some time. He had slept later in the mornings and gone for fewer rides. He was often tired and more easily winded. She had feared for his heart—old Mr. Darcy had died at one and fifty when his heart gave out—and she had noticed changes in his color.

Now, she feared he would not fight this fever, whatever it was. No one else seemed to be ill. Not even Samuel Wickham, who had been with him every day of their trip.

She dragged the cool cloth over his neck and stopped when she saw something. Was that a spot? She untied his shirt and pulled it open, seeing his chest was covered in a bright red rash.

“Measles!” cried Nora.

Lady Anne had forgotten she was behind her. She looked worriedly at her daughter. “Have you had it?”

Nora nodded. “There was an outbreak at the orphanage. I will be well.”

Anne sighed in relief. “Stay away from the parsonage. Your daughter cannot become infected.”

Nora nodded, swallowing hard as tears ran down her cheeks. “Have you had it, Lady?”

Anne nodded. “Randall and I had it as children. So did Fitzwilliam. But Georgiana and the boys have not.”

Their eyes met and Nora walked calmly to the door, trying to keep her breath steady. She called to the footman and told him not to come too close. She explained what was happening and told him to inform the butler; Thompson would know what to do. The footman hurried off with a worried expression, and by nightfall, the family wing of the house was seen to only by those servants who had had the infection, and those who had not would tend to the guest wing where Georgiana, Nathaniel, and Luke had been moved.

Anne refused to leave her husband’s side. She was not at danger for infection, and she somehow knew he was comforted by her presence. He had woken twice and called for her, then a third time and asked for Fitzwilliam. His fever was so high he was delirious, thinking his grown son before him was his brother Luke, who had died at sixteen.

“Luke, what are you doing here? Mother is looking for you.”

Fitzwilliam looked to his mother, not knowing how to respond. She could only smile sadly at him and encourage him to talk to his father.

“Mother knows where I am, do not worry.”

“That is good.”

They thought he had drifted off into sleep again when he grabbed Fitzwilliam’s hand.

“Have you heard?”

“Heard what?” asked Fitzwilliam gamely, his throat tight.

“I am to be married! Lady Anne Fitzwilliam has accepted me. Can you believe it?” He smiled brightly, looking so utterly happy Anne could not help the little sob that escaped her.

“That is wonderful, Brother. I am sure you will be very happy together.”

George smiled again and closed his eyes, drifting off to sleep.

Fitzwilliam took a deep breath and touched his father’s head, confirming that the fever was still raging. He placed a cool cloth on his brow and pressed his father’s hand between his own, praying for a miracle he knew would never come.



Samuel insisted on sharing the night vigil. Lady Anne was dead on her feet and Nora was exhausted. George’s fever had burned on for five nights. His breathing was ragged and he

hardly woke, and when he did, he was confused. He had joked with Samuel as if they were fifteen again, daring him to race to the river. He had asked Lady Anne to dance as if for the first time, and kissed her hand gallantly, giving her a roguish wink, just like he had done after their first dance in truth.

Anne kept up a brave face, but she was utterly shattered inside. Her husband was slipping away. Her rock, the one man she had depended on more than any other in this life. She did not know how to say goodbye. She did not know how to let him go.

So she held fast.

She bathed his brow and held his hand and fed him broth. Both Nora and Fitzwilliam tried to make her leave and rest, but she refused. Wickham was her only ally in this. He seemed to know that she would not be able to bear it if George breathed his last and she was not with him. She thanked him as well as she could and only returned to her room for a few hours at a time, making whoever was sitting with George promise to get her the moment there was any change.

Now, on the fifth night of his fever, she and Samuel sat on either side of her husband's bed, Nora sleeping in Anne's room next door and Fitzwilliam on the sofa in the sitting room. The windows had been thrown open to combat the scent of illness and trays of food sat uneaten on the side table.

The candles and fire were low, and death hovered at the door. George's breath became shallow and soon there was

more and more time between each inhalation. Anne met Wickham's eyes over her husband's prone body.

"Wake Fitzwilliam."

She hurried to her room and called for Nora, then ran back to the bedside with Wickham and her son. She took George's hand in hers, kissing it repeatedly. "I am here, my darling. I am here. You are not alone. We are all here, my love."

"I am here, Father."

"I am here," echoed Nora.

"I am here, George."

Anne leaned in and kissed his cheek, whispering in his ear, "I will always love you, my darling. More than anything in the world."

A ghost of a smile seemed to cross his face, then George dragged in a ragged breath, the sound thin and straining. They watched his chest anxiously, willing it to move, as it sank down slowly and became still. They waited a minute, then another, but he did not take a breath. Wickham reached out and felt for his heartbeat.

"He is gone," he whispered.



Anne prepared for bed woodenly, the knowledge that her husband's body lay next door a leaden weight in her stomach. She wrapped a heavy wool robe about her and tied it tightly,

then settled into her bed, leaning against the headboard and staring blankly into the fire.

Eventually, she heard a light knock on her door and called weakly for whoever it was to enter.

Nora peeked her head in. “Have I disturbed you?”

“Come in, my dear.”

Fitzwilliam appeared in the doorway behind her. They were both in their nightclothes with woolen robes on, warm slippers on their feet. For a moment, they were children again, and she the mother they ran to when they were hurt or distressed.

“Come here, my darlings,” she cried, holding out her arms.

They rushed to her and piled onto the bed, crashing into their mother’s arms. Nora buried her face in Anne’s neck and sobbed freely, while Fitzwilliam rested his head on her shoulder, futilely trying to hold back his tears. Anne kissed the tops of their heads and wrapped one arm about Nora’s shoulders while the other stroked Fitzwilliam’s hair. Her touch was just what he needed to release his grief and soon he was sobbing alongside his sister, his head landing in his mother’s lap as she stroked his hair and cooed affectionate nothings to them.

Fitzwilliam fell asleep first, then Anne, and finally Nora, her head still buried in her mother’s neck, Anne’s robe wet beneath her cheek.



Darcy sat in his father's chair, at his father's desk, speaking with his father's steward. He felt in every way the impostor. This was not his position; this was not his place. His father should be here, should come through the door at any moment and say that it was all very good to play the master, but he would like his seat back.

Darcy shook his head and looked at Wickham. "I'm sorry, Mr. Wickham. What were you saying?"

"Perhaps we should continue tomorrow," he suggested quietly.

"Yes, perhaps we should." Darcy swallowed past the lump in his throat. "Are you keeping well, sir?"

Wickham smiled at the deference. The boy had yet to realize he was 'sir' now. "Well enough. And you?" he asked kindly, his head tilted to the side.

Darcy smiled sadly. His father had tilted his head just like that when he asked a delicate question. As if by that one motion, he could sweep away all the difficulties and leave one feeling safe and unharmed and ready to confide in him. "Well enough."

Wickham nodded and said somewhat awkwardly, "Your father was my dearest friend. If you ever need anything, or need to speak with anyone, you know where to find me."

Darcy nodded. Thinking he should say something, he added, "Father said you saved his life more than once."

“Aye, that I did,” Wickham said with a fond smile. “If I may give you some advice, young Darcy?”

Darcy nodded and sat up, all attention. Poor boy. He would feel the lack of a father.

“If you ever feel your friends wouldn’t save your life if the situation called for it, find new friends.”

Darcy swallowed and nodded, his throat too thick to speak. Wickham gathered his things and left, closing the door quietly behind him. Darcy stayed at the desk, rubbing his palms absently over the warm mahogany, a thousand memories of his father flashing through his mind. He finally stood to go and looked around the room, rubbing his hand absently over the back of his neck. As he lowered his arm from his anxious gesture, he realized he had not gotten it from his father, but from Samuel Wickham. He felt a laugh bubbling up inside him, making its way out with a strangled sound.



Darcy was sitting behind his father’s desk, tending to estate matters, when he heard a knock on the door. “Come.”

George Wickham walked in slowly, looking around him with awe. He stood in front of the desk, waiting for Darcy to invite him to sit.

Darcy looked up. “Do be seated, George.” It felt odd, playing the host in a room he thought would not be his for another decade or more. “Are you here about the bequest?”

“No, actually. I wanted to see how you are faring.”

Darcy met his eyes and sighed. “As well as can be expected, I suppose. How are you?”

“Well enough.”

It had taken him some time, but Darcy had finally forgiven George his misdeeds and come to appreciate his father’s continued care of him. Handled wrongly, it was easy to see how George Wickham could have become a dangerous man—selfish, manipulative, charming. Everything his mother was but with a man’s freedom. But Samuel and Rachel Wickham had refused to give up on him, as had his own father, and he had become someone Darcy was proud to call friend.

Darcy would have been surprised to know George was thinking similarly about him. Darcy was the most loyal man George knew, but when he lost his faith in someone, his resentment could consume him. He had a tendency to take good care of those in his immediate circle and more or less ignore the rest. George suspected it was because Darcy had such a great capacity for love and devotion, and was so committed to the happiness of those in his care, that if he admitted more to his notice, he would run mad trying to care for them all. Thankfully, Lady Anne had taught him to see to the welfare of those he could and have compassion for those he could not.

George regretted deeply the words he had said to Fitz when his mother died. Perhaps it was unchristian of him, but he knew the world would be a darker place if Lady Anne had

been the one in that carriage accident instead of Rebecca Wickham. What would have become of Georgiana? Or Mr. Darcy? He imagined Fitz would have been angry at the world, and with no one to cajole him out of his moods, he would have become resentful and arrogant.

With a wistful smile and a look out the window, George said, "Seeing you behind that desk will take getting used to."

"As will sitting behind it."

"I can only imagine. You know I am here if you need anything at all? I must return to Manchester within the week, but it is a short journey."

"I thank you. All is in hand at the moment, but I will let you know if I need anything. What will you do with the bequest?"

George shrugged awkwardly. Mr. Darcy had left him one-thousand pounds, more than he had ever expected. "I had thought to buy a small house in Manchester. It would be more comfortable than the rooms I am letting now, but I do not know that I will settle there permanently. I may seek out a position in London after I have clerked a few more years. I think I may invest it. A little with Madeline's husband, and the rest more traditionally."

"That is wise. Will you return for the festive season?"

"Yes. Aunt Rachel would skin my hide if I didn't!"

They laughed for a moment, then slowly sank back into melancholy.

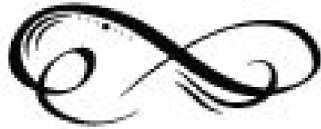
“I know it is trite, Fitz, but I truly am sorry. Mr. Darcy was a giant among men. I have never met his equal.”

“I doubt you ever shall,” said Darcy, his voice strained.

George looked at him appraisingly. “I don’t know about that.”

Darcy looked up in surprise, and a slow, sad smile worked its way across his face.

CHAPTER 38



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 21 November 1811

Four days after the Bennet ladies had come to Netherfield, Lady Anne had not heard anything from Mrs. Bennet. She did not wish to call on Longbourn herself for fear of being subjected to the parson's sycophantic ways. She did not need to know Mr. Collins to know how he would behave. Her sister only ever surrounded herself with two types of people: those in awe of her, and those terrified of her. Her niece's companion, Mrs. Jenkinson, was the latter, poor dear. From the sounds of him, Mr. Collins was the former. She was certain Mrs. Bennet would have told Mr. Collins of her presence in the neighborhood, but she had asked her not to mention the familial connection. Anne was not sure if Mrs. Bennet would be able to restrain herself, but one could hope.

My dear Mrs. Bennet,

How goes your visit with your husband's cousin? Do you find him agreeable? Will he make an admirable son-in-law, do you think, or were we all mistaken in our belief in his reasons

for visiting? Do let me know how things are progressing with Miss Mary. Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth are doing well here at Netherfield.

Lady Anne Darcy

Instead of responding to Lady Anne's note with one of her own, Mrs. Bennet called on Netherfield. It was the first time Lady Anne had seen her without at least one of her daughters, but she was made to understand that the young ladies had walked into Meryton with Mr. Collins.

“He is quite taken with Mary! You were right! Without Jane and Lizzy, she is vastly more pleasant. How clever you are! Mr. Collins could not stop remarking on how much more mature she was than Kitty and Lydia.”

Mrs. Bennet preened and Lady Anne kept the thought that it was not much of a compliment to the younger girls to herself. “I am glad things are progressing apace. Do you expect a proposal?”

“Any day now! You don't mind having Jane and Lizzy a little longer, do you?” She went on in an almost-whisper. “If he sees Jane, he may feel slighted by being given Mary.”

Lady Anne kept her expression even and said calmly, “I'm sure Miss Mary has admirable qualities of her own. She is an accomplished musician, I understand.”

“Yes, but what care men for that when beauty is before them?” Mrs. Bennet said with a wave of her hand.

Lady Anne wished she could contradict her, but unfortunately, when it came to most men, Mrs. Bennet had the right of it. “Is Miss Mary encouraging him? Does she wish for his addresses?”

“She certainly seems to! They spent the whole of last evening poring over some dull old book and making notes for his next sermon.”

“Then it sounds as if she is pleased with the match.”

“Yes, and thank heaven! A daughter married! I shall go distracted!”

Lady Anne laughed and having never received that reaction, Mrs. Bennet stopped her fluttering and looked at her friend with a guilty smile. Lady Anne grasped her hand and said, “Would you like some tea? The cook here makes the most wonderful cake.”

After their cups had been drained and their plates left in crumbs, Mrs. Bennet leaned towards her friend and asked, “How goes it with Jane and Mr. Bingley? Has he come to the point yet?”

“Not as yet, but he is close, I believe. They sit together at every meal, and if you find one of them, the other is certain to be nearby.”

“What is he waiting for?”

Before Lady Anne could answer, there was a shout and the sound of breaking glass. Both ladies startled and rose to their

feet, hurrying to the door to look out into the hall. A footman was rushing to the parlor and Lady Anne called out to him.

“What has happened?”

“Miss Bingley dropped a vase, my lady.”

Lady Anne excused herself from Mrs. Bennet for a moment and stepped into the parlor to see if Miss Bingley had cut her hand and might need assistance. To her great surprise, she was met with an irate woman, nearly purple with rage. Lady Anne quickly surmised that she had not dropped the vase so much as thrown it.

“Are you well, Miss Bingley?” she asked carefully.

Caroline’s chest was heaving, her breath ragged. Lady Anne approached her slowly, like a startled horse, and led her to a settee on the far side of the room. She sat beside her and stroked her hand gently.

“Might you tell me what has happened?”

Caroline released a stuttering breath and sagged, the fight rushing out of her. “He has proposed. He did not even speak to me of it.”

Lady Anne wondered if her son had proposed to Miss Elizabeth, but surely she would have known of it first? “Who has proposed?”

Caroline turned forlorn eyes to her. “Charlie!”

Lady Anne saw the pain and betrayal in Caroline’s eyes. It was not only that she did not approve of Miss Bennet, though

she certainly did not, but that her brother had taken such an enormous step, one that would affect all of their lives, without even mentioning it to her before it was done.

Anne wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. She could think of nothing to say, so she merely sat there with her, rocking gently side to side. She knew the Bingleys' mother had died when they were adolescents. She idly wondered how the girls would have turned out had they had their mother longer. Charles Bingley had had the benefit of a father's guidance and example until he was one and twenty, and he was a delightful young man. Perhaps Caroline would have benefitted from the same with her mother.

"All will be well," she finally said, whispering quietly. On an impulse she did not question until after she had done it, she kissed the top of Caroline's head and smoothed her hair. She turned Caroline to face her and asked gently, "Now, can you tell me what is so terribly awful about your brother marrying Miss Bennet?"

"She is a nobody! She has no connections and no dowry! We are trying to establish our place in society, and he goes and does something like this! Everything Louisa accomplished in her marriage will be wiped away by this foolish choice!"

"Miss Bingley," said Lady Anne patiently, "I have been in society a long time. My mother was a celebrated hostess in her day. I know of what I speak when I say that is utter nonsense!"

Caroline's mouth dropped open in shock.

“Miss Bennet is a perfectly acceptable choice. Now, had he run off with a milkmaid, I could see how that would be scandalous, but Miss Bennet is a gentleman’s daughter. Longbourn is not as large as Pemberley, but it is solvent and brings in a healthy income, and more importantly, the Bennets have held it for seven generations. That is something to be proud of.”

Caroline looked confused for a moment, then said defensively, “But they will lose Longbourn. It is entailed.”

“Mr. Bennet’s heir is visiting Longbourn now and expected to make his addresses to Miss Mary any day. So in addition to having one fewer sister to worry about, Longbourn will stay in the family and the Bennet ladies will not be knocking on your door for a bed.”

Miss Bingley looked both relieved and vexed, and Lady Anne continued. “Miss Bennet may not have a large dowry, and her connections may not be illustrious, but she does have a family to be proud of. Her uncle in London is married to an old family friend of mine, to my ward’s sister, in fact, and he makes a very good living. I would imagine his income is nearly as great as your brother’s, with every chance of increasing.”

Caroline’s head shot up at that, her eyes going wide. Were tradesmen really so prosperous? Of course, that was how her father had earned his money, so she should not truly be surprised. But she did not like to think of it.

“Miss Bennet is a kind woman and very beautiful. People will take one look at her and understand exactly why your brother married her. They will be wrong, for I believe he loves her as much for her kindness as her beauty, but in this instance, their paltriness will be your ally. You will not need to explain a foolish infatuation. She is a gentleman’s daughter, and he has been wanting to move into the gentry. She will have one sister safely married and I doubt it will be long before the others follow.” She made sure she had Caroline’s attention before she continued. “Truly, Miss Bingley, this will not be the disaster you imagine. All will be well.”

There was a great screech and excited chatter from across the hall, and they both snapped their heads towards the sound.

“I gather Mrs. Bennet has been told of the engagement,” said Lady Anne with a smile.

Caroline sniffled and nodded, turning away to dab at her face with a handkerchief. “Is it awful to ask what shall become of me?”

“Do you not wish to live with your sister? I understood Mr. Hurst had a house in Town?”

“He does, but I do not wish to live with my sister forever. I wish to have my own home.”

“Of course you do, that is a perfectly rational desire. Tell me, what sort of alliance are you hoping for? Perhaps I know someone.”

Caroline's eyes lit up, and before Miss Bingley could be carried away, Lady Anne said, "If I may make an observation, Miss Bingley?"

Caroline nodded. "Of course, my lady."

"You have been going about your search for a husband all wrong."

"I have?"

Seeing her so lost and pathetic, Anne felt terrible for how she had been thinking of the young lady lately. She would make up for it now. "Yes, you have," she said gently. "You have been thinking of the rank and position you wish to have, not the kind of life you wish to lead."

"Are they not one and the same?"

Anne laughed. "No! Not at all!"

Caroline looked confused and Lady Anne put a hand on hers. "Let me give you an example. My sister Lady Matlock was born Lady Philadelphia Cosgrove, eldest daughter to the Marquess of Chatham. She had a fabulous dowry and wonderful connections, and likely could have married anyone she wished. She begged her father for a quiet sort of man, one who did not entertain too often, as she is rather shy, and one who preferred the country over Town, as she did. Of course, she married my brother, and though they barely knew each other when they wed, they have had a very happy marriage these thirty-three years."

"Because they preferred the same manner of living?"

“Yes, exactly. So I ask you, Miss Bingley, how do you wish to live?”

Caroline thought for a moment, then said, “I enjoy the country for a visit, but I do not think I would like to live away from Town the majority of the year.”

“Very good. How about entertaining? Do you wish to do much of it?”

“Oh, yes! I love a good party.”

“Then a reserved sort of man who preferred the company of a few close friends and a quiet night at home would not suit you.”

“No, I suppose not,” said Caroline, brow wrinkled in thought.

Lady Anne resisted the urge to sigh at Caroline’s lack of perceptiveness, but it was a near thing. “So you need a man who likes to entertain and has the funds to do so, and who prefers Town to country. Do you have a preference for his looks?”

Caroline wrinkled her nose slightly. “Actually, I do not much care for looks, but I cannot abide a man with a bad odor.”

“I certainly understand that. Would you mind an older gentleman? Significantly older, I mean.”

“I do not think so. As long as he was not infirm and restricted to the house, I do not think I would mind it overmuch.”

“Do you envision yourself spending much time with your husband?”

Caroline squirmed in her seat. “I had not thought I would. Most marriages I have seen are not overly companionable.”

“But what do you wish for?”

“I wish for a respectable match, with a man who enjoys Town and entertaining and does not place too many demands on me.”

“Ah! I see. I may know just the man.”

“You do?”

“My uncle in Somerset, Sir Digby, has a neighbor who may meet all of your criteria.”

Caroline sat up eagerly.

“He is an older gentleman, nearing fifty I believe, but has never married and is now in need of an heir. I shall write to my cousin and find out when he will next be in Town. He is a gregarious sort of fellow, very fond of company, and he spends roughly half the year in Town, though I doubt he would mind if you stayed on without him. I do not believe he would make many demands on you,” she said with a significant look, “and likely very little once a son was born.” She left out that it was because he had very little interest in women whatsoever, though she thought Caroline would likely be relieved rather than repulsed by such news.

Caroline flushed but nodded. “I should like to meet him.”

“I shall arrange it.”



“You must be happy for your sister,” said Mr. Darcy.

He and Elizabeth were walking in Netherfield’s conservatory, a generous term for a room that had precious few plants in it and a great many empty pots. But with the braziers lit and the light from the many windows, it was warm and bright, a good alternative to the biting November air.

“Of course! I know no one more deserving of happiness than Jane. She is so sweet and good. Do you think Mr. Bingley deserves her?” she teased.

He pulled her a little closer by the arm that was looped through his. “I think he is almost good enough for her.”

Elizabeth laughed gaily, her happiness a sparkling presence that wrapped around him and made him want to kiss her senseless, to burn in her fire, a moth to her flame. He longed to feel her pressed against him, to wrap his arms firmly around her, but he could not. Not yet.

Mr. Darcy had gone quiet again, and his eyes were terribly dark. He had done it more and more lately, and she was unsure what it meant. “Where do you go when you look like that?”

“Hmm?” he said, still distracted by her plump bottom lip and some sort of floral fragrance wafting from her hair.

She smiled indulgently. “You were far away.” She boldly took his hand in hers and walked backward in front of him,

pulling him along. “Tell me where you went?”

Abruptly, he pulled her to him until she was flush against him. “You would blush to know where my mind has been, Elizabeth.”

Heat rushed to her face and she expelled a breath. “Try me.”

He was surprised but pleased by her answer. He lifted his free hand to her face, tracing over her brows, her nose, her cheek bones. He drew his finger across the lines of her lips, then lifted her chin slightly. He met her eyes, seeking acceptance, and lowered his lips to hers. Sensation flooded him as she tentatively returned his kiss, and he crushed her to him, reveling in the way she wrapped her arms around his waist, drawing him closer.

Finally, after he thought he might combust from wanting, he withdrew from her perfect mouth and rested his forehead against hers.

“I love you so very dearly, Elizabeth. Please say you will marry me.”

Happiness bubbled up in her and she laughed, smiling so widely her cheeks ached. “Yes, Mr. Darcy, I will marry you.”

He could do aught but kiss her again.



They could not hide their news from their party, not after Colonel Fitzwilliam came searching for them and had to clear his throat three times before catching their attention. He had

left the conservatory with raucous laughter, and soon everyone in the house knew Darcy and Elizabeth were engaged.

Thankfully, Miss Bingley had spent her ire on her brother's news and was looking forward to any introductions Lady Anne might make on her behalf, so she received the news with equanimity. Lady Marianne squealed and embraced her cousin, then Elizabeth, then her cousin again, crying that she had known they would be perfect for each other and how happy they would all be.

Darcy smiled and occasionally blushed, accepting the congratulations with his usual dignity, while Elizabeth laughed and answered questions by his side. He would not relinquish her hand, which the ladies, bar Caroline, thought endearing, and it was easy to see a future pattern emerging wherein Elizabeth took on the brunt of the social duties and Darcy provided her a steady presence to hold onto.

"Congratulations, my dear," said Lady Anne as she kissed her son's cheek. "To both of you." She reached out and grasped Elizabeth's hand, pressing it warmly. "Welcome to the family, Miss Elizabeth."

"Thank you," Elizabeth said, her throat thick. "And please, call me Elizabeth, or Lizzy if you prefer, as my mother does."

"Very well."

Georgiana joined them and embraced them both, telling Elizabeth to call her G now, as her brother did, and took to calling her Lizzy so quickly her brother had to laugh.

They ended up dining rather informally, even more so than they had each evening after the first disastrous dinner, and the upcoming weddings were the main topic of conversation. It was quickly decided by all involved—absent Mrs. Bennet, who had left Netherfield in a flurry to tell all her neighbors that her daughter was engaged to Mr. Bingley—that Jane and Elizabeth would share a wedding day. Neither groom wanted to wait long, and the Darcy family wished to travel as soon as Luke was well enough.

Thus it was decided the weddings would take place the day after Boxing Day, and Colonel Fitzwilliam would escort his aunt and cousins to Pemberley while Darcy and Elizabeth took a short wedding tour. Georgiana would stand up with Elizabeth—an honor she never thought to have since she had no true sisters of her own and she was only eight years old when Nora married.

They parted company in good spirits and Darcy made his way to Luke's room to have an overdue conversation. He tapped on the door and let himself in.

“Would you care for company?”

“Come in, Fitzwilliam.” Luke was sitting in bed, staring at the coverlet, his fingers absently picking at a loose thread.

“I suppose you have heard the news already?”

“That you are to marry Miss Elizabeth? Yes. Richard's cheering could be heard all the way up here.”

“Do you not like her?”

Luke's head jerked up. "No! I like her very much."

"Then why are you upset?" Darcy knew why, of course, but he wanted to leave Luke a dignified exit if wished for it.

"I am not upset, merely feeling foolish."

"Why is that?" Darcy sank into the chair nearest his brother's bed and leaned forward attentively.

"I have behaved stupidly."

"What did you do that was stupid?"

"I have fawned over Miss Elizabeth like a milksop and now she shall wish nothing to do with me," he burst out.

Darcy sucked in his lips to stop the smile that threatened to emerge. "She will do no such thing. She thinks very highly of you, I know it."

"Did she say that?"

"Yes. She said she is happy to be gaining two brothers when before she had none. Marianne intends to teach her to ride, and I told her you would be glad to help. She is looking forward to it."

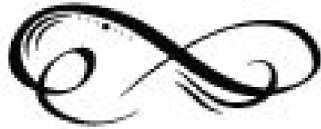
"Truly?"

"Yes. Now, stop this pouting and congratulate me. I am to be married!"

Luke smiled brightly. "Congratulations, Brother! She is a fine lady and you will be very happy." He shook his brother's hand, grasping his forearm as he did so. "And she will be much happier with you than with Richard."

Darcy let out a bark of laughter. “That she will!”

CHAPTER 39



*N*etherfield, Hertfordshire, 30 November, 1811

Marianne was sad to miss her cousin's wedding, but she had not seen her boys since shortly before the birth and it had been even longer for Henry. The children were anxious to meet their sister and see their parents, and neither she nor Henry wished to travel far in the harsh winter weather. It was wisest to journey to Lincolnshire now before it became too cold, but... It was Fitzwilliam's wedding!

She laid her sleeping baby in the cradle and went to her room to begin packing. They should leave the day after tomorrow. She was halfway down the corridor when she heard the sound of tiny feet running, followed swiftly by a squeal. Before she could turn around, her legs were grabbed from behind.

“Mama!”

Marianne twisted awkwardly to see the face of the child hugging her legs. “Harry! What are you doing here?”

She saw her husband coming up the corridor, their younger son in his arms and his brother beside him.

“Did you arrange this?” she asked.

“I did. Are you not pleased? Now we may all be together and you may attend your cousin’s wedding.”

Marianne felt tears filling her eyes and blinked rapidly. She would not break down in the middle of Netherfield’s corridors. Miss Bingley would never let her forget it.

She took Jack from his father’s arms and held him to her, smiling at her husband. “Thank you, Henry. That was very sweet of you.”

“Do not forget me! I am the one who rode in a carriage with two small children all the way from Lincolnshire!” cried his brother.

“John, you are a prince among men!” said Marianne joyfully. She kissed her brother-in-law’s cheek and sent them to the library for a well-deserved brandy while she took the boys upstairs to the nursery. She promised herself she would be nicer to Miss Bingley for allowing her entire family to stay. Though it *was* Mr. Bingley’s house, and he was marrying Jane Bennet who would soon be Mr. Darcy’s sister, so in a way, Mr. Bingley was her cousin as well. And was this situation not precisely what family was for?

“What is this? I thought I heard someone had let in some wild children, but I did not believe it.”

“Uncle Fitz!” Harry raced to his uncle and Darcy lifted him up into the air, high over his head as Harry squealed and squealed. “Again! Again!”

“Fitz! Up!” Little Jack was tugging Darcy’s pants leg, desperately wanting to be allowed to play. Darcy scooped him up and spent the next half hour attempting to wear the boys out and almost succeeding.

Marianne laughed, filled with joy to see her boys again and her cousin so happy. Fitz reminded her of her Uncle George, and the way he had picked up the children high over his head as they screamed for more. He had always been her favorite uncle and she missed him horribly. It warmed her to see Fitz stepping into his shoes so effortlessly. Every family needed a George Darcy.

“Marianne, are you well?” asked Darcy.

She fanned her face and blinked rapidly. “Perfectly well. Just thinking of Uncle George.”

Darcy’s smile slipped. “I wish he was here for this.”

She reached out and clasped his hand. “He would be so proud of you. And he would love Elizabeth!”

“Do you truly think so? I thought he would, but I am hardly unbiased.”

“Unquestionably. She is just the sort of woman he would want you to be with. Lively, cheerful, intelligent, and sweet when she wants to be.”

He chuckled. “That she is.” He took a deep breath and leaned back, watching the boys stack blocks on the floor.

“Just think, soon you could have children of your own.”

He looked thoughtful. “I would like children, but I will admit to hoping to have some time with Elizabeth to myself. We have not known each other so very long—a year, mayhap two would be pleasant. She is young. There is time.”

“There is. And I hope for your sake that your hopes become reality.” Her expression said that she doubted it would work out that way, but she hoped the best for him.

They laughed together and joined the boys on the floor. “Let us see if we can make a bridge,” said Darcy.



The wedding was the twenty-seventh of December, a cold, dim morning that boasted nothing special other than that it was dry. The church was decorated for Christmastide and Jane and Elizabeth rode thither in a carriage decked in holly. The ceremony moved swiftly, as such things usually do, and before long, two couples stood where four individuals had been. They smiled and laughed through signing the registry and climbing into the carriages that would take them to Longbourn for the wedding breakfast.

Mrs. Bennet had thought to have the breakfast at Netherfield, but Elizabeth and Jane had both refused, saying that the Bingleys were already hosting Mr. Darcy’s entire

family—Longbourn would host the breakfast. Mrs. Bennet reluctantly agreed and set about making the grandest wedding feast Meryton had ever seen.

Lydia had hung kissing balls in odd places all over the house, and she and Kitty giggled when they caught unsuspecting guests beneath them. Mary watched it all somberly, thinking her wedding would be a more sober affair, as befits the seriousness of the occasion. Mr. Collins was absent, having been called back to Kent to attend his patroness. Lady Catherine had declined attending her nephew's wedding for reasons of her own, and the family did not care to speculate, at least not aloud.

After all the planning and teas and celebratory dinners that had filled the engagement period, Georgiana somehow became another Bennet sister. She played the pianoforte with Mary, practiced dance steps with Lydia—finally, someone tall enough to partner her properly!—and picked apart bonnets with Kitty. Mr. Bennet had even begun to tease her as he did his daughters, but as Miss Darcy was not one of the silliest girls in all of England, he was forced to get creative. He rather enjoyed the challenge, and by the end of her stay, Mr. Bennet had cajoled a promise from her to join Elizabeth on her next visit.

Jane was resplendent, as only Jane could be, and she and Mr. Bingley were both beaming at their guests. Jane was serenely happy while Bingley was practically bouncing, he was so excited.

“Is he always like that?” Elizabeth asked Darcy.

“Yes. Is your sister always serene?”

“Yes.”

“Then they should do very well together.”

Elizabeth couldn't help but smile and shake her head at her husband's matter of fact way of communicating.

“What amuses you?”

“I was thinking how odd it is that yesterday I was plain Elizabeth Bennet, and now I am Mrs. Darcy, wife to a man I met three months ago and who has the most endearing way of speaking.”

He raised her hand to his lips. “You were never plain, Elizabeth. And I feel as if I've known you all my life.”

She smiled gently at him as he kissed her hand again. “Oh, Fitzwilliam, you do say the sweetest things.”

He gave her a grin that said he was terribly proud of himself, and she shook her head as she laughed lightly.

“I am glad you feel so, my love, but there is much about you I do not know. For starters, who is that man standing with Marianne?”

He followed her eyes to see George Wickham talking to Marianne and her husband. “That is George Wickham. He grew up at Pemberley.”

“Is he another cousin?”

“Of sorts.” He caught George’s eye and the other man came to join them. “Elizabeth, this is George Wickham, the son of my father’s oldest friend and a cousin. Wickham, my wife and the love of my life, Elizabeth Darcy.”

“I never thought I’d see the day, Darcy!”

“Was he very resistant to marriage?” asked Elizabeth brightly, enjoying teasing her husband.

“Oh, terribly. Half his relations wished to betroth him to their daughters, but old Mr. Darcy wouldn’t hear of it. He said his son would choose his bride and that was all there was to it.”

“That was terribly lucky for me, wasn’t it?” quipped Elizabeth.

“Lucky for me,” Darcy whispered in her ear.

She blushed and Wickham looked away.

“Is Anne here?” asked Darcy.

“Yes, she is sitting down in the drawing room. It has been a busy day for her.”

Wickham led them to the far side of the drawing room to a petite woman with sandy hair the same shade as his own and a tired smile on her face.

“Anne, I have brought Fitz to you.”

She looked up at her cousin and smiled brightly. “Fitz! Congratulations! Will you introduce me to your bride?”

Darcy was so astounded by the genuine smile on her face that he took a moment to answer. “Yes, this is Elizabeth. My dear, this is Anne de Bourgh, my cousin.”

“Oh, you must be Lady Catherine’s daughter!”

“Oh, no! Does Mother’s reputation extend to Hertfordshire?” asked Anne cheerfully.

Elizabeth laughed. “I do not think so. Her parson is a distant cousin of my father’s, Mr. Collins. He is engaged to my younger sister Mary. They will wed in March.”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Collins. I hope they will be happy together.” She looked as if she did not think that likely to happen, but Elizabeth moved blithely on.

“Will you go on to Pemberley with your other cousins?”

“No, I’m afraid the journey would be too much, especially in winter. I will go to Oxford from here to stay with Lady Livingstone.”

“She is Lady Marianne’s mother, is she not?”

“Yes. It must be difficult to learn so many new family members.”

“I am sure I will make a great many mistakes in the beginning, but I hope everyone will be patient with me.”

“Would you like some punch, Anne?” Wickham held out a glass and she took it with a grateful smile.

“Thank you, George.”

Elizabeth watched the interactions between the two with curiosity. After she and Darcy had moved on, she asked, “Are they engaged? He is very attentive to her.”

Darcy shook his head. “No, not at all.” He looked about to make sure no one was near enough to hear. “It is a complicated story, but the short version is that they share a father, though neither of them knew it until a few years ago, and now they see each other often and have a close relationship.”

“Your father’s friend was his brother-in-law?”

“No, that is Samuel Wickham, the man who raised George. He is the steward at Pemberley.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “You will have to explain this to me in more detail later.”

“I will.”

“You can tell me in the carriage. Long rides are always terribly dull.”

He traced a finger over her arm slowly. “I had not thought this one would be so dull.”

She blushed and leaned towards him, their bodies almost touching.

“Ahem.” Richard brushed past them, clearing his throat loudly and bumping into his cousin as he passed.

Darcy huffed and Elizabeth laughed. “Come,” she said, “I want to speak to the Gardiners.”

After a short but cheery conversation with her favorite family members, Darcy brought Elizabeth a glass of punch and they stood quietly watching the assembled guests, basking in a rare moment of peace.

“Your cousin is in fine form today,” said Elizabeth quietly to her new husband.

“Which one?”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

Richard Fitzwilliam was happy for his cousin and happier for himself, for he had discovered that a lady like Elizabeth Bennet had excellent taste in friends. He had charmed a Miss Long (not very clever, but sweet-natured), a Miss Goulding (pretty and an excellent horsewoman), and a Miss Lucas (not as pretty as the others but sharp as a tack). The last had him particularly intrigued as she did not seem to believe his more outlandish stories as Miss Long did and was unimpressed with his lineage.

“Ah, that is because he is now the proud owner of an estate in Staffordshire. His father and grandfather have gifted it to him.”

Thistledown Grove was roughly the size of Longbourn and located thirty miles west of Pemberley. Richard would take possession in February, after his father’s steward had taken care of a few things and he was fully relieved of his duties to the army.

“Oh how wonderful! Will he marry soon, do you think?”

He laughed. “How quickly a lady’s imagination works! You leap from an estate to a wedding in an instant.”

She mock-scowled at him and he tapped the end of her nose in what would become a regular habit between them.

“I do not know what his matrimonial plans are, though I do know he is currently unattached. But given the way he is behaving today, he may not be for long.”

Elizabeth looked to her left and laughed at the group of women encircling Richard. “Well, at least he seems to be enjoying the attention.”

“Yes, a little too much.”

“Let us ignore your cousin for the moment and speak of something else.”

“Such as?”

“Such as where you are taking me on our wedding trip. You have been very secretive.”

“Ah, that,” he said with a sly grin, “a cousin of mine—”

“I have never known a man with so many cousins!”

He ignored her interruption. “—has a house in the Chiltern Hills. It is small, and comfortable,” he leaned in and whispered in her ear, “and very private.”

She felt heat rising up her neck.

“We shall have it all to ourselves for three weeks before going on to Pemberley.”

She smiled impishly. “And will we go there today or shall we spend our wedding night at Netherfield?”

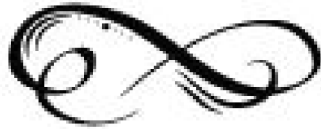
“Today. In fact, we should leave soon. Did you wish to stay very much longer?”

She looked around at the smiling faces of her friends and family and half wished she could sneak out the door to be spared the goodbyes. She did not want to farewell her father or Jane, but she was nearly overwhelmed by how happy she was to be starting her new life.

“Another half an hour, and I will be ready.”

He smiled reassuringly and squeezed her hand. “As you wish, my love.”

EPILOGUE



*P*emberley, Derbyshire, March 1812

“Good morning, my sweet,” Darcy said in his wife’s ear.

Elizabeth might have been embarrassed by how much she liked the way his voice sounded first thing in the morning, but she was too happy to think on it. “Good morning, my love.” She rolled over to lay her head against his chest and snuggle into his warmth. “Is it time to rise?”

“We could stay abed a little while longer.”

If someone had told her when she first met Mr. Darcy that he was capable of speaking in such wicked tones, she would have laughed and not believed a word of it.

“I should like to remain in bed for a time,” she said.

He grinned and began nibbling on her neck, then worked his way downward. She sighed lazily and leaned back on the pillow, smiling at the canopy.

Her peace was shattered by footsteps thundering down the corridor, followed by a shout from Georgiana. “Give it back,

Luke!”

“Argh,” Darcy groaned. He gave up his more pleasant pursuits and fell back on the bed beside his wife. “How many times has Luke disturbed us in the morning now?”

“Not counting the time he barged in on us in the sitting room? I believe this is the fifth.”

He groaned again. “He is too old for this nonsense.”

“He is eleven.”

“He has just turned twelve!”

“Perhaps *we* should move to the dower house,” suggested Elizabeth playfully.

“Don’t tempt me.”



After a discussion with Lady Anne wherein Darcy and Elizabeth flatly refused to consider moving her or any of the Darcy children to the dower house, Lady Anne suggested they take the opportunity to travel. Elizabeth had not seen much of the world but she dearly wished to, and it was the perfect time to go. They had no children to worry about, Lady Anne was perfectly capable of watching over Pemberley, and they had a trustworthy and capable steward in Mr. Wickham.

With very little fuss, it was decided that they would stay at Pemberley through the spring planting (though they were considering relocating to the guest wing), and in early

summer, they would set off on a tour of Scotland, beginning with Richard's new estate in Staffordshire.



“It is a fine home you have here, Richard,” said Darcy, looking about the estate from his horse.

He and Richard had gone for an early morning ride while Elizabeth stayed abed. Darcy felt only slightly guilty for keeping her up half the night, but he thought he could at least get Richard out of the house to spare her any teasing on his cousin's part.

“I know it is not very grand, but I confess there are few homes I am fonder of.”

“You feel as you ought. How go the renovations?”

Richard spoke to him about the changes he had made to the barn and the home farm, and which tenant cottages were still under repair. The main house was in good condition but woefully outdated, and Elizabeth had promised to help him choose new papers while she was there.

“Will you marry now, do you think?” asked Darcy. Richard had always said he would remain a bachelor forever, though his justifications no longer applied.

“I have thought about it. I certainly have the means to now, especially if I were to wait a year.”

“Yes, that may be wise. Is there anyone you are considering?”

Richard shifted in his seat. “I have thought of one or two ladies, but I remain unattached.”

Darcy thought his cousin was hiding something but did not press him. “Let us go back to the house.”

“Missing your bride already?” Richard teased.

“Just you wait, Rich. Your turn will come. Then we shall see who is laughing.”

Darcy raced off and Richard chased after him, laughing as he spurred his horse on.



“This is lovely,” Elizabeth said dreamily as she leaned back against her husband. They were staying in a cabin of sorts overlooking a loch north of Glasgow. They would remain there a fortnight before moving on to their next destination.

“Yes, it is. It will be difficult to go back to a house full of people.”

“Maybe we *should* consider the dower house,” she said, only half teasing.

Darcy sighed. “I wish we could, my love, but I fear it is impossible.”

She twisted to see his face. “Why is that?”

“It would look odd. Pemberley is enormous. People would say that you and my mother hate one another and cannot stand to be in the same house. Or that she is a termagant. Or you are impossible. Or I am still such a boy I cannot disobey my mother even to please my wife.”

“Alright!” She pressed her hand over his mouth. “I believe I understand. It would look odd and cause gossip.”

He nodded. “If my father were alive, it would probably be acceptable, but as it is, well.”

“I understand. Do not worry about me, Fitzwilliam. If we must move into the guest wing, I am amenable to that, though it may be awkward when we have guests. Perhaps we should consider the third floor near the old nursery?”

“The rooms there are much smaller and do not have dressing rooms. Only a few of them are even linked, so we may have to construct a new door to give you a sitting room.”

She gave him a look. “A sitting room? Do you not mean to connect my room to yours so you won’t have to skulk about in the middle of the night?”

He looked affronted. “I do not skulk.”

She laughed gaily. “Oh my dear, with that expression, you most assuredly do!”

“I shall teach you manners, young lady,” he said with a growl.

Elizabeth continued to laugh as he scooped her up into his arms and nearly ran with her to the bedroom where he plopped

her onto the mattress.



They continued to discuss their living arrangements throughout their trip—in the highlands, on a small island off the east coast, in Edinburgh. On and on they talked, coming to no greater conclusion than moving to another wing of the house, or doing construction on the third floor that would make it acceptable for the master of the estate to live in it. Elizabeth disliked this plan for it seemed a dreadful extravagance. Georgiana was sixteen. Surely she would not be at home much longer. Nathaniel was already at Eton much of the year and Luke would follow in the autumn. Of course, then it would only be Lady Anne, Georgiana, and the newlyweds, which might be even more awkward if they wished to retire early or stay abed some mornings.

Regardless, Elizabeth disliked the idea of the third floor. Besides the unnecessary work, they would eventually have children and those rooms were designated for them. Not to mention the school room, play room, and the nurses' rooms. She could not imagine her husband being comfortable sleeping a few doors down from his children's nurse.

In only a few years, the house would empty considerably. Then they could live together with his mother and a sibling or two peaceably. After her children were grown and married, Lady Anne might even prefer the dower house for her own privacy.

“You know,” Elizabeth said one day, walking on the beach near Edinburgh, “it would be perfect if there were another house altogether to stay in. Not the dower house,” she added quickly when she saw his look, “but another estate entirely. Like Richard’s. Small, but comfortable and with plenty to do.”

Darcy looked at her strangely and she laughed a bit uncomfortably. “I am not suggesting you buy another estate, my dear. It was merely an idle thought.”

“No, it is brilliant!”

She raised her brows.

“I have just such an estate.”

“You do?”

“It is intended for my brother, Nathaniel, but he will not come into possession of it until he is five and twenty, though he may live there earlier if we feel he is ready.”

“Is it vacant?”

“Yes, there was a tenant, but they moved in April. I had intended to find another when we returned.”

“Where is it located?”

“That is the best part. Only fifteen miles from Pemberley.”

Her eyes lit up. “And we might live there? Just the two of us?”

He nodded happily.

“And no one will mind? Nathaniel will not feel as if we are stealing his house and your mother will not feel as if I am

stealing her son?"

"Well, I cannot predict what my mother will feel, but I do know that she will not resent us for it. It might even make things easier."

"Yes, I have wondered how awkward it will be having me as mistress while she is still mothering young children. If Luke wished to invite a friend to visit, would he ask me or your mother?" She shuddered at the thought.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "I am certain Nathaniel will not mind. I am already managing the estate, and this will allow me to do so more closely. More importantly," he pulled her closer, "it will give us the chance to be together without quite so many people underfoot."

She smiled up at him. "That sounds lovely. When will we move?"

He chuckled. "Anxious, are we?"

"To be alone with my husband, yes, quite anxious."

He smiled gently. "I will write the necessary letters today, my sweet."



By the end of October, the harvest was in at Pemberley, and Darcy and Elizabeth were settled into their home at Dunford Hall. Elizabeth was happy to be able to organize her home and act its mistress without making Lady Anne uncomfortable, and Darcy was pleased to have his new wife to himself.

He traveled to Pemberley at least once a week to meet with Mr. Wickham and see his family, and he and Elizabeth were frequent dinner guests. Lady Anne did not have to fully give up her son, nor her place as mistress, both of which made her very happy.



For the festive season, the Darceys invited Colonel Fitzwilliam as well as Bingley and Jane to visit, and because he wished to please his wife, and satisfy some suspicions of his own, Darcy suggested Charlotte Lucas accompany the Bingleys. The invitations were accepted with great pleasure and soon Dunford was bursting with guests.

When Colonel Fitzwilliam joined them and saw Charlotte Lucas again, he liked her even more than he had in Hertfordshire. They were just as easy in each other's company as they had been, though there was a new earnestness to their interactions. Before Twelfth Night, he proposed and she accepted.

They were a very merry party and had much news to share and plans to make. Jane confided in Elizabeth and Charlotte that she believed she was with child. She would not be certain for another month or so, but she had suspicions. Elizabeth congratulated her happily, and when Jane said she was certain Elizabeth would have some good news soon herself, Elizabeth surprised the other women by saying she was hoping it would

not be too soon, for she felt she was just getting to know her husband.

“There was the wedding trip, then we were all together at Pemberley and it was somewhat hectic, then we toured Scotland for some months. Back at Pemberley, there was his mother and sister needing his time, and he had to deliver Luke to Eton. He is happy to do it and I do not begrudge them his time, but I would like to have him to myself for a while. We have been settled at Dunford less than two months, and I already feel so much closer to him. You understand, Jane. You have lived alone with Charles all this time. Has it not brought you closer together?”

Jane looked down and fidgeted with her skirt. “It has, though we have not been as alone as I thought we might be.” She took a deep breath. “We have often been with my family.”

“Of course.” Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Mama would be unable to resist visiting you at least twice a week.”

Jane made a face.

“Is it more often?”

Charlotte snorted and covered it with a cough.

“Oh, Lizzy!” cried Jane. “It is every day, or very nearly! She insists on advising me on the decoration of the house and the menus and the invitations. I can do nothing without her!”

Charlotte made a sound of sympathy and rubbed Jane’s back. Elizabeth looked at her sister with a frown.

“Have you told her you do not wish for her company so often?”

“I could not say so to my mother!” Jane looked horrified.

“You would not have to be rude, merely tell her that you would like some time on your own with your husband and ask if she could limit her calls to Tuesdays and Fridays.”

Jane’s eyes were wide, and Elizabeth sighed. Her gentle sister would never say anything of the sort.

“Fitzwilliam tells me that he has recommended some estates to your husband. Perhaps one of them will do.”

Jane nodded, taking her sister’s hand. “I hope so! It would be good to be close to you again!”

“And away from Mama!” Elizabeth cried.



After looking at three estates within fifty miles of Pemberley, Jane and Bingley settled on the one that was only thirty miles away and needed the least repairs to the house. The style suited Jane’s preference and the tenant farms were prosperous. Bingley signed the papers, and they would take possession in April.

Lady Anne kept her promise to Miss Bingley and arranged an introduction to Sir Geoffrey Marshall. Within a month, they were betrothed, another month saw them married, and eighteen months after her wedding, Caroline was delivered of a healthy baby boy. She spent the majority of her time in Town

at her husband's townhouse, thankfully located at a very fashionable address, and he lived quietly in the country with their son. They saw each other at least once per season, though they never had any more children. Overall, they were both vastly content with their marriage.

When Alexander Fitzwilliam heard his brother Richard was marrying, he did not care overmuch. He was still young and there was plenty of time to marry. When Richard announced that he would be a father only six months after the wedding, Alexander was slightly concerned. When Charlotte delivered a healthy baby boy in December of 1813, he began to worry. He went to London for the Season and threw himself into the marriage mart. His bad behavior was slightly curbed, and he was successful in securing the hand of Felicia Woodmont, the daughter of a wealthy landowner in Sussex who fancied making his daughter a countess.

Felicia was pretty and occasionally sweet, but mostly empty-headed and forgettable. Her dowry, however, made her quite memorable to her husband. For the first few years of their marriage, he was moderately attentive, and she presented him with a daughter shortly after their first anniversary. He redoubled his efforts to be a good husband, especially after Richard's second son was born, and was rewarded with a baby boy after his third anniversary. He was not entirely reformed—in truth, he was barely improved—but he had at least learned something of discretion, and his family was grateful for it.

Elizabeth had agreed with her husband when he said he did not wish for children right away, but she had not truly thought

it would be so easily accomplished. Shortly after her second anniversary—and seeing both Jane and Charlotte delivered of babes—she began to wonder if it was *not* easily accomplished, but that perhaps she was barren. She did not bother her husband with her suspicions, but she did begin to relax her precautions to test her theory.

Three months later, she felt a little lightheaded. Then she felt nauseated. Food tasted strange and she was uncommonly sleepy. Fitzwilliam wondered if she was ill when he found her taking an afternoon nap two days in a row. Wondering herself what was wrong, she checked the calendar and realized she had missed her courses. Deciding a call to her sister was in order, she took the carriage to Kympton and visited Nora.

Nora confirmed her suspicions. Elizabeth was all but sure that she was with child. She did not tell Fitzwilliam for fear of disappointing him if she were mistaken, but she was excited nonetheless. She had enjoyed their time together alone; now she felt ready to add to their family.

As per Lady Anne's suggestion, Elizabeth had begun volunteering at the school and orphanage once each week soon after moving to Derbyshire. She would read to the children, do a little sewing with the girls, and usually have dinner at Pemberley or at Nora's before going home. She would spend the night on days that the sun set early.

Fitzwilliam often accompanied her, but on this day, he had been overseeing the work on a bridge near Dunford and he had

sent her on her way, sending greetings to Nora's family and saying he would see her in the morning when she returned.

Elizabeth had not yet felt the quickening when she fell ill in Nora's parlor. She was turning pages for her sister when out of nowhere, she collapsed. Nora called for the apothecary, thinking it was merely the faintness of pregnancy, but then Elizabeth developed a fever. Unsure if what she had was catching, the children were sent to Pemberley while Elizabeth rested in the spare room at Nora's house. By nightfall, Elizabeth's fever was raging.

Nora sent notes to Lady Anne and Fitzwilliam. Lady Anne arrived first and looked at Elizabeth in consternation. In the two and a half years she had known Elizabeth, she had never seen her ill, not once. Nora confided to Lady Anne that Elizabeth believed she was increasing, and they both wondered if it would complicate her illness, whatever it was.

Nora's husband David returned home late, walking slowly into the house. His normally warm skin was ashen-colored, and before he could speak more than three words, he collapsed on the floor.

"The school!" Lady Anne cried.

She immediately sent a messenger to the teacher and Rachel Wickham. Something was catching, and they would need to quarantine the children.

Rachel sent back a note that several children at the orphanage were ill, three of them seriously so. They all had raging fevers and were terribly tired, but not many other

symptoms yet. The teacher reported that two of his pupils had gone home sick that day. Within a matter of hours, all of Lambton and Kympton were aware of a catching fever, and a physician had been sent for from London.

Fitzwilliam burst into the parsonage like a penned bull. “Where is she?” he looked to his mother with wild eyes. “Where is Elizabeth?”

“She is upstairs sleeping.”

He did not wait for a further response and ran up the stairs three at a time. He knelt beside her and took her hand, holding it tightly in his own. “I am here, my darling. I am here.”

Elizabeth’s fever did not abate for two days. Darcy had changed the cloth on her head more times than he could count when he realized her hair was wet. Inspecting more carefully, he found that her nightgown was damp and sticking to her body. Desperately, he felt her forehead. Her fever had broken.

Suddenly she opened her eyes, looked at her disheveled husband, and said, “Fitzwilliam, what are you doing here?”

He nearly wept with relief. “My love, you have been very ill. There is a fever in the village. You likely caught it at the school. Abara has it as well.”

She looked confused, then asked slowly, “May I have some water?”

“Of course!” He nearly fell over himself bringing her a glass and held it tenderly to her lips. “Is that better?”

She nodded. “How is Abara?” Her voice was hoarse and weak, but he had never heard anything sweeter.

“His fever has not broken yet, but it has not been as high as yours. He has been awake and talking some of the time.”

“Have I been asleep long?”

“Two days.”

“Two days?” Her eyes widened in astonishment. “But I have no memory of it.”

“I know. It is all right, my dear. You will be well now. The physician said that the fever is the most dangerous part. If you come through the fever, you will be well.”

She looked at him closely, noticing the dark circles under his eyes and the paleness of his skin. “You have been very worried, haven’t you?”

He pressed her hand to his mouth, closing his eyes tightly to hold back his tears. She reached out her other hand to touch his face. She was so very tired, and it was difficult, but she could not leave him alone.

“It is all right, my darling. I am here. I will not leave you so easily,” she whispered.

He wept then, letting his head drop to the bed as she rested her hand in his hair.



Some time later, Lady Anne sent Fitzwilliam downstairs while she sat with Elizabeth.

“My lady, have you spoken with Nora?”

“Yes, I know about the babe.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes in relief. “Is she well? The babe?”

“I cannot say. You have not been bleeding, if that is what you are asking.”

Elizabeth nodded. She had a horrible feeling of dread, but perhaps it was merely anxiety.



Elizabeth convinced her husband that she would feel much better if she could have a hip bath. He was reluctant to allow her out of bed, but after arranging that he would help her into and out of the tub, he finally agreed.

Elizabeth held onto him tightly as she walked toward the small tub. She gave Fitzwilliam a wobbly smile as he helped her remove her shift and sit in the hip bath, wishing she were at Pemberley or Dunford where there would be more comforts available and servants to help her.

She convinced him that she would be well for a little while; he could go get tea from the kitchen and bring her a cup. He did not like it, but he left her alone as she asked. Elizabeth leaned her head back against the tub wall and let her arms fall as far into the hot water as they could. She had been cramping terribly for the last hour, and she knew what it likely meant.

She had lost her baby. As the cramps came harder, she curled her arms around her legs and rested her head on her knees, breathing through the pain.

“Elizabeth?”

Her husband’s voice came through the closed door. “Fitzwilliam, would you please ask your mother to attend me?”

“My mother?” he clarified, clearly surprised.

“Yes.”

She heard his assent and took another breath, hoping this would not last long.

“Elizabeth?” Lady Anne’s voice accompanied her tap on the door. She opened the door a crack and peeked in. “Are you well?”

A strangled sob was her only answer and she rushed in, finding Elizabeth curled up in the hip bath, her head buried in her arms.

“My dear, what is the matter?” Then Anne looked down and saw the water had turned red. “Oh, Elizabeth.”

She sat back on her heels and took a deep breath, then leaned forward and brushed the hair off her daughter-in-law’s face. “Do not worry, it will pass soon.”

Elizabeth nodded, her throat too tight to speak. Lady Anne busied herself ordering fresh water and collecting towels and linens. After the cramping ceased, she helped Elizabeth stand

from the tub, the younger woman's body weak from illness and grief. She sagged against Anne as she dried her off, gently rubbing the towel across her back.

"Do you wish to tell Fitzwilliam or shall I?" She asked as Elizabeth eased back into the bed.

"Could you?" she said, her voice tiny.

"Of course, my dear. I will take care of everything." She stroked the hair from Elizabeth's forehead and pulled the blanket up higher.

Soon, the bath was drained and the windows opened. Servants came and went from the room, but Elizabeth paid them no mind. She was barely aware of her surroundings until she felt warm arms surrounding her, pulling her into a familiar embrace.

"Come here, my darling." Fitzwilliam had climbed onto the bed beside his wife, his legs pressed behind hers and his chest against her back. "All will be well, my love." He kissed her temple and she sagged into him, feeling utterly boneless.

She wept and wept and wept, Fitzwilliam's tears mingling with her own until they both fell asleep in exhaustion.

They woke the next morning to an eerily still house. Fitzwilliam peeked over Elizabeth's shoulder to see she was still sleeping, and he slipped off the bed and out the door without waking her. He made his way to the parlor and found his mother sitting on the sofa looking utterly shattered. He sat beside her and put a hand on her back.

“It will be well, Mother. We will have another babe.”

She turned to face him, her eyes red-rimmed and her face pale. “David died in the night.”

Darcy froze, unable to comprehend her words. “David? But he was talking! I spoke to him yesterday.”

Lady Anne’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. “He seemed to be on the mend, then his fever rose, and we could not get it down. It happened very quickly.”

Darcy stared ahead of him blankly. David was more than Nora’s husband. He was a childhood friend.

“Why did no one call for me?”

“There was nothing you could have done, and Elizabeth needed you.”

He nodded woodenly. “Where is Nora?”

“She is sleeping. She is in shock, I think.”

“Of course. I shall arrange everything.”



In the end, the vicar from the next town over had to officiate David’s funeral and those of the villagers who had died in the fever. The vicar of Lambton, David’s father’s old position, had also been taken ill, though he seemed to be recovering. Three children from the orphanage died, and one village child who attended the school. One elderly couple from Lambton and

two men in Kympton had not survived, and two shop keepers were still seriously ill.

After David Abara was laid to rest, Nora agreed to move back to Pemberley with her three children. She settled the children into the third floor where she had grown up, too numb to feel any sort of nostalgia. Georgiana was happy to have her and was a tremendous help with the children. She gave Nora the space to grieve, and the children someone to lean on.

Lady Anne wanted Elizabeth to come to Pemberley to recuperate as well, but Elizabeth wished to be in her own home, surrounded by familiar things and faces. What she did not say was that the last thing Nora needed to see every day was a husband doting on his recovering wife. Nora's grief was fresh, and she should be able to feel it in peace.



It was a full year before Elizabeth fell with child again. The midwife had recommended giving her body time to heal and rebuild her strength. Fitzwilliam had taken the advice very seriously. He had never been as scared in his life as he had been when he saw Elizabeth lying in that bed, pale as a sheet. He would not risk her again.

Elizabeth's pregnancy was blessedly easy and the spring after her fourth anniversary, she delivered a rosy, bawling boy. Young Bennet was the apple of his father's eye, and Lady Anne wept rather uncontrollably when she met her first grandson.

Congratulations came from nearly every person they had ever met, or so it felt to Elizabeth. Colonel Fitzwilliam and Charlotte came to the Christening, as did Jane and Bingley. There was one unexpected face in the church.

“George! I did not think you would make it.” Fitzwilliam shook George Wickham’s hand.

“I was not sure I would until the last moment. Congratulations. He is a fine boy.”

Darcy thanked him and they caught up on all that had happened in the year since they had seen each other. George was still close with Anne—they wrote each other letters nearly weekly and he went to Rosings twice per year. He had only been able to get away from work once per year until Anne had given him a stipend from Rosings’ income. He had protested, but she said she would pay a great deal more than that to see her only brother more often, and he acquiesced.

Anne was not well. She had never been particularly healthy, but she was deteriorating rapidly. That was one of the reasons George had come to Pemberley. He would go to Rosings and stay with her till the end. He had told his employer he would be gone some time, likely months, and he knew there was a good chance his job would not be waiting for him when he returned. But Anne was his only sister, and they had missed so much of their lives due to others’ deceit. He would not let her die alone.

Darcy was shocked to hear the news of his cousin, as were Richard and Georgiana. Darcy could not leave Elizabeth so

soon after the birth, but his cousins could, and Lady Anne agreed to send Georgiana and her companion along with Colonel Fitzwilliam to say goodbye and bear Anne company.

George had one other reason for making the journey to Pemberley. Nora.

He had always loved her, since he was nine years old and saw her standing on Pemberley's lawn, looking lost and frightened but trying to be brave regardless. He had tried to love other women, but none had ever compared to Nora. Now she was a widow, and he wanted to know if there was a chance she could ever come to care for him.

He approached her outside the church, the spring blooms giving her a whimsical backdrop.

"How are you, Mrs. Abara?"

"I am well, Mr. Wickham. How are you?"

"Well, I thank you. And the children?"

"They are well. Getting into mischief, as always."

He smiled. "Mischief is what children do best."

She laughed softly. "I remember Mr. Darcy used to say that."

"Aye, he did." George rubbed the back of his neck and looked about nervously. "Mrs. Abara, Nora—"

Her eyes shot to his face at his use of her given name.

"I will leave for Kent tomorrow, to be with Anne. She is unwell."

“Oh, I am sorry. Do give her my best wishes.”

“Thank you. What I wanted to ask is if when I return, whenever that may be, if you would allow me to call on you?”

She stared at him for so long he began to shuffle from one foot to the other.

“You wish to call on me, George Wickham?”

“Yes, I do, Nora Mason Abara.”

She smiled at the way he said her name. “You know I have three children?”

“I had noticed, yes.”

“And how would you feel, raising another man’s children?” she asked, suddenly serious.

George looked at her earnestly, then glanced over at Samuel Wickham where he spoke to Lady Anne. “I would be honored.”

She gulped. “I believe you mean that, George.”

“I mean it, Nora.” He looked about and seeing no one nearby, took her hand in his and gave it a quick squeeze. “I will be back.”

She smiled brightly at him. “I shall look forward to it.”



Having a brother was exactly what Anne de Bourgh had needed in life. George gave her the strength to stand up to her

mother when she otherwise felt weak. He made her laugh at herself when she would have complained. Most importantly of all, he was a steady companion who never failed her. Now, when she was at her weakest, he came, bringing with him two of her cousins and a plethora of stories from Derbyshire.

Anne had sent Lady Catherine to the dower house when she came into her inheritance a few years ago, with the assistance of her Uncle Randall and Darcy, and she had lived quite peacefully at Rosings with her companion ever since. Her mother came to call precisely once per month, always on the second Tuesday. She never stayed long and never had anything pleasant to say. Anne would have been bothered by this before she met George, but knowing he would be there no matter what gave her the strength she needed to finally stand up to her mother.

Once her family arrived at Rosings, Anne's decline moved swiftly. She had a month where she could still move about a little and enjoyed listening to Georgiana play the pianoforte. Then she was confined to her chambers, unable to be up from her bed for more than a few minutes. After a fortnight of taking bedside visitors, she began to sleep more and more of the day away and was often difficult to rouse.

Finally, she called her brother and cousins in to see her.

"I'm sure you all know why you are here," she said.

Georgiana looked about her nervously. "I do not," she said in a small voice.

“I wish to explain my will, so there will be no confusion after I am dead.”

Georgiana gulped and sat back in her chair, deciding to listen instead of participate.

“I am leaving Rosings to George,” she said simply.

“What?” George cried. “Annie, you cannot do that!”

“Why ever not?” She closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the pillow, clearly becoming tired.

“Because it will be a great scandal! Someone in your legitimate family should have it.”

“Rosings has been in the de Bourgh family for generations and so it should stay.”

“Then leave it to one of your de Bourgh cousins.”

“I have none. My father was an only child as was his father before him. His distant cousins are unknown to me and if there are any others, I do not know of them.”

“But,” George protested weakly.

Richard slapped his shoulder. “It is yours, Wickham. Accept it and be grateful.”

George looked between them with his mouth agape. Finally, he said, “Annie, I do not know what to say. This is remarkably generous of you.”

“It is your right, Brother. Do not pretend otherwise.”

“It is not, and we both know it.”

“Do not argue with a dying woman. It is unseemly.”

Georgiana laughed nervously, followed by Richard and Wickham.

“Very well, I shall accept your extravagant gift.” He reached out and took her hand in his, noting how frail it felt. “I will miss you horribly, Sister.”

“I want you to fill this draughty old house with laughter and joy. And preferably children. If you can find anyone to marry you.”

His laugh came out as a choking sound. “I will do my best.”

“Good. Now leave me. I wish to rest.”



Eighteen months later, George Wickham stood on the lawn of Rosings, watching the Abara children frolic across the grass with their cousins.

“I never thought I would live in Kent,” said Nora absently.

“Neither did I.”

“Is Lady Catherine horribly angry I’m here?”

“I have not heard from her in some while. She is pretending this is not happening, I think.”

“It is ironic, is it not?”

“What is?”

“She wished for there to be a marriage between Pemberley and Rosings for so long. Now it has happened in a rather roundabout way.”

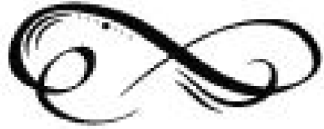
He laughed. “That it has. Though I doubt she is happy about it.”

“I am happy enough for three people.”

He brought her hand up and kissed it, feeling overwhelmed with joy. How had the illegitimate son of a steward become so lucky?

The End

ON EQUAL
GROUND



For Kim.

Your strength amazes me.

PROLOGUE



*W*inter, 1807

“What did you think of Miss Grange?”

“She was as expected.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means she was terribly dull, if I may say so of a lady.”

“You may. What of Mrs. Carteret?”

“Calculating eyes.”

“Miss Thornton?”

“Too stupid by half.”

“Lady Leticia Worthington?”

“Who?”

Alfred sighed and threw his hands up. “Really, Robert, it wouldn’t hurt you to be moderately helpful.”

“Ah, helpful, what an interesting word. And what exactly am I supposed to be helping with, cousin?” Robert leaned back in his chair and sipped his brandy slowly.

“You know what! You need a wife!”

“I’ve had a wife. Two, as a matter of fact. I see no need for another.”

Alfred looked stricken. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I will not marry to please the family. Not again.”

“Not marry!” he spluttered. “You need an heir!”

“I have twice married ladies of considerable rank and fortune. I have had three heirs, and they have joined their mothers in the churchyard. No, I have no desire to do it all again.”

“Who will inherit if you do not have a child?”

“My nephew may inherit if it comes to that. He’s a fine boy.”

“But, but...” his cousin trailed off.

“I am sorry to disappoint you, but I have decided to live life on my own terms. I have been a slave to duty these thirty years and now my life will finally be my own.”

His cousin looked at him with suspicion. “You’re not going to marry a milkmaid, are you?”

He laughed. “You do say the most ridiculous things! Where would I even meet a milkmaid?” He chuckled again. “At the barn, I suppose,” he added thoughtfully.

Alfred looked at him seriously after the laughter died down.

“Just promise me you won’t do anything *too* rash,” he said.

“Define rash,” answered Robert. At Alfred’s exasperated expression, he had mercy on his cousin. “I won’t do anything disastrous, you have my word.”

“No milkmaids?”

“No milkmaids.”

CHAPTER I



*F*ebbruary 1809

The Gardiners' carriage was moving nicely along the road when it suddenly began to slow. Mr. Gardiner looked out the window at the grey landscape covered in fog and spitting rain and tapped his cane on the roof.

He spoke quietly to the footman, then turned to the ladies inside the now still carriage.

“Excuse me, my dears, there’s another carriage up ahead that seems to have had an accident. I’ll just see if they need any help.”

After telling him to be careful, his wife and niece watched out the window as he hurried over to a carriage set at a precarious angle on the side of the road.

“May I be of any assistance?” Mr. Gardiner called to the men working to unload the carriage.

A well-dressed man a little older than himself stood from where he had been crouched next to the carriage, assessing the damage.

“Good day, sir. As you can see, we’ve run into some trouble,” he said with good humor. “It appears the axle is broken.”

“Oh! Could I offer you a seat in my carriage into the next town? It is about five miles on,” Gardiner offered genially.

The man looked to his driver who had been unhitching the horses, apparently planning to ride one of them into the nearest town for assistance. Gardiner could see the man weighing the options and deciding between riding with strangers for half an hour and then being in the comfort of an inn, or staying on the side of the road in the cold and damp and waiting more than twice as long for his man to go to town, hire a carriage, bring it back, and load it.

“Thank you, sir, that would be most kind of you,” said the stranger.

Mr. Gardiner nodded and introduced himself as they walked toward his carriage.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Gardiner. I am Robert Talbot.”

Gardiner popped his head into the carriage and said to his wife, “The gentleman’s carriage has broken an axle, and I’ve offered him a ride into the next town.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded. “Of course, as you should. Was anyone injured?” she asked as he climbed in and sat across from the two ladies.

Gardiner looked to the gentleman climbing in behind him.

“Thankfully not,” Mr. Talbot said sincerely.

Gardiner quickly introduced him and then turned to the ladies. "This is my wife, Madeline, and my niece, Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire."

"I am pleased to meet you, ladies, and much obliged for the assistance. You have saved me from a wet afternoon on the side of the road." He smiled and the ladies smiled back charmingly.

"Where are you headed, sir?" asked Gardiner.

"London. And you?"

"The same. We've been on a short visit to Oxford and now our niece will spend the season with us in town."

Mr. Talbot looked toward Elizabeth and smiled kindly. "Is it your first season, Miss Bennet?"

"No, sir, not completely. But it will be my first proper London season," Elizabeth replied.

"I wish you luck on the battlefield," he said seriously.

Elizabeth couldn't help but laugh and respond, "Surely it isn't so dreadful, sir?"

"I will let you find that out on your own," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Just remember, their barks are worse than their bites. Most of the time."

Elizabeth let out a bubbling laugh and the remainder of the drive was filled with good conversation and easy laughter.

When they arrived at the coaching inn, the ladies settled into a sitting room to have tea while the men settled business.

Talbot's driver was seeing to the axle and his man was securing another carriage. The only trouble was that there were no carriages to be had. The proprietor apologized profusely and said one was due to be returned late that evening, but in the meantime, nothing but a wagon could be procured.

Mr. Gardiner offered to convey Mr. Talbot the remainder of the way to town, and after some polite refusing and insisting, it was decided that Mr. Talbot would travel with the Gardiners into London while his man took the wagon to the damaged carriage and collected the luggage and footmen. As the driver saw to the repairs, an express was sent to Talbot's house in Town explaining what happened and asking that another carriage collect him at the Gardiners' residence. Gardiner tried to insist that they could deliver him safely to his home, but Talbot would hear none of it. He said he had inconvenienced them enough and he wouldn't dream of forcing the ladies to spend another hour in the carriage when they could be resting comfortably.

By the time the carriage arrived at the Gardiner home on Gracechurch Street, no one could remember having had a more pleasant journey or with better conversation. The Gardiners and their niece found Mr. Talbot to be pleasant, conversant on a wide variety of topics, unfailingly polite but not so much as to be dull, and the possessor of a wonderful sense of humor that delighted in teasing and being teased.

Mr. Talbot thought the Gardiners were genteel and uncommonly kind—helping a complete stranger as he was—

and excellent company besides. Mrs. Gardiner was gentle and intelligent, and he thought he saw wisdom in her grey eyes. Mr. Gardiner was funny, sensible, and discreet—not prying into others' business or asking personal questions as many were wont to do.

Their niece, the young Miss Bennet, he found intriguing. At first he had not paid her much attention. He'd thought she was a child, tucked under rugs in the corner as she was, until she spoke and he could hear the maturity in her voice. She had been a good conversationalist, but he hadn't thought beyond that.

Once at the inn, she'd stood stretching her back outside the carriage and he realized he'd made a grievous error. She was not a young girl thrust into society straight from the school room. She was a lovely young lady, fresh-faced with a fully-formed figure. He felt a bit of a dunce for not noticing her beauty before, but the carriage was dim and outside wasn't much better, so he hadn't really seen her. He wasn't ashamed to admit she was a pleasant inducement in his accepting the Gardiners' offer of conveyance.

His carriage was waiting on Gracechurch Street when they arrived, and he bid the family farewell cheerfully, once again thanking them for their assistance.

The next day, when Elizabeth entered the parlor with her five-year-old cousin Jenny, she was surprised to see a beautiful bouquet of flowers on the table.

“Aunt, wherever did those come from? Did Uncle send them? Is it a special occasion?” she asked eagerly. She walked over to the blooms to smell their exotic fragrance, entranced by the deep colors and the varieties she’d never seen before.

“No, they came from quite another source. Mr. Talbot sent them as thanks for assisting him yesterday. He must be a very kind man. His note was all politeness.”

Elizabeth tore her gaze from the bouquet and looked to her aunt. “That was very generous of him. Shall you maintain the acquaintance?”

“I believe so. He also sent a parcel,” she looked at Elizabeth shrewdly. “It contained two books. One for Edward and another for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes. Apparently, Mr. Talbot remembered you mentioning it in the carriage yesterday and he thought you might like your own copy. It is a very fine edition.”

She passed the book to her stunned niece who took it reverently, turning it over in her hands, caressing the fine leather casing and tracing her fingers over the gold embossed letters.

“Oh, Aunt, surely it was very expensive. Should I accept such a gift?” she asked tentatively.

“I believe in this instance it is acceptable. After all, he sent one to your uncle as well and flowers to me. I imagine he did

not want to slight any one person, hence the gifts all around. You are free to enjoy your book, dear.”

Elizabeth sighed in relief and hugged the book to her. “I’ll just put this away upstairs.”

Pursing her lips in thought, Mrs. Gardiner wrote out her thanks and an invitation and sent it on its way.

“What did you send, Mama?” asked Jenny.

“Just a little note, Jenny. Nothing exciting.”

Jenny looked disappointed and went to play with her doll.

Nothing exciting yet, thought Mrs. Gardiner.



Two days later, Elizabeth and her aunt waited in the drawing room for Mr. Talbot, their dinner guest.

“Will it not be strange with only one guest?” asked Elizabeth.

“Not at all. Intimate perhaps, but that is all the better for getting to know someone. We do not know Mr. Talbot well enough to choose which of our friends would be good dinner companions,” said Mrs. Gardiner.

“So you think you will become friends with him?” asked Elizabeth.

“Yes, I believe we will. After all, we are already well on the way.” She smiled at her niece just as the maid opened the door

and announced their visitor.

“Mr. Talbot, how nice to see you again,” said Mrs. Gardiner.

“You as well, Mrs. Gardiner, Miss Bennet.” He bowed to the ladies. “I am glad it is under better circumstances than our last meeting,” he said with an easy grin. “I make a much better impression when I am dry.”

Dinner was just as successful as the carriage ride had been. Conversation flowed easily, laughter was frequent, and everyone seemed well pleased with the company.

Afterward, the ladies left for the drawing room while the men enjoyed their port. Elizabeth was at the pianoforte playing a simple favorite of her aunt’s when the gentlemen rejoined them.

“That is lovely, Miss Bennet,” complimented Mr. Talbot.

“Thank you, sir. I’m afraid I do not practice as often as I should,” she said with a contrite look in her aunt’s direction.

“We are considering engaging a master while Elizabeth is in Town,” added Mrs. Gardiner.

“If we can find someone patient enough,” quipped Elizabeth.

The men chuckled and Mrs. Gardiner replied, “You’ve a very good notion of fingering. It’s finding a master free to take you on that is difficult.”

“Have you had trouble in that regard?” asked Talbot curiously.

“I have made a few enquiries, and the instructor I most wanted is not available, and those that are left much to be desired.”

“I see,” said Mr. Talbot. “Are you looking forward to formal instruction, Miss Bennet?”

“Yes, I am. I realize you do not know me well enough to know I am teasing more often than not, but I would enjoy being more skilled at the instrument.” She smiled and he nodded cordially.

“My cousin engages a young man for her daughters. I shall ask her the name of the fellow and if she recommends him, I’ll pass the information along,” he said decisively.

Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth both thanked him heartily and he was soon on his way.

“Well, that was an enjoyable evening,” said Mr. Gardiner after seeing their guest out.

“Yes, he is a very pleasant guest. Did you not think so, Elizabeth?” asked Mrs. Gardiner.

“Yes, he has excellent conversation and a wonderful sense of humor. I think Papa would like him.”

“I imagine he would,” said Mr. Gardiner thoughtfully. “At the risk of upsetting such an agreeable evening, I must give you some surprising information.”

His wife and niece looked to him expectantly.

“Mr. Talbot is not who he appears to be,” said Mr. Gardiner.

“What?” cried Mrs. Gardiner. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he said, walking toward them and dropping a card on the small table between their chairs, “that he is Robert Talbot, Earl of Asheland.”

The ladies gasped and Elizabeth put her hand to her mouth.

“He asked me to tell you after he left, he didn’t want to upset you,” said Mr. Gardiner. “Apparently, when meeting strangers on the road, he does not reveal his true identity for fear of theft or worse.”

“What would be worse?” asked Elizabeth. She tilted her head thoughtfully. “I suppose ransom.”

“I imagine that would be an extreme case, but he is right to be cautious. One never knows who is behind a friendly smile,” said Mr. Gardiner. “In any event, he is determined to maintain the acquaintance and wants us to know who he really is. I am inclined to accept the offer of friendship.”

He looked to Mrs. Gardiner and she nodded. “Of course. He has been nothing but kind. It may be a little eccentric to keep the title to himself, but I can understand his reasons and he did tell us his name.”

“I suppose it serves us right for not studying Debrett’s,” teased Elizabeth.



Two days later, a note arrived from their new friend listing the name of a pianoforte master and his willingness to meet

Elizabeth on Tuesday and assess if she would make a good pupil. It also included an invitation to the opera Friday evening and dinner after at the Asheland townhouse.

Both were accepted with alacrity and Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner scrambled to put together dresses and gloves and slippers for the opera that would do the box of an earl justice. Naturally, an urgent trip to the dressmaker was in order.

By Tuesday, Elizabeth had had the first fitting for her new theatre gown, placed orders for five more gowns at her aunt's insistence (five!), and had practiced for hours in preparation for meeting the music master.

He arrived promptly and asked Elizabeth to play him something. She knew the piece he requested and thought she acquitted herself well, though his expression revealed nothing. Then he asked her if she sang at all and she told him she did, followed by another song. She wondered what he was thinking behind his thick blond brows and harsh expression, but he gave nothing away.

Finally, though the suspense was excruciating, he told her he would see her every Monday morning at precisely eleven o'clock, and that he expected her to practice diligently between her lessons. He would occasionally see her twice a week if she was in particular need of instruction.

Elizabeth thanked him and showed him to the door, feeling a bit like she had just been insulted, and shared the news with her aunt.

“We shall have to thank Lord Asheland for the recommendation,” she said.

“Yes, though I may reserve my thanks until after the first fortnight of lessons,” replied Elizabeth dryly.



The theatre was resplendent and Elizabeth had never looked forward to a show more. It would be her first time sitting in a private box and wearing such an expensive dress; she was especially excited to see the performance of which she had heard wonderful things.

Lord Asheland met them in front of the theatre and took Mrs. Gardiner’s arm to lead them to his box. Elizabeth held her uncle’s arm tightly, trying to contain her enthusiasm. He patted her hand and smiled at her kindly.

The box was large and their party small, so all four were able to sit across the front row. The ladies sat in the middle, Lord Asheland on Elizabeth’s right and Mr. Gardiner on his wife’s left. Elizabeth leaned forward in anticipation as the lights dimmed, scooting almost to the end of her seat. She ignored her uncle’s amused chuckle.

The party had one libretto and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner were using it at Lord Asheland’s insistence. Unfortunately, Elizabeth found herself mildly confused in the middle of the second act.

She leaned slightly toward Lord Asheland and whispered, “Is she more angry at her brother or her lover? She appears to be yelling at both of them.”

He leaned toward her and whispered back, “Her brother. Without her knowledge, he has promised her to Count Rossi.”

Elizabeth gasped and glared at the stage. Lord Asheland hid his grin.

“Now she is telling him that she loves Basilio and will marry none but him. Her brother threatens to disown her.”

Elizabeth shook her head and raised a hand to her mouth, moved by the swelling music and the beautiful voices on the stage, their costumes shimmering in the lights as their faces contorted in emotion.

Without prompting, Lord Asheland continued translating for her, whispering softly to her as she leaned into his side, so engrossed in the opera that his breath on her ear became a part of the story, the darkness and intimacy of the situation only heightening the drama on stage.

Her hair tickled his cheek and the light dancing off her eyes was enchanting. Suddenly, Robert Talbot, Sixth Earl of Asheland, thought he might be in a bit of trouble.

CHAPTER 2



*A*pril 1809

“I thought we might host a small dinner for your birthday. What do you think, my dear?” asked Mrs. Gardiner one morning as the ladies sat in the sitting room.

Elizabeth looked up from her needle work and answered, “That sounds lovely. Who would we invite?”

“I had thought the Briggsbys, of course, and the Barings—I know you get on with their daughter. Would you also like the Hutton family? Their son is in town,” she added slyly.

Elizabeth made a face. “No, thank you. Let’s invite the Swansons instead.”

Mrs. Gardiner laughed. “Understood. And Lord Asheland?”

“Of course! We couldn’t possibly leave him out,” said Elizabeth matter-of-factly as she went back to her sewing.

Mrs. Gardiner raised a brow but said nothing as she added another name to her list.



Eight weeks after her arrival in town, and her introduction to Lord Asheland, Elizabeth helped her aunt welcome a small gathering of friends to celebrate her birthday. She was wished well by all and received many kisses to her cheek.

The dinner was filled with laughter and good company. Each guest was dear to the Gardiners or Elizabeth, and each came prepared to please and be pleased. When it was all over and she had bid goodnight to the last guest, her uncle called her into his study.

“Have you had a pleasant birthday, my dear?” he asked her kindly.

“Yes, I have,” she said before releasing a large yawn. “Though I am rather tired!”

He smiled. “I imagine you are. Before you go to bed, I want to speak with you about something. Lord Asheland left a gift for you.”

He held out a small parcel to her and she took it curiously. “Why did he not give it to me himself?”

“He wanted to ask my permission before giving it to you. I believe it is quite valuable. And I don’t think he’s the kind of man who wants to be liked for the gifts he gives,” said Mr. Gardiner.

She opened the package gingerly and removed a small carved box. She set aside the paper and lifted the lid before

gasping aloud. “Oh! It is beautiful!”

She held up a small brooch covered in amethyst and opal stones in the design of a delicate flower.

“There should be a note there somewhere,” said her uncle.

She found a piece of paper in the bottom of the box and read,

Miss Bennet,

I picked this up on my tour of the continent several years ago. I believe at the time I thought I would give it to my sister or some other female relation, but truly it was too beautiful to leave behind. When it came time to hand out gifts, it didn't suit my sister or any of my cousins. I think it has been waiting for you. Happy birthday.

Your friend,

R. Asheland

“Oh! How kind of him! And what a lovely gift. It is almost too nice to accept, but I don't want to injure him by refusing.”

She looked at her uncle with a question in her eyes and he answered, “I believe it is all right to accept it. It is your birthday, and you did receive various gifts today, though of course none as valuable as this. He asked my permission first and has been a good friend to the family, so I think you may accept if you are comfortable doing so. But Elizabeth,” he

said, his voicing dropping seriously, "I must caution you about Lord Asheland."

"Caution me?" she asked in surprise.

"Perhaps that is too strong a word. Let us say 'discuss.' I think he may have tender feelings for you."

Elizabeth stiffened in surprise and her eyes widened.

"He has said nothing to me formally, but I have seen the way his eyes watch you, and I don't think he calls here twice a week to see my pretty face," he said with humor.

She laughed. "But uncle, he looks on me as a younger sister or a niece. He has compared me to his sister more than once."

"His sister was only five years his junior, and the comparisons I have heard have all been favorable. His gift is further evidence of his regard. I am not trying to alarm you, but in the event Lord Asheland makes his addresses to you, I want you to be prepared. You must decide if you want to live life beside a man so much older than yourself, though that is not so very unusual, and if you would like to live in his society."

"You really believe he may offer for me?" she asked.

"I do not know. I don't believe I am raising your hopes as I knew you to be ignorant of his feelings until now, but neither do I want him to feel humiliated if you are completely taken aback at his overture. If you cannot like him as a man, if you cannot imagine life as his wife, it would be kind to withdraw."

“Do you believe I have encouraged him?” asked Elizabeth in disbelief.

“No, I do not think you have. But you are a naturally vivacious lady and certain men find that very attractive. It would be a kindness to avoid him if he does have tender feelings you cannot reciprocate.”

She looked down at the brooch still in her lap. “I see. You’ve given me much to think on.”



Elizabeth went to bed with a troubled mind. She remembered the conversation she had had with Lord Asheland earlier that week when he had asked to join her on a walk with her eldest nephews. He had asked her if she would obtain her majority on her upcoming birthday and she had laughed and said that was a few years off; she would be eighteen this birthday.

Asheland had stared at her in shock for a full minute before spluttering his surprise, much to Elizabeth’s amusement.

There was always laughter and easiness between them. That was one of the things she loved about spending time with him. While they shared a similar sense of humor, there were differences enough to provide the occasional surprise.

She supposed it was silly of her not to realize by now that asking to walk with her, several times, in fact, should have been a sign of his interest. But she had never thought of him in that way before.

She made herself stop fretting and think rationally. Was he really so much older than she? She wasn't sure of his exact age, but he seemed near her uncle's age or thereabouts. Her own father was eight years older than her mother, and her uncle was nearly ten years older than Aunt Madeline. He had been building his business and not married until he was over thirty.

But twenty years was more than ten. *Twice as many*, she thought acerbically. With a man that much older than herself, she would most assuredly end up a widow, and possibly at a young age. Did she want to live her later years on her own? Of course, there was no guarantee that she wouldn't be widowed if she married a young man, or that she might not die and leave him alone.

Mr. Pratt, an elderly man in Meryton, had been married three times, and widowed three times. His most recent wife had been scandalously younger than himself, and yet she had been the one to die from a fever, not him.

Did she want to be like the young Mrs. Pratt? Gossiped about and laughed at for marrying an old man? Of course, Lord Asheland was hardly old! He was still quite attractive and his hair hadn't even begun to gray yet. It wouldn't appear she was walking with her grandfather! And there was the matter of his being an earl. It was a very advantageous match for her, everyone would say so. They would all ignore his age for the sake of his eligibility. But she did dread people saying she had married him for his money. After seeing his

townhouse and riding in his carriage, she was sure his income was far above what she was accustomed to.

But she could never choose a husband on security alone. There must be something more between them. She was romantic enough to want respect, esteem, and affection in her marriage, but practical enough to realize that the love described in fairy tales was not easily attainable and may not even exist. Who fell in love with someone the moment they saw them? Who felt a burning passion on such a short acquaintance and how would it last throughout time?

She desired a marriage like her aunt and uncle's. They respected each other, clearly admired one another, each liked the other and enjoyed their company. They were good friends and she could tell by the soft look in her aunt's eyes when she gazed on Mr. Gardiner that the lady held him in affection. Likewise, his attraction was clear. Beyond that, she did not want to imagine, but theirs was a relationship she thought realistic to emulate.

Could she have that with Lord Asheland? *Silly girl! He isn't even courting you yet,* she thought. *No, he comes to Cheapside twice a week and accompanies you on walks with the children because he simply has nothing better to do,* she answered herself dryly.

She laughed at herself and rolled over fitfully. She liked him. She respected him. She enjoyed his company. If anything were to grow from there, she thought that a good basis for it.



A month passed and nothing was declared. Lord Asheland continued to call at least once a week, and he often invited them to dinner or to see an art exhibition or to take a walk in the park. It was clear Elizabeth was his main object. Or at least it was to her aunt and uncle. Elizabeth wasn't entirely sure, as the gentleman never made any advances and didn't appear to be flirting with her, though she was the first to admit she had little experience in that arena.

She wondered that her uncle was continuing to allow him to call without declaring himself, and this, above anything else, convinced her that he was only interested in friendship. She could not know that her uncle had questioned the earl on the subject of excess attention given to his niece and received every assurance that Asheland's intentions were honorable, and that he wished to take things slowly with Elizabeth in deference to her age and the years between them.

One day in mid-May, Elizabeth was walking in the park on the arm of Lord Asheland while her aunt sat on a bench nearby watching the children play with their nurse. Elizabeth had been laughing at some story he had told her about his cousin Alfred when she looked at him and saw something in his eyes that made her stop and blush, then look down with uncommon silence.

Asheland took this as encouragement and decided to speak. "Miss Bennet, might I share something with you?" he said

quietly.

“Yes, of course,” she answered, slightly unnerved. Was it her imagination or was he holding her arm closer than he usually did?

“I’m sure you’ve noticed my attention toward you these last weeks.”

She looked down and gave a tiny nod.

“Do you consider me a friend, Miss Bennet?” he asked.

Her head shot up. “Of course!”

“Do you think me an old man?” he asked again.

She noticed a tiny twitch in his jaw and thought it a sign that he was uncomfortable. “No sir, I do not. My grandfather was an old man, and you do not resemble him in the slightest.”

He laughed at her tease and patted her hand on his arm. “My dear, you are a wonder. If I may, I would like to share some of my history with you.” He knew he was muddling this up something terrible, but she did make it hard to think clearly sometimes.

“I will listen to anything you have to say to me,” she said with more calmness than she felt.

“Thank you. When I was five and twenty, I wed Lady Beatrice Alsop, the eldest daughter of Lord Langley. She was a typical woman of fashion; she shopped, hosted parties, and attended salons. She managed my homes well and less than two years after we were married, she bore me a son, Edmund.”

Elizabeth was about to say that she had not known he had a son when she noticed his pinched lips and lowered brow.

“He was a good, sweet-natured boy. Beatrice and I were not particularly close—our marriage was little more than an arrangement by our parents—and we barely knew each other when we wed, but we were kind to each other and had a measure of friendship between us. We were always respectful of one another, which is more than many can say about their unions.”

Elizabeth nodded and squeezed his arm where her hand rested on it.

He continued, “Shortly before Edmund’s second birthday, he contracted a fever. Many in the household became ill, including the butler who had been with us since my infancy. In the end, Edmund and Beatrice both succumbed to the disease. I was away on business and was spared.”

“I am so sorry, my lord. That must have been a difficult time,” she said.

“Yes, it was.” He tried to smile at her and continued walking around the small pond the children were playing near. They were on their second loop now and Mrs. Gardiner could be seen watching them from across the water.

“After two years of mourning, my family began to insist I marry again. The earldom needed an heir. I had a younger brother and several cousins, so I did not exactly agree with them, but I bowed to family duty and wed Sarah Wainwright, an old family friend. She was seven and twenty at the time and

her family dearly wished her to marry. She had turned down numerous suitors and only agreed to marry me because she had known me since childhood.”

Elizabeth wanted to ask if he had been happy with her, but thought it too intrusive a question.

“She was an intelligent woman and we got on well enough. We had two children together, Mary and Jenny.” He did not tell her that his wife had had a strong aversion to men and that she had barely tolerated his person, making the begetting of children uncomfortable in the extreme. He had offered a cessation of the activity, but she wished for more children, so the awkwardness continued. She became particularly shrewish after a few years, making her presence more of a duty than a joy, but he would not speak ill of the dead.

“Sarah took the girls to visit her brother’s family and there was an accident. The roads were icy and the horses lost their footing. The carriage slid down an embankment into a river and all were lost, including my daughters. Jenny was not yet a year old.”

“Oh, Lord Asheland, I am sorry. How incredibly dreadful for you!” she said with feeling.

He looked at her with sad eyes and was somewhat surprised to feel the tightness in his chest lifting a little with her obvious concern.

“Yes, well.” He cleared his throat. “That was six years ago now.”

“My lord,” Elizabeth started but then stopped herself.

“Go ahead, you may ask me whatever is on your mind,” he said.

“Thank you. It is just, I wonder, why are you telling me all of this?”

“Miss Bennet, I tell you because I wish you to know that I understand what marriage is, what it entails and requires, that I am no stubborn bachelor. But mostly because I want you to know *me*.”

She looked at him with some disbelief but said nothing.

“My marriages had their good and bad, seasons of warmth and of reserve, but I never felt I had a true partner, a companion. I never felt that my wife considered me her peer.” At her confused look, he elaborated. “I know I sound revolutionary, but I mean to say that there was always a distance between us, a chasm I could never cross, even had I wished it. Neither of them wanted to know me intimately and did not wish for me to know them as such. They were content with a cordial friendship, but I wanted more. I wasn’t sure what that more was until I met you, Miss Bennet.”

“Me?” she squeaked.

“Yes, you. You who have never cared about the size of my house in town or the number of carriages I keep. You who want to discuss books and will take the opposite opinion of the one you hold just for the sake of a good argument. You who make me laugh more than I have ever laughed with a lady. You

have awakened something in me that has long lain dormant, and I have come to admire you fiercely.”

Her jaw dropped and left her mouth hanging open in a rather unladylike fashion as he turned to stand in front of her and took her hands in his own.

“Miss Bennet, Elizabeth, I believe we could be wildly happy together, if you could find your way to learning to care for me.”

She stared at him, mouth agape, for some minutes before she finally spoke. “Me? Truly? Are you certain?” she asked, clearly in shock. “What do you see in me?” It was not that she thought herself undesirable, but rather she thought him a man of the world with infinite options. She simply thought herself an odd choice for one such as he.

He chuckled. “Don’t you see, darling girl? In you, I see a future of warm talks and passion-filled discussions. Long walks and lively dinners. Companionship. Friendship. Love. Joy. A beautiful life, that’s what I see in you.”

“Oh!” she was breathless all at once, and all she could do was look into his eyes, trying to decipher what she saw there.

“Don’t answer now, just promise me you will think about it,” he said softly.

“Yes, of course. I’ll think about it.” Before he had offered his arm again, her tendency to tease came to the fore and she said, “Just what am I supposed to be considering exactly, my lord?”

He laughed. "This is what I love about you. You are not afraid of me."

"Should I be afraid of you?" she asked, genuinely perplexed.

"No, my dear, I believe *I* should be afraid of *you*," he said with a certain look she could not comprehend.

She huffed. "What a silly thing to say!"

"If you agree to become my wife, you can tell me how silly I am every day," he said simply.

She instantly flushed and looked to the ground. "I will consider it carefully, sir."

"As you should," he answered.

They made their way back to her aunt in silence, both too filled with thoughts of the future to speak.



That night, Elizabeth and her aunt sat on Elizabeth's bed discussing the earl's proposal. After nearly an hour of discussion, in which Elizabeth told Mrs. Gardiner everything he had said and how he had looked when he said it, they had still not made a decision.

"What you must consider, of course, is where you will be in twenty years' time," stated Mrs. Gardiner. "If you were to marry a younger man, there is a good chance he would still be

alive and you could grow old together. If you marry Lord Asheland, he may have died by then or be quite infirm.”

“How old is he exactly?” asked Elizabeth.

“I think he is forty-two, but I am not certain.”

Elizabeth blanched. “That’s only four years younger than Papa!”

“And four years older than your mother,” Mrs. Gardiner murmured.

Elizabeth put her head in her hands. “Why is this so complicated!” she cried. “If he were younger, or not so very important, I would not hesitate. He is a kind man, amiable, generous, intelligent. I have never enjoyed a man’s company more!”

“And yet?”

“And yet, I do not want to be a widow in five years’ time!”

“I doubt that would happen. He is very healthy and hardly an old man!” interjected Mrs. Gardiner.

“And I do not know if I want to be scrutinized and judged by everyone I meet. They will think me a fortune hunter and unworthy of him. I will be the penniless girl from the country who somehow turned the old earl’s head. I do not want to live my life under a cloud.”

“It sounds like you have made your decision, then,” said her aunt steadily.

Elizabeth nodded and looked at the coverlet she was plucking at with nervous movements. “But I cannot imagine not seeing him again. Surely, if I refuse him, he will cease calling. I cannot expect to receive his attentions after such a rejection.”

“No, you are right, you cannot,” agreed Mrs. Gardiner.

“What will I do without him? He has become a very dear friend!”

“Elizabeth,” Mrs. Gardiner began carefully, “do you think your happiness may depend on Lord Asheland?”

Elizabeth sat up straighter and looked surprised. “I do not know. I haven’t given it much thought.”

“Let us change our direction somewhat. If you do not think of anything else, not his title or money or society, and not his age, can you see yourself living happily with him? Can you picture being on his arm and attending the theater? Dinners together, walks in the park?”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and imagined her life with Lord Asheland. As she pictured the scenes her aunt had mentioned, a slow smile worked its way onto her face.

“Yes, yes I can. It’s lovely,” she said softly.

“And can you picture having children together?”

Elizabeth imagined taking a walk with a young girl like herself, and beaming proudly at a boy who had learned to ride a horse on his own.

“Yes, I can,” she said simply, looking at her aunt with bright eyes.

“Good. Now, I know it is awkward, but we have talked before about what happens between a man and a woman.” Elizabeth nodded with trepidation and her aunt continued. “Can you perceive being intimate with Lord Asheland? Could you be comfortable with him kissing you, touching you, caressing you? Sharing a bed with you?”

Elizabeth’s cheeks flushed brightly and she looked down.

“You are young, and very pretty. Lord Asheland is clearly attracted to you. He will likely be a frequent visitor to your chambers. If you cannot imagine welcoming him with equanimity, and even with joy, you should not accept him. The marriage bed is a large part of your relationship and must be considered seriously before you make any decisions.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I understand, Aunt. I will think on all of this carefully.”



Elizabeth spent the next few days deep in thought. Lord Asheland showed his good breeding and stayed away to allow her to reflect without interruption. After five days had passed, he sent a note asking if he could call the following day. Elizabeth was the only one home when the note arrived, so she quickly penned an answer to send with his servant. She would receive him at one the following day and was looking forward to taking a walk if he would be so kind as to accompany her.

Lord Asheland arrived promptly and Elizabeth was already wearing her bonnet and gloves where she awaited him in the entrance hall. He offered her his arm and she took it with quiet thanks; neither said anything until they reached the park and began strolling slowly around the pond.

“I suppose you must be wondering about my answer to your question,” she said, sounding more mature than he had ever heard her.

“Yes, I will admit to an inordinate amount of curiosity,” he said.

“As much as I hate to disappoint you,” she said quietly as he stiffened beside her, “I must ask you some questions before I can answer you properly.”

“Questions?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, my dear! I thought you were refusing me!” he said. He released a long breath and his shoulders relaxed. “Please, ask what you will.”

“Thank you. Firstly, how old are you?”

He chuckled softly and answered, “One and forty, though some days I feel much older.”

She nodded, relieved to find it was not more than she had expected. “And do you have any children living?”

“No, none of my children survived beyond the age of three.”

She squeezed his arm. “I am sorry, my lord.”

He nodded and they walked on quietly for some minutes.

“Do you spend more time in town or in the country?”

He smiled and answered, pleased that she was thinking about the future—it meant she was considering accepting him. “I prefer the country to town in the warmer months, of course, and for the deep winter, but spring is nice in town, though it comes with the unfortunate accompaniment of the season.”

“Should I take from your answer that you are not fond of society?” she asked.

“Not at all, I simply dislike people who constantly try to manipulate me into doing what they want, in parliament and in drawing rooms. I find it exhausting.”

She smiled. “I understand you perfectly. Do you limit your acquaintance accordingly?”

“Do you mean do I avoid those whose company I don’t actually enjoy? As much as possible, though the occasional meeting cannot be avoided.”

She nodded reflectively and he continued.

“If you are wondering if I associate with those who would be rude to you, or treat you meanly in any way, I do not. Of course, we cannot control others’ guest lists and I am sure we will have to spend some time with the old guard, especially in

the beginning when we are deciding who we like and who we do not, but the name Talbot is old and respected, and the Asheland title is noble and more importantly, wealthy. They may be unkind for a moment, but give them time, and they will all be crawling to you with their tails between their legs and their hands outstretched.”

She laughed at the image he presented and the twinkle in his eye as he said it. “Are you so terribly rich, then?” she teased.

“Oh, quite terribly! You will have more frocks than days to wear them and the ladies will be clamoring for your favor.”

She laughed. “I have only one other question.”

“Go ahead.”

“I would ask you to answer me honestly. It goes without saying that anything you say will be kept in strict confidence.”

“This sounds serious. What do you wish to ask?” He stopped and took both her hands in his, pulling her off the path to stand in the shade of a large tree.

“Are you in good health? I mean, are you suffering from any malady that might shorten your life? Do you expect to grow to an old age?” she asked worriedly, biting her lip.

“Oh, my poor dear girl. I should not have worried you so. Forgive me for not discussing this when I first proposed. I am in perfect health. Not a thing is wrong with me except for the odd headache when I’ve been up too late or in the sun too long. Nothing to worry about.” He patted her hand and she exhaled in relief. “I will be honest with you, though.” She

tensed again. “My father died at one and sixty—an ailment with his heart. And my younger brother has also passed on, but his disease was believed to be brought on by his dissolute lifestyle more than anything else.”

She raised her brows but did not ask for further details.

“Is there anything else you wish to ask me?” he asked kindly.

“No, I believe that is all. I imagine you would like to hear my answer now, though I still maintain that you never truly asked me a question,” she said with an impish grin.

“Allow me to rectify the situation. Darling Elizabeth, you are the brightest, sweetest, most enjoyable woman of my acquaintance. I want to spend every day listening to your laugh, looking into your eyes, and kissing your beautiful mouth. Please, do me the very great honor of becoming my wife and I will do everything in my power to make you deliriously happy.”

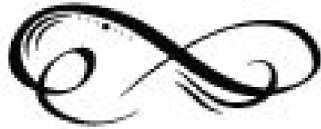
She stood staring at him, speechless, for some time before she finally smiled at him and he wrapped her in his arms, pulling her further into the shadows along the path. She laughed at his exuberance and felt herself filled with all the joy of knowing she was making the right decision.

“Now, you have taken me to task for not asking properly, I must insist that you answer properly,” he said as he released her.

“Yes!” she cried, all urge to tease gone. “Yes, yes, yes!”

He laughed and embraced her again, lifting her feet off the ground and twirling in a circle. “My darling girl,” he whispered in her ear.

CHAPTER 3



Mr. Gardiner was quickly applied to and his consent given, as everyone knew would happen. Lord Asheland made plans to go to Hertfordshire and speak with Mr. Bennet in person at the end of the week when the settlement papers had been drawn up. He wanted everything completed as soon as possible. He had waited years for someone like Elizabeth and he did not want her to slip away.

Lord Asheland arrived at Longbourn on horseback by noon that Friday. He had sent a letter asking for an audience and had the settlement in his pocket. He had chosen to not take his carriage, both for the purpose of speed and because Elizabeth had warned him of her mother's exuberance when confronted with wealth such as his. He was less conspicuous on horseback.

He was admitted discreetly into Mr. Bennet's library and assessed Elizabeth's father carefully. Mr. Bennet was a little older than himself and his hair was fully grey, though it was still thick upon his head. The thought tickled in the back of Asheland's mind that between his and Elizabeth's family

propensities, their children would have marvelous hair. He almost chuckled at his wayward thoughts and extended his hand in greeting.

The meeting proceeded without difficulty. He laid out his friendship with and affection for Elizabeth, and his own financial solvency. Mr. Bennet was duly impressed with the size of the gentleman's fortune and his apparent respect for his daughter, though he expressed concern for the difference in their ages and wished to ascertain if the gentleman's affections were deeper than an infatuation with a pretty face.

"I would not wish to see my daughter resented by her husband when time takes its natural course and she is no longer the youthful beauty she is today," Mr. Bennet said seriously.

"I understand you perfectly. Be assured that I am no fickle youth or an old man simply wishing to appease his baser instincts. Mr. Bennet, I do not wish to be offensive, but you know I have no need of marriage if all I want is the company of a pretty young woman. In your daughter, I have found something I have never before encountered, and I have lived long enough to know that chances like these do not come very often. I care for her very deeply, and she will have my respect and affection all my days. Do not worry yourself on that account."

Mr. Bennet looked out the window for a moment, sighed, and reached his hand across the desk. "I see everything is as it

should be, and I would be remiss in denying my consent. Do you know when you would wish to marry?" asked Mr. Bennet.

"Thank you, sir, I appreciate your trust in me." Asheland tried to hold back the smile attempting to take over half his face. "I would like to marry in two months' time, if that is agreeable to you. It would give Miss Elizabeth time to prepare herself and my staff to make my homes ready, as well as allow sufficient time for the preparations. What say you?"

"I think that is a fine idea. I will inform Mrs. Bennet. Will you marry here at Longbourn or in London?"

"I think here would be best. Miss Elizabeth would like to marry from her home and I would not wish to deny your wife her due," Lord Asheland said respectfully.

"That is good of you, my lord," said Mr. Bennet in some surprise.

"Not at all, it is a woman's prerogative to marry from her home. And please, call me Asheland," he said warmly.

"Very well, but you must call me Bennet."

They smiled and nodded and before the pause could become awkward, Asheland indicated he had brought the marriage settlement with him if Bennet would care to peruse it. Asheland was introduced to Mrs. Bennet as a friend of the Gardiners—Mr. Bennet would announce the engagement once he had agreed to the settlement—and the earl sat in her best drawing room and listened to her complain of her nerves while Mr. Bennet examined the marriage articles.

Asheland was an old hand at steering conversations and before long, Mrs. Bennet was telling him about Elizabeth as a child and even showing him a painting done of the family when Elizabeth was six years old. As he had suspected, Elizabeth had been a beautiful child with bright, dancing eyes and chocolate curls.

Soon enough, Mr. Bennet called him back to the library and signed the articles, seeing no need to change the already generous settlement, and with very little trouble, Lord Asheland was on his way back to London.



Lord Asheland arrived in London too late to call on Elizabeth, which he regretted, but he took great pleasure in penning her a letter and sending it to Gracechurch Street. It arrived as she was preparing for bed and was brought up by a maid. She smiled and opened it eagerly, knowing that if he was writing her so openly, her father must have consented and they were now officially engaged.

My Dearest Elizabeth,

It is with great joy and the utmost humility that I inform you of my conference with your father. He has consented. We are to be married in two months' time. I can hardly wait to bring you home, my love. We will be the happiest couple in England, I am sure of it.

I know you must be wild with curiosity and long to know each word exchanged between us, so I will wait on you tomorrow at the earliest possible moment and tell you everything.

Sleep well, my sweet.

Yours,

Robert

Elizabeth sighed happily and hugged the letter to her. She was to be married! And to such a man! She knew she would be wildly happy. She was so excited about the prospect of her new life, and imagining all the adventures they would have together, that she could not fall asleep for nearly two hours.



As soon as Lord Asheland entered the sitting room, Elizabeth rushed to him and took his hand, practically dragging him to the sofa.

He laughed. “What is all this excitement about?” he asked through his chuckles.

“You know exactly, sir. Now, tell me everything that occurred between you and my father,” she said as they sat, her hand holding his firmly in her lap.

“Very well, but it isn’t half so thrilling as you believe it is.”

“I will be the judge of that, sir,” she said.

“Dearest, would you call me Robert? I do tire of this ‘sir’ business.”

“Of course, if you wish it. You do not want me to call you Asheland?”

“No, I hear it enough from everyone else that I tire of it. I would like to be Robert to you, if I may.”

Her face softened and she smiled gently, “Very well, Robert. You will not be a title to me, but a man. *My man.*”

He stared in disbelief at her perception and stroked her cheek softly with his free hand. “How well you know me, Elizabeth.”

She smiled and leaned into his palm, a soft blush warming her cheek. Before anything else could be said, they heard footsteps in the hall and broke apart just before her aunt entered the room.

Lord Asheland stood to greet her and Elizabeth smiled and said, “You are just in time, Aunt. Robert was about to tell me of his visit with my father.”

“I assume by your expressions that all went as expected and your betrothal has been sanctioned by Mr. Bennet,” said Mrs. Gardiner with a warm smile for both of them.

“Yes, it went very well. You are now looking at the future Countess of Asheland,” he said with obvious pride.

Elizabeth started a bit at the announcement. She, a countess! How very extraordinary!



A fortnight later, Elizabeth sat in her uncle's study going over her marriage settlement. After much conversation, Lord Asheland had persuaded her to discuss it in detail with her uncle. He insisted that a woman be familiar with her own situation and strongly believed that ignorance could not make one secure.

Her uncle had agreed and so they sat, reviewing papers and articles and copies of wills.

“Well, Lizzy, you shall be very well looked after,” said her uncle.

“I expected no less, Uncle. Robert says I must know the details or I will be at the mercy of unsavory characters, though I cannot know what he means by that in relation to my settlement.”

“I believe he means that if he were to die, he wants you to know exactly what is your due so that others cannot cheat you,” stated her uncle seriously.

Elizabeth gasped. “Surely he doesn't think that will be necessary? Does he have unscrupulous family members he is worried about? And he is far from being an old man!”

“True, he is not an old man, but he is significantly older than you and is wise to prepare for your eventual widowhood. I would want no less for you, even from a young man. It is a

reality we must face in this world, my dear, as much as I wish it were not. I have prepared similarly for my wife.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Very well. I suppose you should tell me everything, then.”

“I wish I could say it was all very simple, but there are quite a lot of conditions. Let us begin with the assets. There is, of course, the country seat in Nottinghamshire. The estate itself is quite large and is attached to the title. The majority of the lands and the main house are entailed on heirs of the body, meaning your daughter could inherit if there were no sons and hold the title for her firstborn son. There is additional property attached to the estate and generally considered to be part of the whole. There are several smaller estates, six in total, ranging in size and profitability.”

“Six!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, the largest had been his brother’s, and when he died unexpectedly, it reverted back to the earl. He had never married and had no children.”

She nodded. “You say the largest. How large is it?”

Mr. Gardiner looked at the paper carefully. “According to this, it has a good-size house, though I am not sure what their definition of good-size is, multiple tenant farms, and an income of seven-thousand a year.”

Elizabeth gasped and fell back in her chair, astonished beyond speech.

“It is designated for your second son, should you have one. If you do not, it will go to your eldest daughter as part of her dowry, or in the absence of sons, your second daughter.”

Elizabeth shook her head in wonder. How had all of this come about?

“Are you well, Lizzy?” her uncle asked softly.

“Yes, yes, I am well. Just astonished. Did you know he was so *very* rich? I confess I did not!” she said, somewhat hysterically.

“Perhaps we should continue this tomorrow,” Mr. Gardiner said carefully.

“No, no, I am well. Just surprised. I am quite recovered now,” she said, sitting up. “Please, do go on.”

Gardiner nodded, though he looked at her warily. “Two of the other estates bring in roughly six-thousand a year, one more five-thousand, and the other two bring in four and three-thousand respectively.”

“Finally, some numbers I am accustomed to. I imagine their dispensation follows the ages of the children? The eldest son gets the earldom, the second the largest estate, the third the next largest estate, and so on?”

He nodded.

“And daughters take their places accordingly if we do not have sons?”

Again, her uncle nodded and she laughed nervously. “It is funny, don’t you think? When you collected me in January to visit Great Aunt Seymour, I never imagined that the following summer I would be engaged to an earl and making plans for my seven children!”

“Elizabeth, is this all too much for you? Are you having second thoughts about marrying Lord Asheland?” he asked.

“No!” she cried. “I very much want to marry him! It is just, this is all, all so...”

“Sudden and overwhelming?”

“Yes,” she exhaled loudly. “Exactly. Thank you, Uncle. All will be well, I will be well, I know it. I just need time to adjust to so many changes and so much money! I’m sure there are many women who always hoped to marry a wealthy man, but I confess I never truly thought I would. I thought Jane might, but I never expected to be more than comfortable.”

“It is a good surprise though, yes?” he said with some humor.

“Yes! If I must choose, I’d rather be wealthy than poor,” she teased. “Now, tell me how many grand carriages I am to have.”

Her uncle laughed and continued detailing the three houses in town—one accompanying the title, Asheland House, one inherited from an uncle, Talbot House, and another from his mother’s family. Two were let and one was currently in use. There was a good amount of money in the funds and in the

bank, amounts which were not specified, but clearly there was enough for him to settle forty-thousand pounds on her without strain. When her uncle told her this, her eyes bulged and he had to call for tea before they could proceed.

Her pin money was more than she could ever imagine spending and the dowries set aside for their daughters were, to her mind, inconceivable, but of course the amount would be lowered if she delivered more than three Miss Talbots.

Upon her husband's death, she would be an incredibly wealthy woman in her own right. Apart from the money settled on her, she would have an annuity and her choice of one of the five unclaimed estates plus lifetime rights to Talbot House in town. She would also live on the main estate, Cressingdon, until her son came of age. Obviously, she and her son may choose for her to live there longer, and if they did not wish to reside together, there was always the dower house.

It was all so very grand, so extravagant, so *much*, that she felt herself alternately giddy and grave, lightheaded and slightly terrified. They finished the meeting without many more interruptions and Elizabeth went to bed that night wondering if she knew what she was about.

When Lord Asheland called the next day, all her doubts flitted away. He was so kind, so intelligent, able to make conversation on so very many topics and always willing to please. He was obviously in love with her and falling more under her power every day, something she could not quite

understand the workings of but enjoyed the results nonetheless.

She toured his London home and met with various craftsmen to discuss the changes to her chambers and personal study. She was introduced to his cousin, Alfred Downing, at a private dinner and found him vastly entertaining. He was roughly five years older than Lord Asheland and reminded her of her own father, only more voluble. His wife Sylvia decided to take Elizabeth under her wing and had made shopping arrangements and plans for a ladies' tea to introduce her to her friends before the second course. Their son John was only a few years older than Elizabeth and particularly close to her betrothed. To no one's surprise, they quickly struck up a sibling-like relationship and Robert was pleased to see her assimilating into the family so easily.

She also met Robert's brother-in-law, Stephen Carew, who had been married to his sister Violet. The siblings had been close and Lord Asheland was devastated when she died in childbirth seven years ago.

Elizabeth marveled at the losses Robert had endured. One expects to lose parents, it is the natural order of things, but to lose both his siblings, both his wives, and all of his children—it was positively Biblical! She had held him tightly when he told her of his son Edmund, of the silly words he would say and how he was utterly fascinated with horses and always wanting to visit the stables, and how little Mary had loved her blocks best, always building large colorful towers and crying if anyone knocked them down.

She did not know it, but her compassion in hearing and comforting him only confirmed to Asheland that he was making the right choice of bride. He rewarded her kindness with a gentle kiss to her pink lips and she stared at him with wide eyes for a moment before asking him to do it again, for she had not been expecting that one and had not savored it as she ought.

He laughed. Elizabeth was always making him laugh. He had never been happier than he was with her. She was quickly becoming essential to his existence and he found himself wondering how he had ever lived without her. He finally understood what men meant when they said they wanted to make their wives as happy as the ladies made them. Now he knew. If he could make Elizabeth even half as happy as she made him, then she would be happy indeed.



Lord Asheland went to Hertfordshire a fortnight before the wedding. As expected, Mrs. Bennet was all aflutter at having an earl for a son-in-law, never mind that he was older than herself. She fawned and flirted and made a general fool of herself while Elizabeth sat by silently, her cheeks aflame.

Mr. Bennet was no help, only watching with amused eyes as his wife make their guest uncomfortable. Elizabeth was grateful that Kitty and Lydia were not yet out—though Kitty would be next spring—and thus were spared their incessant giggling. It was embarrassing enough listening to Mary play

so very badly while demanding an attentive audience. Only Jane was perfectly behaved and tried to direct their mother's attention elsewhere.

Eventually, Elizabeth took Lord Asheland for a walk in the gardens, more out of a need to get away than to actually show him anything.

"I must apologize for my family, sir," Elizabeth said quietly.

He patted her hand where it rested on his arm and pulled her a little closer. "Do not, it is not your fault."

She nodded and looked down, shame washing over her. He had not said it was unnecessary or that they had not been that bad. No, he had simply said their bad behavior was not her fault. She couldn't look at him; he with the title and the grand estates and the well-behaved family.

"Dearest, do not let them worry you. I am not bothered, truly. Surely every family has some manner of..."

He searched for a word and she supplied it for him. "The ridiculous?" He inclined his head and she continued, "But surely not quite so many in one room at the same time?"

"I don't know. The Shrewsburys can be quite taxing. But one never corrects an earl, unless one is a duke, and there aren't many of those."

She relaxed and laid her head on his shoulder with a faint laugh. "You are so very good at cheering me, my love," she said.

He beamed with pride and they walked on quietly.



Lord Asheland was a perfect (and patient) gentleman. He allowed Mrs. Bennet to host multiple teas and dinners in his (and Elizabeth's) honor and drag him all about the neighborhood to call on all her friends and enemies to crow about her daughter's great conquest. Through it all, he was polite and well-mannered and never lost his temper or composure, though Elizabeth came close to it on more than one occasion.

After one particularly trying episode involving her mother and Sir William and Lady Lucas, Elizabeth was pacing in the garden, trying to calm her frayed nerves and feeling as though she had just found her wits' end, when she was approached by her betrothed.

"Dearest, what troubles you?" he asked, pulling her into his arms.

She rested her head just below his chin and wrapped her arms tightly around him. "My mother. My father. Mary. Our neighbors. Need I go on?"

He chuckled. "No, I understand perfectly."

She sighed. "I feel so terrible for leaving Jane here all alone with them. What will she do? What will become of her?" They were silent for a moment, then she spoke tentatively. "Robert, what do you think of Jane coming to stay with us? Perhaps just for the Season? Or maybe for the autumn?"

“I think it a fine idea.”

She pulled back abruptly and looked at him. “You do?”

“Of course. She is your sister and you will miss her. And she is old enough to marry and not likely to meet many gentlemen here. She should spend the winter with us at Cressington and then travel to London. We must be there for the entire Season, unfortunately, but that will give you more time to shop.”

“Very funny, my lord. Is that all I am expected to do while you sit in Parliament and shape the nation?”

“No, you will also plan menus and visit friends and receive some truly ghastly callers.”

She laughed and snuggled into him again. “You are the best of men. I am very pleased to be marrying you.”

He squeezed her to him. “No more pleased than I am to be marrying you, my love.”



That evening, after the ladies had retired upstairs, Lord Asheland knocked on the door to Mr. Bennet’s bookroom. After being invited in, he stepped into the cozy space and wondered at its owner. How could a man so conscientious about his books be so neglectful of his family?

“What can I do for you, Asheland?” asked Mr. Bennet.

“I wanted to speak with you about Miss Bennet.”

“She will be your wife in two days,” he began.

“No, not Miss Elizabeth, Miss Jane Bennet.”

“Oh?”

“Elizabeth would like her to come and stay with us for some time this winter. We would also like her to accompany us to Town for the Season.”

“Ah, I see. I am not surprised. They have always been close. My permission is granted, if that is what you are after.”

“Partly, yes, and I thank you. There is more,” he stated matter-of-factly.

Bennet looked at him with curiosity and raised one brow in question.

“Miss Mary. What do you think of sending her to a seminary? There is one in Town that specializes in music—my cousin sent his daughter there last year. There is also another in Nottinghamshire that would be suitable. It is near Cressington, so we could keep an eye on her.”

Mr. Bennet’s brows were nearly to his hairline. “Are you attempting to educate my children, Lord Asheland?”

“Someone should,” he said simply.

Mr. Bennet’s eyes widened and his face flushed. Asheland looked perturbingly calm.

“Did Elizabeth ever mention to you that I was married before?”

Bennet looked surprised at the turn in conversation and said, "She told me you were a widower."

"Yes, twice over." Mr. Bennet's eyes widened again and Asheland continued. "Did she tell you about my children?"

"You have children?" Mr. Bennet asked, shocked and slightly angry.

"Yes, I did. Odd that you never asked me that, knowing I had been married before and that I was nearly of an age with yourself."

Mr. Bennet flushed, feeling the weight of the insult.

"I had a son, Edmund. He is unfortunately no longer living, but I had great plans for him. I would teach him to love our estate, our land, the Asheland legacy. I would teach him to ride and to hunt. He would be a credit to the Talbot name. When he was old enough, he would go to Eton, though my wife argued for Harrow, and then on to Cambridge or Oxford. He would take my seat in the House of Lords and marry a kind woman, one nice to share a house with. His children would be well-loved and spoiled by their grandparents.

"He died just before his second birthday, along with his mother, and none of my plans for him will ever come to pass." He walked around the room quietly, looking at books, pacing the rug, staring out the dark window as he talked.

"Does Elizabeth know all this?" asked Mr. Bennet quietly.

"Yes, she does, and more. I told her before I asked for her hand. I wanted her fully informed before she made her

choice.” He picked up a small ornament on the bookshelf and replaced it before continuing. “I also had two daughters with my second wife. They had a nurse, naturally, and I had already engaged a governess for my eldest. Their dowries were set aside, as are the dowries for Elizabeth’s daughters. I considered sending them abroad for a year to be finished, but that was something to be decided at a later date. Those dreams were also ill-fated.”

Bennet nodded and leaned back, his eyes calculating. “Are you telling me this to shame me into planning better for my own children? Since I am so blessed to have them?” His tone was more biting than he had intended and he winced a little as he heard it.

“Your feelings are your own, Bennet,” snapped Lord Asheland quickly. His voice was immediately smooth again. “Elizabeth is a caring woman, and she loves you. I gather she is your favorite daughter.” He looked questioningly at Mr. Bennet.

Bennet nodded.

“She is greatly distressed by her sisters’ lack of prospects,” said Asheland.

Mr. Bennet looked surprised at this and raised one hand to his chin.

“I do not like to see her upset,” said Lord Asheland quietly.

Bennet straightened in his seat and said, “What would you suggest?”

“Miss Bennet coming to stay with us is a start. I imagine Elizabeth will suggest she move in with us eventually.”

“And what would you say to that?” asked Bennet suspiciously. He did not want to lose his most sensible daughter on the heels of his favorite one.

“As I said, I want my wife to be happy. If providing for her sister, either in our home or her own establishment accomplishes that, I will happily give that to her. She is my first priority.”

Bennet nodded and wondered at the prickling sensation he felt on the back of his neck.

“Miss Mary is old enough for seminary, as we have already discussed, and Miss Kitty and Lydia would benefit greatly from a governess, then school when they are a little older and more mature.”

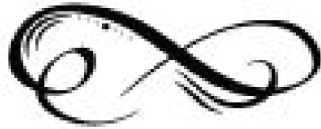
Bennet snorted. “So that is your plan. To completely take over the running of my family, just because you’re marrying into it?” He tried not to sound as threatened as he felt but his tone sounded defensive and belligerent.

Asheland shrugged. “As I said, I do not like to see Elizabeth distressed. I’m surprised you do.” He turned and walked to the door as Mr. Bennet stared at him with his mouth slightly open.

Bennet tried to regain some of his earlier flippancy. “I assure you, an education would be completely wasted on Mary. She cares for nothing but Fordyce and sermons. And Lydia is quite untamable, I assure you.”

Asheland was halfway through the door and merely looked over his shoulder and said, “Nevertheless.”

CHAPTER 4



The wedding was simple and beautiful and before she knew what had happened, Elizabeth signed the name Bennet for the last time and was off to London with her husband. They spent a few days in Town before heading on to the sea where he had taken a house for six weeks and they both declared it the most idyllic time of their lives.

Elizabeth had never felt so cared for, so thoroughly loved, and Asheland was sure he had never been so content, nor so utterly enchanted as he was with his young wife.

They removed to Cressington in Nottinghamshire in time for the harvest and Elizabeth eagerly stepped into her role as mistress. She saw to tenants' families, met with the housekeeper, and redecorated her rooms and the most commonly used drawing room. Being mistress of such a large estate was daunting at first, but she eventually became proficient, though there were some notable bumps in the road. She preferred not to think about how she had lost her composure and cried in front of her new lady's maid, or how

she had asked the housekeeper so many questions she was sure the woman had considered poisoning her soup.

She and Lord Asheland got along famously most of the time. He was patient with her and made allowances for her relative inexperience. His faith in her abilities was steadfast and she drew strength from his belief in her. They did quarrel on occasion, but nothing overly heated, and they both found the act of resolution quite worth the trouble of arguing.

After being married twice before, Lord Asheland had learned how to pick his battles and to value keeping his wife happy over being right. No matter how many mistakes she made, and truly they were small and infrequent, nothing could detract from the joy she brought him. He daily thanked heaven that his carriage had hit a rut that wet February day.

Neither Elizabeth nor Lord Asheland had any complaints about their intimate relationship and Elizabeth found that, to her surprise, it was incredibly enjoyable and something she looked forward to. Lord Asheland, of course, was beyond pleased at his wife's response, especially after his previous experience, and hardly a night passed that he did not sleep in her bed.

His friends and neighbors saw how happy he was and were not foolish enough to say anything about the country nobody he had married. They may have *thought* she was a gold-digging child barely out of the schoolroom, but they feared and respected his power too much to say so. Most were polite to Elizabeth, several going so far as to attempt to curry her

favor, and eventually they became genuinely fond of her, as Asheland had known they would. No one could truly know Elizabeth and not love her.

Lord Asheland arranged for Mary to attend a seminary in London and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner promised to keep an eye on her there. Mary herself was beyond pleased to be going, for the education as well as the opportunity to be away from her family.

A governess was engaged for Kitty and Lydia, and Mr. Bennet was prevailed on to postpone Kitty's coming out until she was seventeen, perhaps eighteen. Mrs. Bennet was not pleased at the idea, but Lord Asheland penned her a very flowery letter saying how happy he would be to take Kitty to Town for a season, but that she was much too young to be considered out by Town standards, and he would hate for the Bennet family to be viewed as country or backward in any way. Mrs. Bennet immediately agreed and the governess set to work making the girls into presentable ladies.

Jane joined them in December and Elizabeth's happiness was complete, especially since she suspected she was with child and desperately wanted a woman to speak to about it. They travelled to London in January for the opening of Parliament, and shortly afterwards Elizabeth felt the first fluttering of her child in her womb. Lord Asheland was beside himself with excitement and Elizabeth was so happy, so luminescent, that she was an instant sensation in town. Asheland teased her that she had them eating out of her hand, to which she said it wasn't her but the title they were

responding to. In part she was right, but she never would have been so successful, nor on a first name basis with Lady Alice Montgomery *and* Lady Julia Sheffield, had she not been truly likeable.

They removed to the country in her eighth month, a truly horrendous journey for Elizabeth, and eleven months after she wed, she was delivered of a boy. The labor was mercifully quick and despite not being wed herself, sweet Jane stayed by her side throughout, except for when she went into the hall to give word to Lord Asheland who was pacing in helpless anticipation.

Their son, Robert John Thomas Talbot, Viscount Lisle, named for his father and grandfathers, was healthy and happy and utterly doted on by his parents and aunt. Elizabeth was thankful it was summer and they were at their leisure in the country and not required to entertain or attend parties as they did in London. The Season had been enjoyable, but she knew it was one of those things best savored in small doses.

Jane went home to Longbourn at their mother's request after nine months spent with her sister. Mrs. Bennet wasted no time in berating Jane for not yet being engaged and Elizabeth for not finding her sister a husband. But since Elizabeth had just produced her first grandchild and the heir to the earldom, she wasn't too vehement in her reproofs.

They went to Town briefly for the Little Season, visited Longbourn, and returned to the country where they were happiest. By the time they traveled to London at the end of

winter, Elizabeth was again increasing and expecting a baby in mid-summer. She was surprised at the speed of it, but her aunt told her that her youth increased the likelihood of conception, as did the fact that she had not nursed her son herself.

Jane rejoined them in Town in late April, they were on the way to Nottinghamshire in June, and in mid-July Elizabeth's pains began. The labor was significantly longer than her first had been—the babe did not want to descend and Elizabeth grew exhausted after a day and a half of much pain and very little progress. Finally, Lord Asheland had had enough of pacing in the hall and barged into her room. He was an earl after all, and this was his beloved wife, birthing his child in his home. He had, in his estimation, more right to be there than anyone.

Elizabeth took one look at him and could see the terror in his eyes. She immediately reached out a hand for him and he climbed onto the bed next to her and began rubbing her back as he had seen Jane doing. Both he and Jane shushed the midwife when she protested and the two shared a look of solidarity over the prone Elizabeth, making of them true siblings.

He supported his wife as she tried to walk around the room, and when she sat on the birthing chair he stood behind her, rubbing her shoulders. He had never been so frightened in his life. Elizabeth was pale and drenched with sweat, and he could tell by the lines in her face and the soft whimpers in her throat that she was in incredible pain.

The position in the chair wasn't right and the midwife moved her onto all fours for a time, then to stand near the bed and clutch the post, her husband helping to hold her up. The next thing he knew, a squalling pink babe was being placed in his arms and Jane was helping Elizabeth to lie in the bed while the maid rushed around cleaning up the blood. He took the baby to the bedside and climbed up next to his exhausted wife where she lay on her side and set the baby carefully in her arms. The tiny pink mouth instantly began rooting around and he watched in fascination as Elizabeth brought the babe to her breast and closed her eyes, then drifted into a light slumber.

It was the single most momentous occasion of his life, and he hadn't even been told the baby's sex yet.



After the birth, Elizabeth and Lord Asheland were closer than ever. She had decided to nurse the baby herself, a beautiful girl they named Violet Jane Augusta. He had wanted to name the baby after her, but she said they could name their next daughter Elizabeth; this one would be christened after his late sister.

He was touched and awed at his wife's kindness. So was his brother, Mr. Carew, when he was asked to stand godfather. He performed the office with gravity and honor, and if he dabbed a handkerchief at his face afterward, no one said a thing.

Elizabeth continued to nurse her daughter, hoping to lengthen the time until her next confinement, and found that it

created a bond between her and the baby that she never could have imagined. Lord Asheland found the practice odd at first, but he would give Elizabeth anything she wanted, and after seeing what she had gone through in her last delivery, he was not eager to put her in that position again. They eventually brought in a wet nurse and the two women split the duties between them, Elizabeth feeding Violet in the mornings and evenings, and once or twice during the day, and the nurse taking care of her at night and when Elizabeth was otherwise occupied.

They carried on, comfortable in their routine, until October, when a letter came from Longbourn requesting Jane's presence back at home and a visit from Elizabeth and the children. Mrs. Bennet wanted Jane to meet the new neighbor, who by all accounts was very amiable as well as young and rich, and quite fortuitously, he had brought rich friends with him. And of course, Mrs. Bennet could not wait to see if the babe had inherited her looks. Elizabeth was too happy to argue with her silly mother.

The day before they were to set out, Lord Asheland received a letter from his estate in Northamptonshire requesting his presence; there had been a fire and the steward would like his assistance. The carriage would leave him there with his horse and he would join them in Hertfordshire when he was able to get away. It was the first lengthy separation of their marriage—he had only ever left her for a few nights before, and only when absolutely necessary—and their parting was all that

could be expected between two people who loved and respected each other as much as they did.

Lord Asheland made Elizabeth promise to keep Violet with her in one coach, and young Robert John in the other with his nurse. Elizabeth understood the fear behind his commands and promised she would keep the children in separate carriages until they were safely at Longbourn, and that they would not go out at all if conditions looked even slightly dangerous. He was much relieved by her promise and kissed her goodbye.



Mrs. Bennet was beside herself. She was to host an earl, a countess, and their two children. The fact that the countess was her daughter only made it sweeter. In the two years since Elizabeth had married, Mrs. Bennet had taken to referring to her as the countess in company, and eventually amongst her own family as well. She had begun with Lady Asheland, but she thought 'the Countess' had a better ring to it.

When the carriages arrived, she was all aflutter. Everyone was quickly rushed inside where Mrs. Bennet held Violet and cooed over her, claiming she had her own mouth and that she had always known her grandchildren would be beautiful. Mr. Bennet immediately claimed Robert John, whom everyone was beginning to simply call Robbie, despite his mother's request that they not. Bennet held him close and took him off to the library with barely a word to anyone, making Jane and Elizabeth laugh and shake their heads.

“Oh, Jane, you must show me all your new gowns! How generous of Lord Asheland to buy them for you,” Mrs. Bennet tittered as she followed Jane upstairs to unpack.

Elizabeth immediately went in search of Mary, who had left school at the start of summer and was now practicing in the music room. Mary would be presented in the spring and Elizabeth was giving her a season in Town to celebrate.

“How are you, dear sister?” asked Elizabeth as she sat on the bench next to Mary.

“Lizzy!” She embraced her sister as Elizabeth laughed. “I was so absorbed in my music I didn’t hear you come in. How was your journey?”

“It was perfectly uneventful. Have you enjoyed your summer at home?”

“Yes, though I’ll admit I was a bit surprised to feel so. But I thought it might be my last chance to be with Kitty as girls. What if I marry this year and we never live together again?” Mary said with wide eyes.

Elizabeth laughed lightly. “Dearest, I’m sure you would see her again. Look how often I see Jane?”

“How is Jane?” asked Mary with a serious look. “Has she shown interest in anyone yet? Mama is saying she must marry soon and is making all sorts of dreadful plans.”

“Oh dear! That sounds serious! She met a great many gentlemen in Town when we took her for the Season, but none

she seemed particularly interested in. I'm afraid we were a very confined party over the summer."

"I can't wait to see the baby! Is she very like you?"

"I suppose she is a little, but I think she will not truly resemble anyone for some time yet. Have you heard from Kitty?" asked Elizabeth.

Kitty was enrolled in a girls' seminary near London. Elizabeth hoped it would bring about as great a change in her as it had in Mary. Her next youngest sister hardly resembled the pedantic, somber girl she had been before going to school. All her serious focus was now on her music instead of religious texts, and the entire family was grateful for it. Being surrounded by other girls that weren't her sisters had brought out a cheerfulness in her character that no one had known was there. Elizabeth told herself to thank her husband profusely when she saw him again.

"She is doing well. She has made friends with a few of the other girls and likes most of her teachers."

"I am delighted to hear it. We shall have to visit her soon," said Elizabeth.

Before she could say more, Lydia burst into the room. "Lizzy!" She kissed her sister's cheek and sat down near the instrument. "I'm sorry I missed your arrival. I was riding and lost all sense of time. How was your journey?"

"Uneventful. How was your ride?" she asked indulgently.

Lydia was a boisterous, fun-loving girl of fifteen whom Elizabeth would have been greatly concerned for had it not been for the firm governess her husband employed for the Bennet girls. Mrs. Standish, a staid widow who had fallen on hard times, was just the right sort of person to take Lydia in hand. She ensured Lydia had at least some solid accomplishments and kept her in line with propriety, even when Mrs. Bennet was actively encouraging her away from it.

Last year, Mrs. Standish had written to Lord Asheland that she believed Lydia needed some activity to occupy her considerable energies or she would be in danger of becoming quite wild and rebellious. Lord Asheland had bought Lydia a horse for her fourteenth birthday and her father, knowing of the gift, had purchased her a beautiful new saddle. No one had known what they were starting, but soon enough Lydia spent hours a day on horseback, and only a few months ago, she had organized a children's mock-derby in her father's back pasture.

Elizabeth smiled as she looked at Lydia in her stylish blue riding habit and wondered when her baby sister had grown up.

“You look very smart, Lydia.”

“Thank you, Lizzy! That gown is lovely.” Elizabeth turned toward her so Lydia could see the lace on the front and Lydia exclaimed, “My lord, Lizzy! Your bosom is enormous!”

Lydia seemed to realize a moment too late that she was speaking out of turn and clapped a hand over her mouth. Elizabeth was shocked silent for a moment, then spluttered

that she was nursing a baby, but it was lost in her giggles, which quickly became laughter as she saw her sister's chagrined face, and before she could stop herself, she was lost to her mirth and gasping for breath, finally joined by Mary and Lydia, all three of them lost to their giggles.

When she could catch her breath she said, "Now, come upstairs and see the baby! And we must rescue Jane from Mama!"



A few days later the house was in uproar as Mrs. Bennet ran around, preparing each daughter in turn for the assembly. Their new neighbor, Mr. Bingley, was to be there, and he would be bringing his party, which was rumored to be quite large. She was convinced there would be a man among them for Jane, and perhaps even for Mary. She made sure each of the girls was in her best gown and commandeered Elizabeth's maid to help prepare.

"You look positively radiant, dearest," said Elizabeth as she looked at Jane putting flowers in her hair.

"It is the very nice dress you gave me, Elizabeth," returned her sister.

"Nonsense. You are five times as pretty as every woman in Meryton and if Mr. Bingley and the gentlemen in his party aren't fighting over you by the end of the night, I will be terribly disappointed."

“And I shall be terribly relieved.”

“Impertinent sister!” teased Elizabeth.

Finally, they were ready to depart, and the three eldest sisters and their parents piled into Elizabeth’s coach, which Mrs. Bennet insisted on using when her daughter was visiting. It wouldn’t do for the Countess to arrive in anything less than a well-sprung, late-model carriage with the Asheland crest proudly emblazoned on the side.

The assembly was a crush, and Elizabeth enjoyed renewing her acquaintance with neighbors she had not seen in many months. She did not feel much changed from the girl who had left Hertfordshire two years ago—a little wiser, more mature certainly, but that was to be expected as one aged. She was more capable, but in essentials, still the same person.

Her neighbors thought otherwise. Everyone spoke of her regal bearing, how she held her head, how she seemed to have a sense of importance about her. Her gown was remarked upon, her elegant taste and knack for flattering her own coloring and figure; her laugh was cheerful but not boisterous, her conversation interesting but never offensive, and unlike some of their acquaintance, she was not constantly going on about whom she saw in Town and where she saw them. In short, she was their very own success story, a homegrown countess, and they could not have been prouder of her.

At a pause in the music, when Elizabeth was dancing a quadrille with one of the Goulding sons, there was a commotion near the door and everyone began to whisper in

excitement. For even in a town with its very own countess, newcomers were still rare—and eligible young men even rarer. The music recommenced and Elizabeth caught a glimpse of the gentlemen between the other dancers.

“Do you know who they are?” she asked her partner.

“I know the light-haired one is Mr. Bingley and the two women are his sisters. I don’t know about the other two men.”

Elizabeth nodded and, when the dance ended, sought out her friend Charlotte who always knew everything there was to know about Meryton.

“The portly man is Mr. Hurst, he is married to the shorter of the two women. The taller woman is Miss Bingley and is to keep house for her brother. The dark-haired man is Mr. Darcy, of Derbyshire. Perhaps he is known to your husband?”

“Darcy, Darcy, I don’t think I know the name,” said Elizabeth thoughtfully. “But Robert may very well know him. I expect him within a fortnight and shall ask him then.”

“The ladies look very elegant,” Charlotte said.

“And very bored. They clearly think highly of themselves. Look at Miss Bingley’s nose! I can practically see the back of her skull, she holds it so high.”

Charlotte laughed and elbowed her friend gently. “You don’t think she shall be your next bosom friend?” she asked teasingly.

“Oh, dear! Perish the thought! I shall like having a little fun with them, though. It can be so tiresome in the country, you

know.” She said the last in a haughty accent that had Charlotte shaking with laughter.

“Come, I will introduce you,” she said as she pulled Elizabeth behind her.

Charlotte dragged her near the ladies where they were standing with Mr. Hurst. “Mrs. Hurst, Mr. Hurst, Miss Bingley, how nice to see you again,” greeted Charlotte kindly.

Miss Bingley only gave a bare nod to Charlotte’s curtsy, Mr. Hurst grunted something unintelligible, and Mrs. Hurst favored them with a slight dip of the knees.

Elizabeth bristled but held her tongue. She hated that she already disliked this Bingley woman. It was terribly inconvenient.

“May I introduce you?” Charlotte asked. She was asking Elizabeth, who held the highest rank in the grouping, but Miss Bingley assumed the question was directed at her and answered.

“Of course.”

Charlotte rattled off the newcomers’ names while each nodded and then turned to Elizabeth. “This is—”

“Mrs. Talbot,” Elizabeth interrupted with a smile.

Miss Bingley examined her gown with an appraising eye and apparently deemed her worthy of a shallow curtsy. Elizabeth nodded condescendingly and was pleased to see the other woman purse her lips in displeasure.

She told them how nice it was to meet them and excused herself. She saw Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were currently being introduced to her mother and sisters. Mrs. Bennet was loud enough she could hear her perfectly from her position several feet away. She could not see the gentlemen's faces, but she thought them terribly patient for listening to her mother speak at such length on topics that couldn't possibly interest them.

"Have you met the Countess?" Mrs. Bennet was asking in her over-loud voice.

"Not yet, madam," said Bingley jovially.

"I shall introduce you later," said Mrs. Bennet. She then referred to the dancing in such a way Mr. Bingley felt obliged to ask one of her daughters to dance. Elizabeth shook her head as he led Jane to the floor and Mr. Darcy bowed slightly before walking away without requesting Mary for a partner.

She went toward the punch bowl and Charlotte rejoined her.

"What was that about, Mrs. Talbot?" she asked with a sly grin.

"It was not an untruth."

"No, but neither was it the whole truth."

"I owe nothing to Miss Bingley or her family. My identity is my own to do with as I please."

Charlotte shook her head. "Sometimes I think that husband of yours is a bad influence."

“You only say that because you have yet to come and stay with me. But I have come tonight to issue an invitation to spend six weeks with us in Town this spring and accompany us to Nottinghamshire for the summer. But of course, if you think the earl such a bad influence, perhaps you should refuse.”

Charlotte looked increasingly excited as Elizabeth spoke. “Refuse! Whatever can you mean? I shall accept with alacrity.”

The two friends smiled at each other and Elizabeth linked their arms. “Let us find me another partner. I must be going home after two more sets.”



An hour later, Elizabeth was near the door, waiting for her carriage to be readied. She had a most pressing need to feed her daughter and after dancing the last jig, she was a trifle sore. Her partner was tired and a touch in his cups and when she turned under his arm, her coiffure caught in one of the buttons on his coat sleeve. They proceeded to untangle it amidst much laughter and silliness, but it left Elizabeth looking rather bedraggled. She only wished Robert had been there to see it. He would have found it most amusing.

She looked out at the empty street, searching for her carriage when she heard her sister’s name. Something or other about Jane being an angel. As if that were a novel term for her! Elizabeth shook her head at the lack of creativity and

would have walked away had she not heard a snide voice responding to the jovial Mr. Bingley.

Of course, he would say Jane was the prettiest girl in the room! She was the prettiest girl in most rooms. Now Bingley was suggesting the snide man dance with *herself*. As if she were searching for a partner! She looked up just in time to catch the fleeting gaze of Mr. Darcy and heard him say, “The disheveled woman by the door? She is tolerable, I suppose, but not handsome enough to tempt me. She cannot even keep her dress clean! I am not that desperate, Bingley.”

Elizabeth looked down and saw, to her embarrassment, that her shawl had slipped and she was rapidly leaking milk onto her silk gown. She had known that last jig was too active to escape unscathed. Fighting the urge to laugh, she finally saw her carriage pulling up to the door and waved to her sister before leaving the building.

She entered Longbourn to the sound of Violet’s wails and immediately made her way to the nursery.

“Lord, but she’s loud, Lizzy!” cried Lydia as Elizabeth passed her sister in the hall.

“She’s hungry,” she stated simply and entered the nursery.

“Help me with these buttons, Polly,” she said to the nursery maid.

In less than a minute, Elizabeth had pulled her dress down below her bosom and sat in the rocking chair, partially covered by her chemise, nursing her daughter.

“There, there. I’m sorry, love. Mother was away too long,” she cooed to the baby.

“Sorry, m’lady. I almost fed her meself, but I thought how you’d be hurtin’ if you didna’ do it, so I waited,” said the wet nurse.

“You did the right thing, Martha, don’t worry. I was simply a little late getting back. Would you please fetch Watson?”

The wet nurse left to find the lady’s maid and Elizabeth rocked contentedly, humming softly to Violet.

As expected, Watson was not happy with the state of her lady’s hair and especially not her stained dress, but she promised she would do all she could to clean it. She left Elizabeth in the nursery wearing a robe and took the soiled dress to the laundry, tutting all the way.

Elizabeth missed Robert mightily in that moment. How he would have laughed with her and soothed her! She had it on the best authority that he found her incredibly tempting. The haughty Mr. Darcy was clearly an ill-tempered sort of man. She suppressed a sigh and laid Violet down in her cot, stroking her soft cheek gently.

“Goodnight, Lady Violet. Sleep well.”

CHAPTER 5



The Lucases hosted a small party a few days after the assembly and Sir William was terribly disappointed that Lord Asheland had been detained. He was so looking forward to telling everyone he had entertained an earl.

Sir William could not even be consoled with Elizabeth's presence, for young Robert John had a cold and was all sniffles and coughs. He wanted nothing but to be held by his mother and Elizabeth saw no reason not to oblige him. She sent her sincere regrets and promised that she would bring the earl to call when he arrived, which went some way to mollifying Sir William.

As soon as the Bennet family arrived at the party, Mr. Bingley attached himself to Jane. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst stood to the side for some time and eventually permitted Charlotte to introduce them to the least offensive guests present. Caroline paid little attention to what others said—they were so obviously beneath her—until she heard the word countess.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked, pretending she hadn’t heard due to the noise in the room.

“Oh, I was only asking Charlotte if the Countess was coming later,” said Mrs. Long, an elderly neighbor. Mrs. Bennet’s manner of referring to her daughter had been adopted throughout the neighborhood.

“I’m afraid Robert John isn’t well tonight, but I’m sure we shall see her soon,” said Charlotte.

“She was looking so well at the assembly,” said Mrs. Long. “I’m so glad she’s recovered from her ordeal.”

Charlotte nodded at the reference to Violet’s birth three months previously and asked after Mrs. Long’s nieces.

At that point, Caroline stopped listening, for she was not interested in this nobody’s family. She had almost asked about the countess, but was prevented by Mrs. Long speaking before her. Caroline knew she had not been introduced to any countess at the assembly and she was quite sure she had met everyone worth meeting. She deduced from this that the countess must be some impoverished aristocrat, in all likelihood an old woman like Mrs. Long, who warranted no notice. Especially if she had recently been ill. Caroline hated sick people. It was all so terribly untidy!

Charlotte observed Caroline’s absent look from the corner of her eye and saw the wisdom in Elizabeth’s little game. Miss Bingley had entirely too high an opinion of herself and a rather low one of everybody else. She would have been insufferable

had she known who Elizabeth really was. Her friend's quick thinking had likely spared them all many unpleasant scenes.



After less than a sennight, Jane received an invitation to dine with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst while the gentlemen were dining out. Mrs. Bennet tried to engineer a way for Jane to spend the night by refusing the carriage and insisting she go on horseback, but Elizabeth thwarted her plans by offering her own carriage. Much negotiation followed and somehow, it was decided that Elizabeth, Jane, and Lydia would all ride out together, Elizabeth's groom following. Lydia wanted to call on Maria Lucas and turned off when they reached the lane. Jane and Elizabeth arrived at Netherfield just as a storm broke out. Elizabeth had intended to ride home after seeing her sister to the door, but the rain prevented her.

They entered the drawing room together and Jane looked surprised when Miss Bingley greeted Elizabeth as Mrs. Talbot, but Elizabeth shook her head discreetly at her sister and Jane said nothing about it.

Two and a half hours later, the storm had not abated, despite Elizabeth's fervent hopes, and seemed to be growing stronger. She was on the verge of sending her groom to Longbourn for the carriage when the gentlemen arrived.

"Hello!" cried Mr. Bingley. He quickly walked to Jane and bowed over her hand.

Elizabeth stifled a smile at the way they both blushed and stared at each other, but she was truly delighted for Jane. Her sister's heart had gone untouched for too long. Elizabeth sincerely hoped it would grow into true affection and not be a disappointment that would only make shy Jane more reticent.

"I was just about to send for the carriage," she said, foregoing introductions. They were, after all, acquainted. Almost.

"I do not think it possible. The road is almost impassable now, and the water under the bridge is rising rapidly," said Mr. Darcy seriously.

She noticed then that the men were slightly damp and their breeches had a few splatters of mud just above their boots.

"You're welcome to stay the night, of course. I'm sure Caroline would like that," said Bingley jovially.

He looked to his sister with a smile and completely missed her look of distaste. However, it was not lost on Elizabeth or Mr. Darcy.

Jane smiled and said it was kind of them, and Elizabeth immediately excused herself. She made her way to the hall and had a footman send for the groom who had accompanied them from Longbourn. He had been awaiting her in the kitchens and met her in the hall a minute later.

"James, I must return to Longbourn immediately. The children cannot be without me so long."

He nodded in understanding. "I'll ready the horses, m'lady."

“Thank you. I shall meet you at the door in ten minutes.”

She re-entered the drawing room unnoticed and sat next to Jane. She whispered a few words in her sister’s ear, to which Jane nodded with a furrowed brow, and then Elizabeth stood at the window looking out at the storm. It was very heavy and she would be drenched through by the time she got home, but she simply could not be away from her children all night. Since Robert John’s birth less than eighteen months ago, she had never slept away from him and she was not about to begin now, without her husband in this unwelcoming house.

Not to mention that within an hour, her breasts would swell and ache and Violet would be screaming for her dinner. The wet nurse would not have enough milk to get her through the evening, the night, and the following morning, not to mention Elizabeth’s own discomfort. Just thinking about her baby, hungry and crying, filled her with resolve. She saw James heading towards the door with her horse and immediately turned to Miss Bingley.

“Thank you for the hospitality, Miss Bingley. I’ll be going now. Goodbye, Jane.” She pressed her sister’s hand, gave the slightest curtsy to the room, and was gone before anyone realized what had happened.

Elizabeth took her cloak from the footman and wrapped it around her before bursting out the door and mounting her mare. She and James quickly headed across the highest field towards Longbourn.

Just as they reached the fence separating the park from the pastures, Elizabeth heard a stern voice yelling, “Madam!” over the rain.

Turning, she saw Mr. Darcy riding towards her on a great brown beast.

“Mr. Darcy?” she called in question.

“Madam, I must insist you come back to the house. It is raining much too hard to be out of doors.”

“You are out of doors, sir,” she said.

“I came to fetch you. The ladies are very worried. Please, accompany me to the house,” he said as he brought his horse up next to hers.

“As worried as I am sure the ladies are, Jane will reassure them. She knows I have ridden through worse and she knows I cannot stay,” she stated simply, her voice raised above the rain. She looked to where James was opening the gate.

Darcy stared at her in shock. Why was she being so unreasonable? “Madam, I must insist. This is madness!”

“No, Mr. Darcy, I believe madness is following a near stranger out into the rain and trying to convince her to return with you to a house of more strangers while leaving her poor groom to be soaked in the rain as he listened to two strangers argue.”

He breathed deeply. “I take your point, madam, but surely you do not consider your own sister a stranger?” he asked, his voice softening cajolingly.

Elizabeth gave him a pitying smile. She hated being patronized. "I see what you are about, Mr. Darcy, and it shan't work. Good day." She turned and began to direct her horse through the now open gate.

He brought his horse up in front of hers to block the opening and looked at her in shock. Was she *arguing* with him?

"What? You can't truly mean to ride through this muck? And what do you mean by saying you know what I am about? I am merely trying to see you to safety, which appears an impossible task since you are clearly bent on foolishness!" he cried in exasperation, water beginning to drip off his nose.

Elizabeth pulled her shoulders back and lifted her chin. "Mr. Darcy, I am not a fragile flower who needs your protection, neither would you be in any position to give it if I were. Your attempts to manipulate me will not work. Good day to you, sir."

He did not move out of her way and she glared at him stubbornly.

"Please remove your horse, Mr. Darcy," she said through gritted teeth.

"Mrs. Talbot, surely there is nothing so pressing at Longbourn that cannot wait until morning. Your parents will realize you've remained at Netherfield because of the rain. You can send your man on if you are concerned they will worry." His words would have been kind, or at least neutral, coming from someone else, but coming from him they

sounded superior and condescending, as if he were explaining something complex to a very small child.

Elizabeth took a deep breath, then looked up at him with fire in her eyes. “My *children* need me, Mr. Darcy. Not that I owe you an explanation.”

He looked taken aback for a moment. Clearly, he had not known she had children and Elizabeth felt a moment of triumph.

But then his face returned to stone and he said, “Surely their nurse can look after them, or your sister.”

Elizabeth felt something snap inside of her. Who was this man and why was he involving himself with her concerns? James had been watching it all with a sharp eye and seeing Lady Asheland’s frustration, he moved forward.

“My daughter needs me because I am her source of food, Mr. Darcy. Now let me pass!”

Mr. Darcy looked confused for a moment, then his eyes bulged as he glanced toward her bosom, remembering the marks he had seen on her dress at the assembly and how she had left early. He flushed a bright crimson and when her groom edged his own horse nearer and gave him a hard look, he moved away from the gate and watched her go through it with her head held high.

Elizabeth turned and set off through the field, leaving Darcy on the other side of the fence, silently fuming.

Of all the insolent, ridiculous, foolhardy women!



When Darcy returned to the house, it was to find it in uproar. No one could clearly tell him what had happened, but it was something to do with Miss Bennet's skirt, which Bingley may or may not have tripped on, or perhaps he tripped on a chair leg, and the lady tried to jump out of the way, or perhaps to assist him, when she herself had fallen. Regardless of what truly occurred, Bingley was left apologizing profusely while Miss Bennet was left with a swollen ankle and a rather impressive bump on her head.

Soon enough she was sent off to bed with some tea for the pain and ice for her head. Darcy shook his head at Bingley for his clumsiness and the sisters experienced a moment of regret at not having the opportunity to canvas Jane on all her connections, but as they were doubtlessly poor and unimportant, they did not concern themselves overmuch.

"She did mention an aunt and uncle in London," said Louisa.

"Yes, near Cheapside," sneered Miss Bingley before the two of them giggled unkindly.

"And the other uncle is an attorney, you know."

"Yes, right here in Meryton! I'm sure he can help with drawing up a lease if one is required." More sniggering and snide looks followed.

Bingley sighed and looked away, annoyed at them for being themselves, and Darcy went to the window where he proceeded to watch the rain as it fell in steady sheets.

At a rather late supper, Bingley looked terribly guilty and forlorn and his sisters seemed annoyed, though that was not so very unusual.

“There is no society, no fashion. Really, Charles, you would do much better to give up the lease and find an estate in Derbyshire,” Caroline was saying.

Bingley only looked at her blankly and Darcy was left to answer.

“Miss Bingley, your brother has only just taken the lease. It would be impossible to be rid of it so soon,” said Darcy rationally. He was tired of dealing with Caroline’s inane requests such as this one and wished for nothing but the fire in his room, a good book, and a glass of port.

“But who are we to visit? What are we to do?” she whined.

“This is life on an estate, Caroline. What did you expect? Weekly balls and nightly dinners?” asked Charles, finally joining the conversation.

“Surely not every neighborhood is so,” she hesitated to find the right word, “barbaric.”

“Barbaric? You don’t think that’s a bit strong?” cried her brother. “You’ve been here less than a month!”

“It’s time enough,” she sniffed. “Why, just look at that Mrs. Talbot, Miss Bennet’s sister. She wasn’t even invited and yet

she arrived here for dinner—”

“She was escorting her sister. She stayed because of the rain,” interrupted Charles.

Caroline ignored him and continued, “— and then she ran off without even saying goodbye! On horseback!”

“As I recall, she did say goodbye, I heard her myself, and how can you be angry she left if you didn’t want her here in the first place?” asked her brother, now perturbed himself. He really must marry her off. This was becoming tiresome.

“You must admit it was rather odd, Charles,” said Mr. Darcy quietly. He was still smarting from Elizabeth’s dismissal of his offer of assistance.

“Talbot... Is she connected to the Asheland Talbots?” asked Mr. Hurst, finally looking up from his plate.

Caroline sniffed. “I doubt it. Can you imagine, the relation of an earl scampering about the countryside dripping wet like that.” Caroline sniggered at her own joke and Louisa joined her in sheep-like fashion.

Bingley rolled his eyes and stabbed at his meat. It really was ridiculous how they went on about nothing, but he knew saying more would only make them continue. Silence was the quickest way of changing the subject.



The next day, the sun was shining and, thankfully, much of the mud had dried up. Elizabeth fed the baby and went down to

breakfast, surprised to see her mother up and in a very good mood.

“Perhaps she’ll stay the entire week,” she was saying.

“Mama, what are you talking of?”

“Jane being at Netherfield, of course,” she said, waving a letter gleefully.

Elizabeth snatched the letter from her mother’s hands and read it herself.

“Oh, poor Jane! I must go to her at once!”

She left the room and immediately asked for her carriage to be readied. She turned in the narrow hall and nearly ran into her mother, who had followed her out, flapping like a goose.

“Now Lizzy, what are you doing?”

“Going to see Jane, Mama, what do you think?” she said impatiently.

“You mustn’t!”

“Mama! Jane must be mortified! Mr. Bingley’s sisters haven’t an ounce of tenderness between them. She will be all alone in her bedchamber, with no one to look after her and nothing for distraction. She will find herself the greatest imposition and will fret ceaselessly, you know she will.”

Mrs. Bennet sighed. “Very well, but you must leave her there!”

“What? No, I cannot!”

“How is she supposed to catch Mr. Bingley or his rich friend if she never sees them?”

“How will she see them if she is resting in one of the bedchambers? It isn't as if Mr. Bingley can nurse her himself. And I'm not sure you want his friend,” she added.

Mrs. Bennet looked thoughtful at that.

“Mama, proper young ladies do not throw themselves into the paths of young men. Proper ladies make themselves more attractive, through accomplishments and deeds and education, and let the good men come to them, remember?” she said with great patience, as if they had had this conversation multiple times before.

Mrs. Bennet's shoulders slumped and she sighed in defeat. “Very well, but he could at least carry her to the carriage!”

Elizabeth shook her head and went upstairs to change. Lord love her, but her mother would never change.

Less than an hour later, Elizabeth's carriage was pulling up in front of Netherfield. She had decided that enough was enough and she was leaving with Jane and no arguments. If she had to use her position to accomplish that, she would and gladly. And she was looking forward to seeing the shock on Miss Bingley's face. The woman could sorely use a set down.

She entered Netherfield in her best day dress, for the collective benefits of Miss Bingley and Mr. Darcy, gave the butler her card, and waited to be announced. When she heard him say, “The Countess of Asheland,” she almost laughed at

the sound of chairs scraping backwards and boots hitting the floor.

She walked in gracefully, head held high, and tried not to smirk at Caroline's open mouth or Darcy's narrowed eyes.

"Forgive me for disturbing your breakfast. I've come to see my sister," she said smoothly, as if she visited lame sisters at her neighbors' homes every day.

She tried not to notice the ticking of the clock as she waited for a response. "Of course," said Bingley. "I'll take you to her."

He quickly ushered her out of the room before anything else could be said and she merely nodded to Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley as she left.

Mr. Bingley babbled on about nothing until they reached Jane's room and she gently told him she would like to be alone with her sister. Jane was feeling much better, though terribly embarrassed, as expected, and with a mild headache. It was quickly decided that the largest footman would carry her down the stairs and they would drive home very slowly to avoid jostling her.

Elizabeth went downstairs to inform their hosts and fetch the footman while Jane dressed with the help of the maid. Elizabeth reached the drawing room and paused outside the door for a moment when she heard Miss Bingley's voice.

"You don't really believe her, do you?" the woman hissed.

Not wanting to eavesdrop, and not caring enough about what they were saying to investigate further, Elizabeth entered the room. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst looked up from the sofa they were sharing, and Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy leapt to their feet.

“Lady Asheland, how is your sister this morning?” Bingley asked, leading her to a chair far away from his sisters.

“Much recovered, I thank you. I shall be taking her home with me. We thank you for the hospitality,” she said evenly.

“Oh, but, is she well enough to travel?” asked Mr. Bingley anxiously. “How will she traverse the stairs?”

“My footman will do the job.” At his incredulous look, she said, “He is very large and Jane quite light. I’m sure he shall manage.” She gave him a sweet smile to ease his disappointment; she really thought he was a decent enough man, if encumbered with a truly awful sister. She almost suggested her mother’s idea of having him carry her down, just to make him feel better, but she knew it would mortify Jane and was entirely improper. She was fond of a friendly joke here and there, but she did have *some* limits.

“Mrs. Talbot,” called Miss Bingley as she rose from her seat across the room.

“Yes?”

“You are familiar with Lord Asheland?” she asked, clearly doubting the veracity of Elizabeth’s identity.

Hurst walked into the room at that moment and, hearing Caroline's question, turned to Elizabeth and said curiously, "Are you a cousin of Lord Asheland?"

"No," she said with a smirk. "I'm the wife of Lord Asheland." Her lips twitched in amusement as she watched the surprise register on the faces of Mr. and Mrs. Hurst.

"Of course," said Miss Bingley, clearly not believing a word. "And is he here with you in Hertfordshire?"

"Not as yet. He was needed at his estate in Northamptonshire. I expect him shortly."

Caroline nodded. "I thought the Asheland estate was in Nottinghamshire, but I suppose it must be easy to confuse them."

"Caroline," said Mr. Bingley quietly.

"How funny, Miss Bingley. I cannot imagine ever confusing two such counties, but then we do not all have a talent for geography." She smiled as Bingley hiccupped rather loudly. "Cressingdon is in Nottinghamshire, but my husband has additional holdings in Northamptonshire. And in Yorkshire, Somerset, and Hertfordshire, but we mustn't bother with the details." She smiled and brushed her skirt. "Excuse me, I will see to my sister."

She walked out the door leaving a furious Caroline and an amused Mr. Bingley. Even Mr. Darcy appeared entertained.

"That scheming little—"

“Caroline,” Bingley warned again. Really, he must find someone to marry her, and soon.

Before anything else could be said, there was rather a lot of noise in the entrance hall and Bingley and Mr. Darcy stepped out to see what was going on.

There was Elizabeth Talbot, in the arms of a man neither of them had ever seen before, laughing and clutching him to her in a most inappropriate way. He was hardly better, hugging her so tightly her feet were off the ground. Lending the entire scene a modicum of propriety was Mr. Bennet, standing a few feet away and laughing quietly at the couple.

“Put her down now, Asheland, before you shock Mr. Darcy,” said Mr. Bennet jovially.

Darcy stiffened and tried to wipe whatever expression he had been wearing off his face.

“Forgive me, I am simply overjoyed to see my wife.” Asheland held Elizabeth’s hand tightly and beamed at his father-in-law.

“Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy, may I present the Earl of Asheland, my daughter’s husband. He insisted on coming straight over when he heard Elizabeth was here and Jane was injured,” said Mr. Bennet with a twinkle in his eye.

For the life of him, Darcy couldn’t see what was so funny. The gentlemen bowed, Asheland gave a nod, and soon enough it was explained what the plan was, and before any objections could be made, Lord Asheland had gone with Elizabeth

upstairs and had Jane in his arms, carrying her down to the carriage.

Bingley followed after them, knowing he was useless but not wanting to leave Jane alone. She smiled at him shyly and Elizabeth sighed, knowing she would now have to be nice to Miss Bingley, if only for Jane's sake. Well, *mostly* nice.

Once Jane was comfortably settled in the carriage, the uninjured guests turned and faced the Bingley party.

“Thank you for looking after Jane,” said Mr. Bennet.

“Of course, it was our pleasure,” replied Mr. Bingley.

Caroline Bingley chose this moment to come outside, belatedly realizing it was incredibly rude not to have greeted their recently arrived visitors.

“Dearest, let me introduce you to Miss Bingley, Mr. Bingley's sister,” said Elizabeth sweetly. “Miss Bingley, this is Lord Asheland, my husband.”

Miss Bingley appeared somewhat pale as she looked from the finely clothed man in front of her to the liveried footmen near the expensive carriage emblazoned with the Asheland crest.

She curtsied deeply, her knees nearly reaching the floor, and smiled her best smile. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lord.”

Asheland smiled in response, thanked Bingley for looking after his sister, and allowed Mr. Bennet to ride with Jane in their carriage while he and Elizabeth took the Bennet coach

that the men had arrived in. Caroline could not understand why they did not all ride in the nicer equipage; even with Jane's leg on the seat, there would surely have been enough room.

“Of course, Caroline. Why would a healthy man reuniting with his pretty wife after a long separation possibly want to be alone in an inferior carriage?” teased Charles.

He and Darcy chuckled and walked inside, and Caroline shook her head, not understanding what they meant but feeling herself blush nonetheless.



“You've done it this time, Caroline!” cried Bingley with a wide smile as he joined his sister in the blue parlor.

“Done what?” she asked testily.

“Done what? Do you truly not know?” he asked, a look of amused disbelief on his face.

“What has she done?” Louisa asked as she entered the room, one hand playing with her bracelets.

“Caroline has insulted a countess, that's all,” said Bingley smugly, as only a brother could do.

“I did no such thing!” cried Caroline, though her face was flushed.

Bingley guffawed and flopped onto the sofa.

“Surely you didn't!” cried Louisa.

“You were there!” said Bingley. “Do either of you truly believe she didn’t see the looks you gave her, or hear you when she was just outside the door? You made no effort to lower your voices. And of course there was the scene this morning where you practically accused her of lying.”

Louisa looked worried and turned to Caroline.

“It wasn’t so bad, not really,” said Caroline, not truly believing it.

“Do you think yourself so clever that she didn’t realize what you were about? I think she’s rather better at that particular skill,” said Charles.

“What do you mean?” asked Caroline suspiciously.

“Come, Caroline, do you truly not see?” His sister continued to look at him in confusion and he sighed in exasperation. “She does not like us. She may dislike me less than the two of you, but I am sure she holds none of us in any kind of favor.”

“What? How can you say such a thing?” cried Caroline. She and Louisa expounded for some minutes on how likeable they were, how kind they had been to the countess (Bingley rolled his eyes), and how they were sure they could be friends in the future.

“Believe what you will, but you are deceiving yourselves if you think you don’t have much ground to make up.” With that final statement, he left the room, leaving two fretful sisters behind him.



Elizabeth's reunion with her husband was all that either had hoped it would be. As soon as they returned to Longbourn, they went upstairs to see the children. Robert sat with Robert John in his lap, reading his son a story, while Elizabeth quietly hummed to Violet as she nursed her. Eventually, Robert's voice tapered off into a whisper and finally stopped, and Elizabeth looked up to see that her son had fallen asleep on his father's chest. She smiled at the picture they presented and Robert carried their son to bed.

"I have missed you all so dearly," he said as he sat back down in a chair near her.

"We have missed you. Is everything all right? Was there much damage from the fire?" she asked.

"Yes and no. The fire did not reach far, but what it did touch it burned to the ground. The entire kitchen must be rebuilt and one of the smaller outbuildings. Thankfully, there was no loss of life and only a few minor injuries."

She nodded and placed the now sleeping Violet in her cradle before rejoining her husband and leading him away for a nap in Longbourn's best guest room. Mrs. Bennet allowed nothing less for an earl and countess.

"I hope we never have such a separation again," she said as she slipped into his arms as soon as the door closed.

“I couldn’t agree with you more, my love. I’ve slept very ill without you.” He kissed her upturned face and pulled back to loosen his cravat and coat. “But surely you’ve had *some* entertainment.”

“Of course,” she answered as she turned her back to him to receive help with her buttons. “I have enjoyed seeing Charlotte—she accepts our invitation, by the way. I do hope she and Mr. Rippen get on. I want her to be well situated and it would be lovely to have her so close.”

“All we can do is introduce them, darling. The rest is up to Providence.”

“I know, but it doesn’t stop me from hoping.” He smiled and she continued, “It would seem that Jane has taken a liking to Mr. Bingley.”

“Has she?” he asked, interested. “What do we know of him?”

“Not much. He has a perfectly horrid sister and another perfectly dull one who follows wherever the horrid one goes.”

He chuckled.

“His taste in friends is suspect,” she said. “Mr. Darcy seems perpetually dissatisfied with life.”

“Darcy,” her husband repeated thoughtfully. “The Darcys of Derbyshire?”

“I believe so,” she answered.

“If it is the family I’m thinking of, I knew the elder Mr. Darcy and visited his estate once. I was very young and accompanying my cousin Alfred; they were friends. I barely knew him, but I recall that he was a nice chap and the estate was beautiful and well cared for. You would have loved the grounds. Pemberton? Pembroke?”

“Pemberley?”

“Yes, I think that’s it.”

“Miss Bingley mentioned it yesterday, but I had no idea what she was referring to. She said it as if everyone should know what it was.” She made a face and imitated Miss Bingley. “You must visit, Paris, Rome, and Pemberley. No education is complete without it.”

Robert laughed and she climbed onto the bed.

“I was introduced to Miss Bingley as Mrs. Talbot,” she confessed while sliding under the covers.

“That old trick! It never ceases to be useful, does it?” He joined her under the blankets and pulled her close.

“She has been perfectly insufferable. I wonder how her behavior will change now.”

“She’ll likely fawn over you or pretend to a friendship. Try to let her down gently, my love,” he said with a kiss to her neck where it lay so temptingly close.

She sighed. “I suppose I should, but she doesn’t deserve it. You should have seen how rude they were to poor Jane! As if she were merely there for their entertainment. They kept

hinting at how unsuitable a match would be between her and their brother. I wanted to bang their heads together.”

He laughed. “You would do no such thing!”

“No, I would not, but that does not stop me from wishing I could.”

He laughed again and she felt the rumble of his broad chest all along her back and sighed happily, snuggling deeper into him.

“I have missed you. I sleep terribly when you’re gone. Promise you won’t go away again soon.” She knew she sounded petulant, but she really did hate it when he was gone, and she was finding it difficult to be stoic about it at the moment.

“Wild horses couldn’t drag me from you,” he said softly and kissed her hair.

CHAPTER 6



To no one's surprise, an invitation arrived the next day addressed to Lord and Lady Asheland and the Bennet Family, inviting them to dinner in three days. Elizabeth was of a mind to refuse; she truly did not like Caroline Bingley and if being married to an earl had taught her anything, it was not to waste time on people who brought neither pleasure nor gain. But she saw Jane's hopeful smile and they both knew the invitation had been issued because of the earl's arrival. If the Bennets arrived without him, Miss Bingley would be terribly put out.

Elizabeth sighed and did her sisterly duty, quickly sending a reply in her elegant hand as Jane stood happily beside her.

The day of the dinner, Elizabeth fed Violet before they left to be sure to avoid an unfortunate accident as had happened at the assembly, and she wore one of her better gowns, assuming correctly that Caroline Bingley would take the opportunity to wear something ostentatious and inappropriate for the occasion.

They were welcomed with an almost embarrassing amount of civility. The difference in the Bingley sisters' behavior was impossible to miss. Mr. Bingley behaved much as he ever had, though perhaps slightly less voluble. Elizabeth could not but respect his genuineness. Mr. Darcy also behaved as he ever had, but since his usual behavior involved insulting her and attempting to command her, she was less happy to note his constancy.

Elizabeth was placed on Mr. Bingley's right and Jane across from her on his left. Lord Asheland was on Miss Bingley's right and Mr. Darcy on her other side. The Hursts, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, and Mary filled the center seats. Elizabeth smirked at seeing Miss Bingley's delight in having Mr. Darcy trapped so near to her with an earl on her other side. Elizabeth didn't know how the woman had failed to see the man's indifference towards her, but hope springs eternal and Miss Bingley was clinging to her illusions like ivy to a stone cottage.

For herself, Elizabeth failed to see why Mr. Darcy provoked such interest. He was handsome, to be sure, but so was Mr. Bingley, and significantly easier to get along with. She looked at her own husband and admired his straight nose and firm jaw. Yes, he was handsome as well, though in a completely different way. His hair was chestnut brown, where Mr. Bingley's was pale blond and Darcy's was nearly black. Robert's eyes were warm amber, the color of toffee, and his skin light but always darker in the summer. Mr. Bingley had light skin that she suspected would turn pink in the sun and

gray-green eyes. Mr. Darcy's eyes were a bright blue, almost cold, and his skin almost looked tanned, more so than hers, which her mother had always lamented, and she thought he would get even darker than she did in the summer months. Three more different men could not have been found in a dining room together, she was sure of that.

Robert and Mr. Bingley were both amiable, but Mr. Bingley seemed eager, and not very steady to his purpose, though she could admit that she did not know him well as yet. Robert was just as good company, but he was confident, reliable, and wise. She suspected Mr. Darcy might be confident and reliable, but he was certainly not amiable. Time would tell if there was wisdom behind those stormy eyes.

Beginning to be bored with her character studies and alternately watching Jane and Bingley flirt, Elizabeth was relieved when Caroline stood and requested the ladies follow her to the drawing room. Elizabeth fleetingly touched Robert's arm as she passed and he reached up and grabbed her hand for a moment before letting her go. Neither of them noticed Mr. Darcy following the motion of her hand and her retreat from the room.

When the gentlemen rejoined the ladies, Mary was playing on the pianoforte and Caroline was attempting to talk to Elizabeth. Lord Asheland nearly laughed when he saw the look on his wife's face, then moved to sit beside her.

"Oh, Lord Asheland!" cried Caroline too loudly. "How are you enjoying Hertfordshire?" Before he could answer, she

continued, “Of course it is nothing to Town, but the country is so much more pleasant in the autumn, don’t you think?”

“Yes, the country is more pleasant at most times of year, I think. And I find Hertfordshire lovely.” He smiled at Elizabeth and she bit her cheek to keep from laughing at the sheer ridiculousness of it all. “How do you find the countryside, Miss Bingley?”

“Oh, it is lovely, my lord.”

And so it went, inane question followed by dull response until Lord Asheland lost count of how many times she had called him my lord.



“That was one of the most painful dinners I’ve ever had to sit through,” said Robert as they entered their room at Longbourn.

“Does Miss Bingley actually think she will gain your favor by boring you to death?” asked Elizabeth with a groan as she bent to remove her shoes.

Robert chuckled as he tugged off his coat. “I could almost feel sorry for her if she wasn’t so difficult.”

“Difficult?” said Elizabeth with raised brows. “Horses are difficult. That woman is a harridan.”

He laughed again. “I saw your expression when she suggested you call her Caroline.”

“What on earth was the woman thinking? Not four days ago she was behaving like a spiteful cat and accusing me of lying about my own husband. Now she thinks I will want to be her friend? Is she mad?”

“You are right, dear, of course, but it is amusing.” His eyes twinkled as he smiled at her and she shook her head at him. “At least you put her in her place, love. I doubt she will soon ask again.”

“It was ridiculous of her to ask the first time,” she grumbled again. “Poor Jane. She seems to sincerely like Mr. Bingley, and he seems like a good sort of man, but those sisters! However is she going to manage them? Had I never met you, I doubt I could have done it, and I’m more forceful than she.”

“Don’t worry, darling. I’ll look into Bingley’s situation, and if all is as it should be, perhaps a subtle word about distancing himself from his sisters would be helpful.”

“Perhaps. But what if he likes them? I don’t want him to give them up for our sakes.”

“Dearest, you did not hear the conversation when the men were alone. Trust me, he will be thrilled when Caroline is removed from his home.”

She looked at him in surprise.

“Marriage would be best for her, but if she becomes a nuisance or disrupts his marriage, he’ll send her off,” he added.

“Would he set her up in her own establishment? Would that not look odd? If Jane is serious about him, I would hate for her to be touched by scandal.”

“He is not without options. She could have her own establishment with a companion. It is not too strange. She could continue to live with her sister; they seem to get on, or he could send her to another relative. He mentioned family in Scarborough.”

“What you men talk about when the ladies withdraw!” He laughed and she continued, “I don’t know how you always manage to find out so much in so little time, but I am grateful for it. For Jane’s sake, we should know as much as possible.”

She turned her back to him and he undid her buttons. She chuckled quietly and he asked what was so funny.

“I was just remembering Miss Bingley and her incessant fawning. ‘My lord, would you like more tea? My lord, can I bring you a cake? Do you prefer Town, my lord, or country, my lord?’” she teased in a high-pitched imitation of Miss Bingley.

He laughed and removed his waistcoat and draped it on the back of the chair. Elizabeth reached up to untie his cravat and continued with her joke.

“How tall you are, my lord. I can hardly reach your neck, my lord.”

“Dear, stop before you give me indigestion,” he said, clutching his stomach.

“Shall I bring you a tonic, my lord?”

He laughed louder, his shoulders shaking. “You little minx. What am I to do with you?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea, my lord.” She looked at him through her lashes and suddenly he felt less like laughing and more like kissing his wife.

She turned away and removed the last of her petticoats, sliding into the bed in her chemise. He looked at her with warm eyes until she patted the place next to her.

“Coming to bed, my lord?”

He shook his head. “How long will you keep that up?”

“Keep what up, my lord?” she asked innocently.

He slid into bed beside her and gathered her close. “Elizabeth, you are the greatest joy of my life.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she whispered.

He kissed her neck. “Do you intend to do that all night?” he asked as he nibbled her ear.

“On occasion it is immensely appropriate. My lord,” she said with a wicked grin.

“Hmm,” he nearly growled as he kissed her neck and ran his fingers through her hair.

“Oh, lord,” she breathed.



Caroline Bingley was exceedingly pleased with herself. She had just hosted an earl—for the first time—at her country estate. Well, her brother's estate, and it was leased, not owned, but she didn't allow those details to bother her. The evening had been a triumph. The earl had been very attentive to her and she thought they would all become good friends. Oh, how grand it would be to sit in the Asheland box at the theatre! And he was cousin to Alfred Downing, whom everyone knew was the heir of the Marquess of Devonshire. By all accounts, the two were very close. Oh! How grand they would all be.

She entered the breakfast room with a smile on her face and a spring in her step.

“What has you so cheerful this morning, Caroline?” asked Bingley from his place at the table.

“I am just pleased with our time in the country, brother,” she said lightly as she began to fill her plate.

“I suppose you refer to dining with Lord and Lady Asheland last evening?”

“Wasn't it lovely?” she sighed and sat down, filling her cup with tea.

“Yes, it was a pleasant evening,” he answered, his thoughts filled with Jane Bennet.

Darcy entered the room to the sight of two Bingley siblings staring dreamily off into nowhere, silly smiles on their faces.

“Good morning,” he said carefully, suspicious of their attitudes.

“Good morning, Mr. Darcy. I plan to call on Longbourn today. Would you care to accompany me?” asked Caroline.

“As a matter of fact, I would. I planned to speak to Lord Asheland today on some business.”

“I can depend on you to turn a hunting party into a business meeting, Darcy!” said Bingley.

Darcy ignored him and ate his breakfast.



The Bingleys and Mr. Darcy were shown into the sitting room at Longbourn. Clearly, the Bennets had not been expecting visitors. Mrs. Bennet sat by the window holding a small bundle and humming softly. A girl the Netherfield party didn't recognize and Jane Bennet sat on the floor with a tiny boy and a pile of blocks, and Lady Asheland sat at the writing desk composing a letter. Soft music was coming from another room.

“Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, and Miss Bingley,” announced the butler in dry tones. Everyone but Mrs. Bennet rose. She looked at the party with wide eyes, then signaled everyone to be quiet.

“Forgive us, Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley, Mr. Darcy,” said Lady Asheland. “We weren't expecting company and Lady Violet has fallen asleep in her grandmama's arms. If you'll excuse me for a moment.” She smiled at the party, then took the sleeping babe from her mother and left the room.

“We apologize if we've come at an inconvenient time,” said Mr. Bingley.

“Not at all, we are just a family party here. Neighbors are always welcome,” said Mrs. Bennet. She gestured for them to be seated. “This is my youngest daughter, Lydia.” Lydia curtsied and smiled at the strangers. “And my grandson Lord Lisle, the viscount.” She gestured to a chubby cheeked boy with golden hair and large, caramel eyes who was regarding them all seriously. “Lydia, please take Robbie to the nursery.”

“Yes, Mama.” Lydia curtsied to the group, scooped up the toddler, and left the room.

Jane and Mrs. Bennet sat across from the three visitors, for a moment not knowing what to say.

“I heard a rumor you were considering a ball, Mr. Bingley,” said Mrs. Bennet finally. “Have you decided yet?”

“Oh, not as yet, though we are considering it.” He looked around quietly for a moment, then spoke to Jane. “Miss Bennet, I hope your ankle is fully recovered?”

“Yes, it’s quite well, thank you,” she said, her cheeks blushing softly.

“Is Lord Asheland available this morning? I had hoped to speak to him,” said Mr. Darcy.

“He is in the book room with Mr. Bennet,” said Mrs. Bennet.

“I will show him, Mama,” said Elizabeth as she reentered the room.

Darcy nodded to the ladies and followed Elizabeth. She led him through the hall and down another corridor in silence

before knocking on a door on her right and opening it before there was an answer.

“Papa, *my lord*, Mr. Darcy is looking for you,” she said brightly with a saucy smile for her husband.

Lord Asheland stifled a chuckle as she entered the room with Mr. Darcy on her heels. Her husband and father looked up and smiled at her happily.

“Thank you, my dear. Would you ask Hill for some tea and those biscuits I like?” asked Mr. Bennet with a wink.

“Yes, Papa.” She gave the men another smile and was gone.

Darcy couldn't explain it, but he felt something odd in her manner toward him. It was almost like hostility, but not quite. He shook off the feeling. Women were strange creatures; it was best not to try to understand them.

“Lord Asheland, may I have a word?” he asked.

“Of course,” he answered.

Mr. Bennet considerably busied himself at his desk while the two men sat near the fire.

“Lord Asheland, I'm afraid I owe you an apology.”

The earl's brows raised. “Oh? Whatever for?”

“I spoke rather strongly to your wife as she was trying to leave Netherfield last week. It was raining, and I wanted her to return to the house. She insisted on riding on to Longbourn and we exchanged some harsh words. You have my apologies, my lord.”

Lord Asheland looked at him silently for several moments until Darcy began to feel uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

“You exchanged words with my wife?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Because she wanted to go home?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But you did not want her to?”

“It was raining very heavily, sir.”

Lord Asheland nodded. “Mr. Darcy, I accept your apology to the extent that I am able, but I believe the one you really should be offering it to is my wife.”

Darcy looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. “Of course, my lord. I will see to it.”

“A word of advice, if I may, Mr. Darcy.”

The younger man looked to him quizzically.

“In future, you might consider *not* commanding the movements of ladies wholly unrelated to you, and perhaps those related to you as well.”

Darcy flushed as the earl managed to look both wise and amused at the same time.

“Intelligent women do not appreciate being ordered about like children,” said the earl.

He smiled and stood, rejoining his father-in-law while Darcy stared into the fire, a thoughtful look on his face.

In the sitting room, Caroline left her seat next to Jane and walked over to where Elizabeth was writing a letter at the desk by the window.

“How quickly you write, Lady Asheland,” she exclaimed, as if Elizabeth had completed some great feat.

“On the contrary, I write rather slowly.”

“You must have so many family members to keep up with, and the housekeepers of your estates as well, I assume.”

“Yes.”

Caroline walked closer, glancing over her shoulder. “To whom do you write, Lady Asheland?” she asked in a voice overly sweetened with false sincerity.

“A friend in Town, Miss Bingley,” she answered succinctly.

“Who is in Town this time of year?” asked Caroline curiously, leaning over Elizabeth’s shoulder further.

Realizing she would not be able to continue, Elizabeth turned in her chair, blocking Miss Bingley’s view of her letter, and answered, “Lady Montgomery is currently in Town, attending her sister’s lying-in.”

Caroline searched her mind for the name of Lady Montgomery’s sister. Who was she?

“Surely you know Mrs. Carlisle?” Elizabeth asked. She knew she was sporting with Miss Bingley and that it was beneath her and quite possibly rude, but she couldn’t resist. The woman was incredibly irritating!

“Oh, yes! Mrs. Carlisle! This is her first babe, is it not?”

“Her third.”

Caroline cleared her throat uncomfortably. “Well, then I’m sure she will come through it admirably.”

She turned to rejoin her brother and Elizabeth grinned to herself as she returned to her letter, feeling slightly wicked.



A week later, Lord and Lady Asheland were set to leave for London. At the Bennets’ request, they planned to leave their son, along with his nurse, with his grandparents since they would only be gone for a few days and take Lady Violet and her wet nurse to Town with them.

Elizabeth and Jane paid a farewell call to Netherfield the morning they were to depart.

“How long will you be away?” asked Miss Bingley, clearly distressed.

“Only a few days. I need to order some clothes for the winter and Lord Asheland has some business to attend to.”

“Are you accompanying your sister, Miss Bennet?”

“No, I will be staying here. Our sister Mary will accompany Lady Asheland.”

“I’m taking her with me to Town for the season and I want to begin ordering her clothes,” said Elizabeth happily. She was

truly excited about Mary's upcoming season and couldn't help but show her enthusiasm.

"Will she be presented this year?" asked Miss Bingley.

"Yes, and we will host a ball in her honor. I am looking forward to it. Alice, that is, Lady Montgomery, has agreed to help me with the preparations. It will be delightful."

Caroline's eyes lit with interest and Elizabeth barely managed to hold in her grin. Really, it was almost too easy; there was hardly any sport in it.

"I assume you are sponsoring your sister?"

"Yes, of course."

"May I ask, who sponsored you, Lady Asheland? I don't mean to be impertinent, I am merely curious."

For the first time, Elizabeth thought Caroline might actually mean what she said and answered accordingly. "Lady Devonshire, the Marchioness, sponsored both me and Jane. She is a cousin of my husband and my son's godmother."

Caroline made a small squeaking sound in the back of her throat and her stomach filled with butterflies.

"And will you accompany your sisters for the season, Miss Bennet?" asked Caroline with an ingratiating smile.

"Yes, I will be there. I wouldn't dream of missing Mary's debut," said Jane sweetly.

Caroline nodded. This was all very good news.

Elizabeth rose and smiled at Miss Bingley. "Thank you for the tea. We must be going. My husband wishes to be on the road by midday."

"Thank you for the call. I do hope you will return in time for the ball," Caroline said as she followed them to the door. "I was going to send out invitations soon."

"When is it?" asked Elizabeth.

"The twenty-sixth of November."

"I believe we will be back in time. If we are not, you have my best wishes for a successful affair. Good day," said Elizabeth kindly.

"Good day, Lady Asheland, Miss Bennet."

In the carriage on the way back to Longbourn, Elizabeth turned to Jane with a concerned expression.

"Jane, you must tell me the truth. Are you serious about Mr. Bingley?"

Jane flushed. "Have you known me to flirt with men I am not serious about, sister?"

"No, but he is a flirt himself; I want to make sure you are not merely responding in kind."

"Of course I am not!" Jane cried. "You know me better than that!"

"I do, I am sorry. I just want to know how you really feel about him." She gave her sister a conciliatory smile. "So you think you would like to see more of him?"

“Oh, Lizzy. He is everything a young man ought to be. Kind, amiable, handsome.”

“Conveniently rich,” interrupted Elizabeth.

Jane nudged her sister with her shoulder and gave her a mock-glare. “You know, I think I might like him even if he weren’t wealthy, or handsome.”

“That is always a good sign. Shall I invite him to Mary’s ball in the spring? Or do you think he will have come to the point by then?”

Jane was impossibly red now, but she knew Elizabeth was teasing her. “I think perhaps we will have an *understanding* by then, but I cannot be sure. It is possible he feels only friendship for me.”

“Jane, surely you aren’t serious? If every man who felt friendship for a woman looked at her the way Mr. Bingley looks at you, there would be a lot more duels at dawn, I can promise you that.”

Jane just laughed and rolled her eyes at her sister.



“Well, Lizzy, be safe and take care. We will watch over Robbie until you return,” said Mr. Bennet as he bid his daughter farewell.

“Must you call him that?” she asked with a kiss to her son’s full cheek. “Oh, I shall miss him so! Perhaps I should stay...”

“And send Mary shopping with Asheland? I think not. It is only a sennight, and if you miss us too badly, you can come home early.”

“All will be well, Lizzy, stop fussing. I did raise five children, you know,” clucked Mrs. Bennet as she bustled over to them and took her grandson from Mr. Bennet’s arms. “Between your sisters and your father, he will be well entertained. Now off you go. You don’t want to arrive in the night.”

Elizabeth gave her son one last squeeze and walked outside on her father’s arm. “What did you decide to do about that cousin of yours?” she asked.

Her father stopped beside the carriage and answered, “I have told Mr. Collins that we are full of houseguests and couldn’t possibly accommodate him until February. I’m sure his noble patroness will assuage his disappointment.”

“Thank you for sparing us, Papa,” she said wryly.

He handed her into the carriage where Violet was waiting in the arms of her wet nurse, and Robert quickly followed, shaking hands with Mr. Bennet and extracting a promise to look after his son.

As the carriage pulled away, Mr. Bennet shook his head, wondering how such a fine daughter had come from two such flawed people as himself and Mrs. Bennet. And then she had gone on to marry such a fine man! Asheland was a better man than Bennet had ever been, he could admit that, but through the earl’s example, Bennet was improving, bit by tiny bit.

In a nod to his improved self, he asked for his horse to be saddled so that he might ride over the eastern fields and check on the tenants there, when what he really wanted to do was return to his book and the warm fire in his book room. Damn if he didn't resent Asheland for making a more productive man of him, though he knew it was for the best in the end.

Shortly after their marriage, Elizabeth had expressed to Lord Asheland her worry for her sisters. They each had a small dowry of one-thousand pounds, payable only on their mother's death. Mrs. Bennet was hearty and hale, and not of advanced years, and the girls were quickly reaching marriageable age, and thus were essentially dowerless. Not wanting to see his wife upset, but also not willing to enable his father-in-law's indolence, Lord Asheland struck a deal with Mr. Bennet.

He would buy a large parcel of land adjacent to Longbourn. It belonged to Netherfield Park, but the owner was looking to sell that property and had no qualms breaking it up. Lord Asheland purchased the land and made repairs to the farms therein, with the agreement that Mr. Bennet would manage it and all the proceeds would go directly to dowries for Elizabeth's sisters. The first eighteen months' income was allocated to Jane, in respect to her age, thereafter split between her and Mary, until Jane's was large enough it needed no addition and Kitty was in need of it. Asheland's reasons were not entirely altruistic; he didn't want his own son to be saddled with a bevy of poor relations to support.

Mr. Bennet was surprised at the feelings this action engendered in him. He had always been an idle sort of man, one who preferred to let things happen around him instead of making them happen himself. His son-in-law's actions (and really the man was only a few years younger than himself) were exactly calculated to show him how lax he had been. Yes, he had thought they would have a son, but surely he could have set something aside, just a little something, for his girls? It would have made a great difference to their peace of mind and to his wife's. It was a humiliating thing to see a man who barely knew his family taking better care of them than he himself had.

When she was made aware of the arrangement, Mrs. Bennet was much relieved. With such good connections, and improved dowries, though still not impressive, she thought her girls stood a chance of making good matches. It motivated both her and Mr. Bennet to put aside a little of Longbourn's income to the same endeavor.

Longbourn had once been a more profitable estate but, three generations ago, hard times had come, as they are wont to do. Unfortunately, the owner at the time had recently made some unwise investments, leaving the coffers low and the estate unable to weather the difficult season. He had sold off a portion of his lands to keep the estate solvent. It was divided amongst the neighboring estates, some going to Netherfield Park—in fact, the same parcel which had recently been purchased by Lord Asheland. Not wanting it to happen again, the entail with its existing restrictions was put into place by the

then owner, leaving the current Mr. Bennet in a precarious position.

Since he owned the land surrounding it, Lord Asheland eventually decided to purchase Netherfield Park. He installed a steward and maintained the majority of land surrounding the house and let the house and park out, firstly to a family that had not kept it above a twelve-month, and now to Mr. Bingley, though the latter did not realize the identity of the owner as everything had been done through solicitors.

Lord Asheland intended to allow Mrs. Bennet and any unmarried daughters to live in Netherfield for their lifetimes, though he thought it likely all the girls would marry. Then he would have another estate to pass down to a child or to strengthen the family's wealth. He could admit to a little trepidation about the number of children he and Elizabeth would have. Mrs. Bennet had had five children in less than eight years, and had Lydia's birth not been preceded by an accident that caused some difficulties, she might have gone on to have even more. Elizabeth was young when they married and young still. She was proving as fecund as her mother, perhaps more so, and he wondered how many children they would have all told.

In truth, though he would give Elizabeth anything she sincerely wanted, he had not fought her on nursing their daughter because of her assertion that it would lengthen the time between babes. He couldn't realistically imagine removing himself from her chambers, and this seemed a logical solution.

In the meantime, he was setting aside Netherfield's income for his sisters' dowries. Once they were all married, it would make a nice addition to the family properties.



The Ashelands' time in Town passed quickly. More than a dozen dresses were ordered for Mary, who was agog at all the fabrics and trims available to her. She was fitted for her presentation gown, and Elizabeth took the opportunity to introduce her to what friends were in Town at the moment.

Lady Asheland did quite a bit of shopping for herself, ordering several dresses to accommodate her new figure and many day dresses with buttons down the front for easy nursing. The modiste and her assistant seemed surprised when she requested them, but she winked and told them how much her husband enjoyed her enhanced figure, and they just giggled and went on with their business, any questions they may have had now answered.

Lord Asheland adjusted his will for the third time in as many years, now to provide for young Lady Violet. Unless another son was born, she would inherit the largest of his supplementary estates in addition to her sixty-thousand pound dowry. He decided that with only two children, he could be generous with his daughter—it would allow her more choices in the future.

He insisted Elizabeth be involved in all the legal transactions, sharing documents with her when he returned

home. He also recounted various meetings with other members of Parliament. He was remarkably good at impressions, and the more his wife laughed, the more he threw himself into the renditions of his fellow peers.

After a week, their business was completed and they made their way back to Hertfordshire. Elizabeth's reunion with her son was happy and somewhat tearful on Elizabeth's part. She'd had no idea motherhood would make her so weepy! To her surprise, her father had taught him a new word and he proudly repeated it to his mother until she laughed in delight.

"Papa, must you teach him such words?" she asked in fond exasperation.

"Oh, come now! It does the boy no harm. He will have to learn them soon enough, anyhow."

"But hedgerows? You couldn't think of a better word?"

"It's really just 'rows; hedgerows is a bit much for the boy."

Elizabeth just shook her head and held her boy close.

CHAPTER 7



The day of the Netherfield ball, Longbourn was once again thrown into turmoil as the women curled and pinned and pulled themselves into the latest fashions. After much waiting in the hall, the men were joined by four very fashionable women.

In the midst of the compliments, Lydia said, “You must tell me everything. I want to know all about Miss Bingley’s dress and whether she has any luck with Mr. Darcy. And see if Maria is wearing that ridiculous gown again. I’ve told her it doesn’t suit her, but she doesn’t listen to me!”

Her sisters promised they would faithfully relay all that occurred and were out the door, into the carriage, and pulling onto Netherfield’s drive in short order. The house was aglow with candles and the moonlight illuminated the path beautifully.

“Lovely night for a ball, is it not?” said Lord Asheland quietly to his wife.

“Yes, the moonlight is perfect. I suppose I should commend Miss Bingley on her choice of date,” said Elizabeth

reluctantly.

Lord Asheland laughed at her and led her into the house.

“Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Bennet!” cried Mr. Bingley. He proceeded to greet Jane and Mary, then finally Lord and Lady Asheland. They greeted Mr. Bingley and walked on to his sister.

“Lord and Lady Asheland! We are so pleased you returned in time for our little ball,” said Miss Bingley in a voice that made Elizabeth want to poke her with a hat pin. “Was your trip pleasant?”

“Quite. I must commend you on choosing the perfect night for a ball, Miss Bingley. The moonlight is splendid,” Lord Asheland spoke charmingly, causing Miss Bingley to blush at his smile.

“Thank you, my lord. A good hostess must always pay attention to these things,” she said.

“May I take the opportunity to request a dance?”

Caroline tittered and blushed more and it was decided he would dance the fifth with her, for the first three were taken by his wife and sisters, and the fourth by Miss Lucas.

Caroline waited anxiously for their dance. She would have the uninterrupted attention of an earl for half an hour! She had danced with a handful of viscounts and a baron or two in London, and there was an older earl that always danced with the young single women, but it wasn't an everyday occurrence

and she had never had the company of one quite so high as Lord Asheland.

When he finally led her to the floor, she couldn't contain the self-satisfied smile that overtook her face. Asheland refrained from grimacing, but it was a near thing.

Miss Bingley prattled on with small talk until halfway through the dance when she began speaking of Elizabeth.

“What was that, Miss Bingley?” said Lord Asheland as he rejoined her after a turn.

“I was saying that when I first met Lady Asheland, I had no notion she was a countess. She said her name was Mrs. Talbot.”

“She is Mrs. Talbot,” he replied with a straight face.

“Of course,” Caroline said quickly. “I just wondered at her not using her title more regularly, that is all.” She pinched her mouth shut, hoping she hadn't offended him.

He shrugged slightly. “Most everyone in Meryton is known to my wife and knows her title. We introduce ourselves as Talbots when we are unsure of a new acquaintance.” He smiled politely and she could only return it with a bemused smile of her own, her face slightly flushed.

She wasn't entirely sure what he meant by his statement, but she felt the sting of an insult nonetheless. In an effort to turn the conversation back to her good qualities, she said, “I am thinking of redoing the ballroom. A new crystal chandelier would give it a sense of grandeur, don't you think?”

He looked up at the current chandelier and back to his dance partner. “My wife is fond of this one, but I shall ask her what she thinks of another.”

“My lord?” said Caroline, confused.

“She chose it last year, but she may have changed her mind. One never knows when it comes to fashion. One moment an item is beloved, and a few months later it is being replaced,” he said with good humor.

Caroline’s face was growing pale. “Are you saying, do I understand you correctly, that you *own* Netherfield Park, my lord?”

He looked at her innocently. “Forgive me madam, I thought you knew. Yes, I purchased it shortly after my marriage. With my wife’s family being so close, it seemed an ideal investment. Wouldn’t you agree?”

She made a sort of squeaking sound and turned away in the dance. Thankfully, the movement kept her occupied and away from Lord Asheland for a few moments. She wasn’t sure how she felt about this information. It wasn’t all bad, of course. She had known Charles was renting the estate and it must belong to someone. But in her mind, that someone had been an impoverished peer, or a gentleman who’d lost his money gambling or on a bad investment. Charles would then be in a good position to buy the estate, and while she did not love the immediate neighborhood, it was very close to London and boasted a mild winter. The recent addition of the Ashelands to the neighborhood was also in its favor.

But now, knowing the house and all its furnishings were nothing but a matter of investment for one of the richest earls in the kingdom, that she and her family were merely viewed as renters to provide a little income for them until they found need of the estate, she felt quite disheartened. Her image of herself as benevolent landowner was cut to pieces. She was not rescuing a sad property and would not be welcomed by the neighborhood as a savior of gentility. She was merely a renter. Expendable. And utterly unimportant—not even able to choose her own chandelier without consulting with the current owners.

It was very disheartening, indeed.



Much to Elizabeth's surprise and chagrin, Mr. Darcy asked her to dance. She said yes before she could think of a plausible excuse for refusing and when he led her onto the floor, she gave him a tight smile and reminded herself to mind her manners.

After several minutes spent dancing in silence, Mr. Darcy spoke. "Lady Asheland, I apologize for speaking to you so harshly before."

She took in his stiff demeanor and his solemn features, his expression showing all his distaste for the current conversation.

"Before you knew I was a countess, you mean?" she said as she turned away from him to dance with the other ladies.

When she returned, he said, “No, I simply meant before as in earlier, though I suspect you knew that and are willfully misunderstanding me.”

She tilted her head and looked at him with one eyebrow arched. “Am I?”

It was his turn to turn away from her and she waited patiently, wondering what he was about.

“Nevertheless, I apologize for speaking harshly and inserting myself into your business. It was none of my affair.”

She looked at him in surprise and said, “Apology accepted, Mr. Darcy.”

He nodded and she noticed his ears were red at the tips and his jaw was flexing. *Not used to apologizing, are you?* she thought.

They moved through the remainder of the dance in silence and when it was over, Elizabeth gladly took her husband’s arm and hoped the pairing would never be repeated.



Shortly after the ball, Mr. Darcy attended a hunting party with Lord Asheland and only found more to respect in the older man. Lord Asheland was fair, patient, kind, generous, and amiable. He watched the earl with his wife, unable to explain his curiosity. There was something between the two of them, something almost palpable, that he couldn’t quite understand but was drawn to nonetheless.

He had heard stories of the earl. A wealthy man does not lose two wives and three children in such tragic circumstances without society speaking of it. He understood that the ton considered him an eccentric for choosing his young wife, but then the wealthy could afford to be so and after all he had been through, could anyone blame him?

He had heard of Lady Asheland, as well. No one could decide if she was a country upstart who had manipulated the earl into marriage or a young goddess who was positively enchanting. He agreed there was something bewitching about her. Her husband was certainly besotted, anyone could see that. But it wasn't only that she had inspired the devotion of a great man, though that in itself was an impressive feat, but that she was beguiling, witty, charming, quick to laugh and entirely devoted to her husband and children. In short, it was clear how she had drawn the notice of Lord Asheland, and why he would refuse a well-connected and dowered bride in favor of a vivacious country beauty.

Darcy couldn't help but see all these things, observant as he was, and as the time approached for him to leave for London to spend Christmas with his sister and Fitzwilliam family, he found himself wishing he might have a marriage such as the Ashelands. Alas, he didn't truly think he would be so lucky. Darcy was rich, to be sure, but Asheland was fabulously wealthy. He would have to make up for Georgiana's dowry when she married, and though he thought he could weather that without too much trouble, he knew his family expected

him to marry a well-connected bride to strengthen their place in society.

He wouldn't be able to do as Asheland had done and marry a penniless girl from the country. He would never hear the end of it.



Though they missed being at home, it seemed a bit silly to return to Nottinghamshire for the festive season, especially considering the icy weather and the long journey with two small children, only to turn around and travel to London in February. Elizabeth dearly wished to see the Gardiners and her sister Kitty, as did her husband, and their London family generally spent Christmas and New Year in Hertfordshire, so the Ashelands decided to stay on at Longbourn until it was time to go to London.

The Netherfield party were frequent callers, though Elizabeth was often out riding with her youngest sister or in the nursery with her children. Mr. Bingley continued to tease his sisters on how bad a blunder they had made with Lady Asheland and the two made every effort to ingratiate themselves with her, despite her clear desire to be left alone to visit her family in peace.

All her patience was worth it in the end when Jane became engaged to Mr. Bingley on Christmas Day. Mr. Bennet made the announcement to a drawing room filled with expectant women and a red-faced Mr. Bingley by his side.

Congratulations were heard all around and an impromptu dinner party filled with toasts and good wishes commenced.

It was decided that the wedding would take place at Longbourn in mid-March, that Mr. Darcy would stand up with Charles, and that Mary would stand up with Jane. Lord and Lady Asheland were truly pleased for Jane, and Elizabeth promised to host a party for them in spring to celebrate the occasion. Jane was happier than anyone had ever seen her, and Lord Asheland felt a true brother's pride in seeing her so well settled.



In February, the Ashelands left for London accompanied by Jane, Mary, and Mrs. Bennet. The ladies shopped for Jane's wedding clothes and prepared for Mary's presentation.

Mr. Bennet entertained a visitor at Longbourn, his cousin Mr. Collins, the heir to his estate. Bennet found him amusing at first, but that quickly turned to annoyance and within a week, Collins was in a hired carriage on his way back to Kent, thinking it very odd that neither the mistress of the estate nor any of his fair cousins had been there to meet him. Only the youngest daughter was about and she was constantly attended by her governess and not yet out. Though, she was a pretty young thing. Perhaps in a year or two, she might make a good wife to a humble parson such as himself.



After three weeks of visiting every warehouse, milliner, and bootmaker in London, Mrs. Bennet returned home to prepare for the wedding and Jane enjoyed her first free morning since becoming betrothed.

“You look exhausted!” declared Elizabeth as she joined her sister in the family sitting room.

“I feel exhausted. I know Mama means well, but I do not enjoy shopping quite as much as she does,” said Jane.

“Jane, no one enjoys shopping as much as Mama does.”

Jane laughed and Elizabeth called for tea.

“I’m glad we are alone, for there is something I wished to speak with you about.” Jane sat forward, interested, and Elizabeth continued. “I didn’t mention it while Mama was here because I didn’t want to embarrass you, but I wanted to give you a selection of night gowns as a wedding gift. One of Madame DuPont’s seamstresses has a knack for getting the fabric to hang just right, and it will make you feel even more beautiful, if that’s possible.”

Jane flushed and looked down. “That’s very thoughtful of you, Lizzy. Thank you. And for your discretion.”

Elizabeth nodded.

“I was hoping you would be willing to speak to me—about marriage—if you were willing,” said Jane nervously.

“Of course, dearest. Ask me anything and I promise to tell you the truth. Did you want to talk today?”

“No!” Jane exclaimed. “I don’t think I’m quite ready for that conversation, but soon.”

“Of course,” said Elizabeth kindly. “I know Aunt Gardiner spoke to us long ago, but it was not so very detailed. Whenever you are ready, I shall tell you all you wish to know.”

“Thank you, Lizzy.”



The next day, Jane mustered up what courage she could find and knocked on her sister’s door. Elizabeth had been expecting her and led her sister to her private parlor where they could speak undisturbed.

Jane began with a series of simple questions and once it was confirmed that she correctly understood the mechanics, she asked more personal questions.

“Is it very strange? Having a man so... near you?” Jane asked.

“I’ll admit it was odd at first, but not unpleasant. Men are so very different from women. I was quite fascinated with Robert’s body when we first wed.” Jane flushed at the casual way her sister spoke. “He teased me about it for ages. But I was honestly curious!”

“Are they very hairy?” Jane asked quietly, her eyes on her lap.

“They are not all the same. Your Mr. Bingley is very fair, so I imagine he is not very hairy. Robert is slightly darker, but I don’t think he’s very hairy either. My friend has a dark husband and she says he is quite furry!”

“Lizzy!”

“It is just us, Jane. We may be honest here if we like.”

Jane nodded. “What do you do... after? Should I ask him to sleep with me? Should I ask him to leave?”

“I think it is nice to share a bed. I can’t imagine sleeping without Robert now that I have shared a bed with him for so long. But you must decide what you like yourself. The marriage bed is a very intimate place, Jane. It will do you no favors to ignore your own desires. If you wish for him to stay, simply ask him. He cannot read your mind and may not know you want him there unless you say something.”

Jane flushed again, but bravely continued. “Do men like that—when you express your desires?”

“I suspect men who truly care for their wives do, yes. I cannot speak for all men, but I have never heard of one becoming upset because his wife asked him to sleep with her or to do something she particularly likes.”

“Like what?”

Elizabeth flushed. “Every woman has her own... preferences. You will like certain touches and kisses more than others. It is wise to tell him, or he may not know and will do something else you do not like as much.”

Jane nodded. "Is it truly pleasant? Or are you just trying to assuage my fears?"

"It can be very pleasant. Though I will not lie that it can be painful at first and rather awkward until you understand what to do. But then, ah," she sighed, "*then*, it can quickly become your favorite leisure activity."

"Lizzy!"

"It is no time to be missish, Jane!"

Her sister looked down and fidgeted with her shawl. "Did you say do?" Jane looked at her with confusion. "I thought he would know what to do."

Elizabeth looked around the room as if the answers to this conversation could be found hiding behind the draperies. "He probably does, but you should not hold to mama's notion of lying still and hoping it will be over quickly. You should be an active participant. Aunt Gardiner gave me that advice and it has served me very well."

"She told you to participate?"

"Yes."

"And to voice your desires?"

"Once I knew them, yes."

Jane took a deep breath. "I think I can do that."

"You can. Charles cares for you very much and will be patient with you, I'm sure of it."

"Thank you, Lizzy. You've eased my mind."



Since they were all in Town, and her mother was far away in Hertfordshire, Elizabeth decided to host a congratulatory dinner for Jane and Mr. Bingley. It was impossible to exclude Miss Bingley and the Hursts, and since she could not make such a public dismissal without hurting Jane, she decided to use the occasion to show Miss Bingley what she, and by extension Jane, was made of.

Elizabeth was under no illusions that Miss Bingley would smoothly relinquish power to her sister. She thought it likely that Jane would face a series of small struggles: from whom to invite, to how to decorate, to which place settings to use. Caroline would insert herself into the smallest decisions until she had worn Jane down and was mistress of the house in all but name.

Robert was right—it was best for everyone involved if she married soon, and barring that, she should move in with her sister, Mrs. Hurst. Robert would talk to Charles Bingley, Elizabeth would handle Caroline.

The date was settled and the invitations sent and accepted. Jane's sweet nature had endeared her to many of Elizabeth's friends, and more than one man was disappointed that she had chosen Bingley. After all, Jane was easily the handsomest woman a man was ever likely to see and had a sweet temperament besides. A man would forego much to have such beauty for his own. And she had excellent connections.

Everyone knew she was the favorite sister to Lord Asheland. Who knew what favors he might bestow on her lucky husband?

Alas, she was taken. The ladies were glad she was removed from the competition (Jane really was terribly pretty) and the men held hopes for the next sister; rumor had it that she was spending the season with the earl and countess. Could she be as pretty as her sisters?



Unfortunately for Mary, or fortunately, depending on one's point of view, she was not as pretty as her pulchritudinous sister Jane, nor as enchanting as her vivacious sister Elizabeth. It was wondered if the sisters decreased in beauty along with age, but a loyal Charles Bingley assured them that Miss Kitty was a delicate beauty and that Lydia was just as robust and playful as Elizabeth, while insisting that Mary was pretty in her way, of course.

Mary Bennet was the kind of girl that becomes more attractive on further acquaintance. One's first impression was that she was serious and boring, but once one took the time to know her, one realized her seriousness was dedication, and she was not boring, merely observant, and to observe properly, she must not be constantly prattling on. Of course, when the topic was of interest to her, she could speak without ceasing.

Mary did not like being the focus of attention for a large group of people. Elizabeth had planned to host a proper

coming out ball for her, but Mary dreaded the idea and asked for a dinner instead. It was a relatively small affair, held the evening of her presentation. The Gardiners were there, Lord Asheland's cousin Alfred Downing and his wife Sylvia, Lord and Lady Montgomery (Elizabeth's particular friend), Lord and Lady Sheffield, and a few of Mary's friends from her seminary and their families.

It was nothing to the lavish dinner and entertainment she was planning to celebrate Jane's engagement, but it was perfectly suited to Mary. After dinner, Mary and her friends entertained the room with music on various instruments and the evening ended with a contented sister and a proud Lord and Lady Asheland.

A week later, Elizabeth stood in the drawing room in her best evening gown, entertaining guests at Jane's engagement dinner. In two days' time they would leave for Hertfordshire to attend to the final wedding preparations, and a week after that Jane would be married. Tonight was the earl and countess's way of showing they approved of Jane's match and an opportunity to introduce Mr. Bingley to the family.

The Talbot family was there en masse. There were a handful of untitled cousins and their usual friends in Town, plus two of Robert's friends from the House of Lords. The Downings were present, of course, along with their son John and daughter Marianne, now Lady Rockingham, and the Marquess and Marchioness of Devonshire, second cousins to Robert and to whom Alfred was the heir. Robert's maternal uncle, Lord Sedbury, was there as well. Even with a cane and advanced

years, he was one of the most interesting conversationalists in the room and a favorite of Elizabeth's. Looking around with a smile, Elizabeth noted that she was very fond of nearly all her guests. It was shaping up to be a delightful dinner.

A solid half hour after everyone else had arrived, Caroline Bingley and the Hursts entered the room. Elizabeth went to greet them, as a good hostess does, and introduced them to two of her untitled cousins before being called away.

Caroline was besieged by so many emotions she didn't know which to pay attention to first. She counted no fewer than six earls in the room and a marquess! Was that Percy Seymour in the corner, Viscount Hyde? Oh! What a grand party! She was glad she had worn her best dress, a shimmering blue concoction that made her look like a goddess. She was determined to make a good impression tonight.

Before she could meet anyone in the peerage, dinner was announced. She was seated in the center of the table, near the untitled cousins and two seats away from Mr. Darcy. He was next to Amelia Herbert, a pretty woman with good connections and a healthy dowry. Why did *she* not sit there? Instead she was seated by Mr. Talbot, one of several in the room, a perfectly decent man made undesirable by his marriage to Mrs. Talbot, the cheerful blonde a few seats away.

Miss Bingley had a few pleasant conversations, and she was introduced to many prestigious people, but the party was so large, and the company so well known to each other, that they spent all their time discussing places and people she knew

nothing of and made no effort to include her in the conversation. Everyone was cordial, and no one slighted her in the least, but she nevertheless felt her own unimportance. She had no bit of gossip to entertain them with—they weren't interested in her friends and didn't seem to enjoy that sort of conversation anyway—and she had no idea of the children they spoke of, or the trips they described, or the homes they were making changes to.

She was utterly superfluous and she finished the evening feeling quite dejected, until she remembered that she would be able to boast of all the impressive people she had dined with to her less significant friends. That thought cheered her considerably.



When the men joined the ladies in the drawing room, merry with port and good company, Elizabeth was taking her turn at the instrument. Darcy found a place convenient to watch her and let himself relax into the spell she was casting over the room. When she began to sing, he let the tiniest smile escape his lips.

Once again he was reminded of how very good a wife she was. She had eyes only for her husband as she sang the ballad. The looks passed between them would have been indecorous had they not been surrounded by family and close friends. Somehow, and quite without his permission, she had become the standard by which he measured other women. Each time a

female acquaintance mindlessly agreed with whatever careless comment he or another man made, he remembered her passionate refusal to concede to him and her dedication to her family's welfare. Each time they simpered and sneered, he remembered her genuine laughter and bright smile.

She was a fine mother, that much was clear, though she was going about it in a strange way. He had not given it much thought before, other than knowing his wife would need to be healthy and able to bear an heir, but suddenly a lady's aptitude for motherhood was something he thought should have more bearing in his choice than he had previously given it.

Yes, Lady Asheland was a fine wife. He should seek someone like her.



The next day, Charles called on Jane and Darcy accompanied him. Elizabeth couldn't imagine why the haughty man bothered; he clearly found no enjoyment there. Each time he and Elizabeth had a conversation, generally about books but occasionally about politics, they ended in an argument of some kind. Lord Asheland was often out—Parliament was in session, after all—and she could hardly leave Jane alone with two gentlemen, so Elizabeth was left entertaining Mr. Darcy while Jane and Charles whispered to each other on the settee.

She was grateful for all her serious conversations with Robert about the state of the kingdom that allowed her to hold her own in debate with Mr. Darcy, but really, she wished he

would simply cease calling. Why did Charles bring him so frequently?

She thought at first it was for the connection. Asheland was a powerful title, after all, and the Talbot family was well-known and respected. But Darcy was connected to the Fitzwilliam family, one not dissimilar to the Talbots in influence, so he could have little need for noble connections. He wasn't interested in Mary; the two rarely said more than two words to each other and Mary often found a way to avoid the call altogether. If she couldn't, she would play the pianoforte or the harp quietly in the background while the others conversed.

Elizabeth stifled her sigh when the men were announced. Mary was playing in the music room and the peaceful notes floated down the hall, soothing Elizabeth's irritation. Darcy was Bingley's closest friend, and Bingley was to be her brother. She should try to get along with the man. Steeling herself, she greeted the men kindly and called for tea.

As expected, Charles and Jane sequestered themselves on the sofa a slight distance away from the chairs she and Darcy sat in. She asked Darcy how he wanted his tea that day—she had noticed that he took it with sugar when he was drinking it on its own, but with milk when he drank it with cake. When he asked for milk, no sugar, she smiled and handed him the prepared tea and a plate of cakes before he could ask for them.

He thanked her and deigned to give her a smile of appreciation for anticipating his needs, which he somehow

managed to do as smugly as he did everything else.
Insufferable man!

“You are a supporter of the Harrington Orphanage, are you not, Lady Asheland?” Darcy asked after some time of idle chatter.

“Yes, I am. Why do you ask?”

“My aunt is as well.”

“Yes, I am acquainted with Lady Matlock.”

“She was telling me recently about a new initiative some of the board have suggested.” He plucked another sweet cake from the tray before them and continued, “It seems they want to start a school of sorts.”

“That isn’t so unusual, Mr. Darcy. Surely educating orphans to support themselves has been going on for some time,” she said patiently.

“Yes, but generally they are trained to be servants or seamstresses, or in the case of the boys, craftsmen of some sort. Higher learning has always been thought to be wasted on them.”

“Define ‘higher learning,’ sir,” she said crisply.

He leaned back comfortably and crossed one leg over the other. “I define it as everyone defines it. Foreign languages, music, debate, classical studies. What use would they have for such things?”

“Is your objection then that they would learn useless topics?” she asked.

“I wouldn’t call it an objection. I do wonder if it is a worthwhile endeavor. What will they do with such knowledge once they have it? Would their time not be better spent learning something of use?”

“Like how to iron a shirt or shoe a horse?” she quipped.

“Precisely.” He flashed his smug smile again before he took a sip of tea and she had a strong urge to dash the cup from his hand and let the tea stain his silk waistcoat.

“Tell me, sir, how often do you speak Latin with your friends?”

“Excuse me?”

“You were at Cambridge and I assume some sort of school before that. Perhaps your parents brought in tutors for you at home.”

He nodded, a suspicious look on his face.

“So you must have learned Latin, like most gentlemen. Tell me, do you speak it together at the clubs? Do you have secret conversations in full view of the servants, knowing they can’t understand you?”

“Of course not!”

“Then what was the purpose of learning it? Would you not have been better served learning something useful?”

He smiled again at her. “And what would you propose young gentlemen learn in place of Latin, my lady?”

“Oh, I don’t know—there are many useful things a man should know how to do. How to mend a carriage for instance.” She almost laughed at the comical look on his face. “Carriages are constantly sitting lame on the side of the road while the owners pace behind them, uselessly. Surely it would be better to know at least a *little* of their construction.”

He nodded skeptically, his eyes narrow. “I concede some general knowledge of the workings of a carriage would be useful.”

“It would also be helpful if gentlemen were more useful about the house. Some gardening skills, laying a fire. Most can’t even design a basic menu, let alone prepare any of the food that goes in it!”

“Surely you jest, Lady Asheland,” he said with a knowing look, certain now that she was teasing him.

“And men know so little about children!” she continued. “One is constantly hearing sad tales about how a mother died in tragic circumstances and the children were sent to live with an aunt or cousin or near stranger because their own father couldn’t care for them. Would it not be better for them to grow up with their own parent in their own home?”

He spluttered.

“You see, Mr. Darcy, people do not learn what is useful for them to know, but what is *appropriate* for their position in

life.” She sat back, her excitement spent.

He took a breath and re-entered the fray. “All the more reason to teach them trade skills for that is the position they are born to.”

She made a doubtful noise and tilted her head. “I do not know. Most pity the orphans, and I will agree that being without home or family is a terrible thing, but there is something liberating in having no set path. If they are able to determine their own futures in more meaningful directions, who are we to say they shouldn’t?”

“You are quite revolutionary, Lady Asheland.”

“Not revolutionary, Mr. Darcy, merely fair-minded.”

He nodded in acknowledgement of her point as Bingley stood and asked Darcy if he was ready to leave. Jane and Elizabeth accompanied the gentlemen to the entrance hall and Elizabeth led Darcy to the door to give Jane and Bingley a private farewell.

“Thank you for the stimulating conversation, Lady Asheland,” said Darcy as he pulled on his gloves.

“And you, sir. I trust your sensibilities will recover soon,” she said impertinently.

“You may depend upon it. I look forward to our next debate.”

“As do I,” she said politely.

He gave her that patronizingly self-satisfied smile again, the one that always gave her the urge to pinch him and stick out her tongue. She gritted her teeth and stepped away from the door, allowing him to pass by.

He stepped through the doorway and turned to look at her. “Until we meet again, upon the field of battle.”

“Sir, I shall show you no mercy,” she said with a sly smile.

“Madam,” he smiled and put his hat on his head, “I look forward to it.” He nodded and was gone.

Darcy whistled on his walk home. He couldn’t remember when he’d had more fun in a drawing room.



The wedding was beautiful. Jane was radiant, as always, and Charles was even more ebullient than usual. Mary was quite pretty and Darcy expectedly smug.

Elizabeth’s family returned to Town the following day to enjoy the remainder of the Season, this time with Charlotte Lucas in tow. Mary had elected to remain in Hertfordshire. She was enjoying being out in familiar society and London had been a little too much for her. Elizabeth suspected the musical (and handsome) cousin visiting the Gouldings had something to do with her decision as well.

Summer was spent at Cressingdon and Elizabeth tried her hand at matchmaking, inviting Mr. Rippen, the owner of a small estate a few miles away, to dinner to meet Charlotte

Lucas. The two had much to talk about, as Elizabeth had thought they would, and to no one's surprise, Mr. Rippen proposed by the end of summer and they were married by Michaelmas. He found Charlotte to be sensible and attractive and kind, and he had long wanted a closer relationship with Lord Asheland. Marrying the close friend of the earl's beloved wife seemed an excellent way to achieve it. The fact that Miss Lucas made him stammer when he would otherwise be articulate and flush when the room was cool was but a happy coincidence.

CHAPTER 8



Jane and Charles went to Ireland on their wedding tour and, on the way back to Hertfordshire in October, they stopped at Cressingdon to visit the Asheland family. To Jane's great surprise, she was met with a rather rotund Elizabeth.

"Lizzy! Why didn't you tell me you were increasing again!" she cried, placing her hands on her sister's swollen belly.

"I didn't want you racing back from your tour," she said.

"When will the babe come?"

"Not for two more months at least, perhaps three."

Jane's eyes widened. "So you think sometime in January then?"

"Most likely, perhaps December. He will come when he is ready. I am not overly worried about it," she said simply.

"So you think it is a boy?"

"I have a feeling," said Elizabeth with a secret smile.

Hoping she would soon have similar news to share, Jane squeezed her hand and followed her sister to rejoin their

husbands.



Jane and Charles spent only a fortnight at Cressingdon with their brother and sister, then went on to Hertfordshire to see the Bennet family. Jane wanted to return for her sister's lying in and her mother would never forgive her if they stayed away for months without a visit. She also knew Elizabeth would have her head if Mrs. Bennet came to Cressingdon to see them. Their mother's nerves were not good companions for a lying in.

By Christmas, Jane and Charles were back in residence at Cressingdon and had looked at two estates available for purchase. The first was in Leicestershire to the south, which was a nice house but not to Jane's personal tastes, and the other was on the border of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, less than thirty miles from Mr. Bingley's closest friend, Mr. Darcy, and only twenty miles north of Cressingdon.

The second estate was agreed upon and the sisters were beside themselves with excitement and spent hours making plans for the house, the gardens, and the nursery. Jane felt the first fluttering of her babe during the festive season and the entire family erupted in joyful congratulations at the announcement.

Lord Asheland's extended family was also in residence for the holiday, including his cousin and close friend, Alfred Downing, who had recently inherited the title of Marquess of

Devonshire, and his wife and children, who were Elizabeth's age, and their cousin, the dowager marchioness. Elizabeth couldn't keep herself from making the observation to Jane that Caroline Bingley would have swooned at all the titles in the room. It was a pity she hadn't been a more pleasant person, or she might have been invited. Jane tried to chastise her sister, but couldn't hold her laugh in well enough to do it properly.

By mid-January, all their guests but the Bingleys had left. Jane had a small but noticeable bulge under her dress, and Elizabeth was so heavy with child she could hardly move. When she woke one morning with excess energy and a strong desire to clean and sew and cook things (even though she hated sewing and didn't even know how to cook), she knew it was a sign the babe was near. The same had happened a few days before the births of both Robbie and Violet.

After organizing the baby's layette for the third time and triple checking all the supplies in the nursery, she felt the need for fresh air. She found her sister Jane and the two of them took to the gardens, kept warm by their fur coats and burgeoning middles.

"Did you ever think we would be walking in a garden together, both with child at the same time?" asked Elizabeth in amusement.

"Yes," answered Jane simply.

"You did?"

"Of course. With our mother, I knew it was likely we would both conceive easily." She nodded to her sister who returned

the gesture. “And you were the one who thought you would never marry. I always knew some lucky man would see your worth and offer for you. It’s only natural that we should eventually fall with child at the same time.”

“I suppose you’re right. It does take nine months.”

Jane chuckled. “Yes. Now, if we were both to deliver on the same day, that would really be something.”

Elizabeth laughed outright and the two continued walking another quarter of an hour until suddenly Elizabeth reached out and clutched her sister’s arm.

“What is it, Lizzy?” asked Jane, worried at the expression on her sister’s face.

“We must return to the house,” said Elizabeth.

She turned and began walking swiftly up the path that led to the house, nearly half a mile away.

“What is it?” asked Jane, concern in her voice.

“My waters have broken,” said Elizabeth simply.

Jane looked down to the ground, then at her sister’s dress, and finally behind them, where she could see the faint trace of a water trail following Elizabeth.

“Oh!” she cried.

Elizabeth stopped to take a deep breath and hold her stomach for a minute, then was moving swiftly again.

“How close are you?” asked Jane.

“I do not know. With the first two, I was well into labor before my waters broke, but once they did...” she trailed off and Jane looked at her seriously, remembering the labors and how within an hour of her waters breaking she was holding little Robbie.

“Come, we must hurry,” she said as she took her sister’s arm and propelled her forward.

They stopped more and more frequently as they went along, rushing up the path between Elizabeth’s pains, desperate to get to the house while she was still able to transport herself.

Finally, after what felt like an age but had actually been less than an hour, the house was in sight. Jane saw an estate worker of some sort, she knew not who and neither did she care, and called out for him to fetch the master and Mr. Bingley and tell someone to call the midwife.

Seeing the situation for himself, the young gardener ran to the stables to send a rider for the midwife and another for the master, who was out with his steward on the east side of the estate. He yelled to a laundry maid hanging out clothes as he ran by, asking her to fetch the housekeeper and Mr. Bingley.

With the house in an uproar, Jane and Elizabeth, the latter now sweating and breathing heavily, made their way up the front steps of the house. Just as they reached the front door, it burst open and the housekeeper stepped out.

“Oh, my lady! It’s your time! The midwife has been sent for and the master, too. Let’s get you to your rooms.”

She took Elizabeth's arm and guided her into the foyer, where Elizabeth was again forced to stop and double over in pain. She stepped forward, and to her embarrassment, and the worry of her housekeeper and sister, Elizabeth left a pale pink pool behind her on the polished marble.

"Good God!" cried Charles Bingley as he ran into the room. "Lady Asheland, allow me."

Before anyone could answer or protest, he swooped Elizabeth up into his arms and headed straight for the stairs. She held to his neck with one arm and to her belly with the other, trying not to scream and frightened out of her mind.

"Robert!" she cried. "Where is Robert?"

"He is on the way, my lady," assured the housekeeper.

"Send him," Elizabeth panted, "straight," pant, pant, "to me," pant, "baby," pant "coming!"

"Yes, my lady," said the housekeeper.

She opened the door and Charles rushed into her chamber. Elizabeth's maid, Watson, had just removed the coverlet and was placing a clean white sheet on the bed.

"Put her here," she said.

Charles deposited her gently on the bed and Elizabeth grasped his arm tightly.

"Thank you, brother," she whispered.

He nodded, the gravity of the situation striking him full force. Jane pushed him into the hall and told him to bring Lord

Asheland to them as soon as he was seen. She then disappeared back into the room to attend her sister.

“Send for Prue Cleary in the kitchen,” barked the housekeeper.

“What?” asked Watson. “I don’t think anyone will be needing a snack!”

“Her mother was the midwife and she used to assist. She’ll know what to do.”

Watson nodded and gave the orders to a maid outside the hall, then returned to her mistress where she began removing Elizabeth’s walking dress. Jane bathed her sister’s forehead with a cloth and rubbed her shoulders trying to offer comfort.

Elizabeth was insensible to all around her. She could only moan and cry out for Robert.

“Where is he? I need him!” she cried.

“He will be here soon, sister. Hold my hand. He’ll be here soon. Shh,” cooed Jane.

Elizabeth whimpered, sweat pouring off her head, her body racked with painful shudders. She could only cling pathetically to Jane and pray for Robert to get there soon.

Suddenly, strong arms wrapped around her and she felt herself lifted off the bed and onto her feet.

“I know it hurts love, but you must move,” her husband’s voice whispered in her ear.

“Robert!” she cried as loud as she could, which was barely more than a whisper. “You came!”

“Of course, love. I always come when you call for me, you know that.” He smiled at her with that familiar twinkle in his eyes and she felt herself buoyed. She nodded and looked to Mrs. Cleary who was acting the part of the midwife.

“You must stand and move about, my lady. The baby must come down,” said the old woman, her apron twisted in her hands.

Elizabeth nodded, remembering well Violet’s birth and the fight to get her to descend. Robert looked above Elizabeth’s head to the grey-haired Mrs. Cleary.

“Do you have this in hand?” he asked. His voice was calm, but his eyes were grave.

The elderly woman squared her shoulders and dropped the apron she had wrinkled irreparably. “Yes, my lord. All is under control.”

“Good.”

Robert stood beside Elizabeth all the while, encouraging her, squeezing her hand, rubbing her back. He never left her side.

Less than an hour later, Elizabeth was on the birthing chair, bent over her stomach and pushing with all her might. With her last push, she cried out so loudly that the maids on the lower floor stopped what they were doing and looked

upwards. There was a dreadful moment of silence, then the hearty cry of a healthy babe.

A spontaneous cheer arose amongst the house servants and in the birthing room.

“You have a bonny baby boy, my lady,” said Mrs. Cleary as she handed the baby to Elizabeth.

“Oh!” she cried as she looked at his round little face, red and angry at being born. “My son!” Then she wept in exhaustion and relief and more than a little shock.

The midwife arrived just as Elizabeth was delivering the afterbirth. She pronounced both the babe and the countess in good health and commended Mrs. Cleary on a job well done.



“What shall we call this little one?” said Lord Asheland softly as he and his wife lay in his bed with their new babe.

“Charles carried me up the stairs,” she said.

“What?”

“Jane and I were walking, and my waters broke, and by the time we got here, I was so tired, I didn’t think I would make it up the stairs, but then Charles came in like an angel, and picked me up and ran up the stairs, as if I weighed nothing at all.”

“I shall have to thank him.”

She nodded. "I would like to ask Charles to stand godfather."

"I think that a fine idea," replied Lord Asheland. "What about Bennet Charles?"

"For his name?"

"Yes."

"Bennet Charles Talbot," she said.

"Bennet Talbot. I think that a fine name."

They smiled at the sleeping babe before them.

"You know your sisters will call him Benny," he said.

"Not if I can help it!" she said. "Ben I like, but Benny is a dog's name."

He laughed. "You should try to sleep, Elizabeth. You've had an exhausting day."

"Yes, my lord."

CHAPTER 9



The time after the birth moved quickly and before long, Bennet was being christened, Charles Bingley and John Downning standing as godfathers and Elizabeth's friend Lady Montgomery as godmother. Elizabeth felt a little bad at passing over her sister Mary for her friend, but in truth she was closer to Alice than Mary and thought Mary could be godmother to the next child. She seemed to have a babe every eighteen months.

After being churched, she was still rather melancholy. She thought it was the weather; it had been cold and dark of late, and she was terribly exhausted with the baby. The wet nurse they had hired had contracted an illness and was no longer available, so for the first seven weeks of Bennet's life, Elizabeth was his sole source of food. They had finally found another woman in a nearby village who would arrive tomorrow. Elizabeth was looking forward to the rest. She couldn't remember when she'd felt so tired.

She wandered through the house, her thoughts drifting here and there, until she came to the nursery. She had a keepsake

box of sorts for each of her children, filled with the mementos of their first few months of life. Rattles, a lock of hair, a Christening gift or two. She traced her hand over the lid to Robert John's box. He had been a baby just yesterday, but now he was nearly three years old. How had time gone by so quickly?

Alfred Downing and her Uncle Gardiner were Robert John's godfathers, and the dowager Marchioness of Devonshire his godmother. Their housekeeper, Mrs. Hobbs, had an orphaned niece who had come to live with her aunt while Elizabeth was expecting young Robert. The girl was quite good with a pencil, and after seeing her drawings, Elizabeth asked her to make a few of the christening. The images were tucked inside the memory box, with one framed and hung on the wall. They were remarkably lifelike. Alfred was beyond pleased as he held his godson, and Robert stood watch over it all, the epitome of a proud father.

Violet's christening had been done the same way. Jane and Sylvia Downing were her godmothers and Stephen Carew, her godfather. John Downing, Alfred's son, had teased them about being passed over, but they promised him he would stand godfather to their next child. Elizabeth had wondered if he and Jane might one day make a match of it, but it was not to be. It was just as well. Jane was very happy with Charles and she wouldn't have liked being a marchioness, anyway.

Now there was Bennet. She touched the third box and couldn't help her sigh. He really was a beautiful baby. His eyelashes were already beginning to look long, like his

father's, and he was such a sweet boy, if not excessively hungry.

Feeling herself becoming weepy again, she left the nursery, drew on a cloak, and stepped outside for a brisk walk. She would keep to the gardens because of the dark sky, but fresh air would do her a world of good.

She would go to Jane's new home in a few days, and Bennet would go with her. She had not discussed it with Robert yet. She knew he wouldn't like the idea. He was aware of how tired she was and concerned greatly by her moods and continual crying. She told him not to worry about it, she simply couldn't help it. When the sun came back out, and she got a full night's sleep, she would be her old self again. She wasn't unhappy, not truly, just exhausted and a trifle overwhelmed.

After all, three babes in three and a half years, and she not yet two and twenty, would exhaust anyone. Sighing, she pulled her cloak around her and headed to Robert's study. She must talk to him about her trip to Jane's. Putting it off would do her no good.



“I simply want to go visit my sister's new house. She wishes to be settled there before the babe is born and I would like to be of assistance. Mary has assisted at Netherfield, I should assist here! I am feeding my baby, so he must come with me. Is that really so terrible?”

He looked at her impassioned eyes and felt the exhaustion coming off her in waves.

“Elizabeth, I am simply trying to take care of you, and our son. I have no objection to you visiting Jane’s new home. I think it a fine idea, but you are clearly exhausted. You can hardly stand up! You were only churching last week.”

She sighed and slumped her shoulders in defeat.

“Have the wet nurse brought in, don’t take everything on yourself, and in a few days, when you are stronger, take Bennet to visit your sister. But please, only two nights away,” he said kindly.

“Truly?” she said hopefully, feeling the inexplicable urge to cry.

“Truly. Surely you know I can deny you nothing.” She smiled tiredly and he continued, “Just try to be reasonable sometimes! You wear a man out!”

She swatted his arm playfully. “You enjoy it when I wear you out.”

His brows quirked up. She was in a much better mood the remainder of the day.



A few days later, Bennet and his new wet nurse were inside the carriage as Elizabeth stood beside it saying goodbye to her husband.

“Don’t worry, darling, I won’t have too much fun without you. Mr. Darcy will be there and we’re sure to spend half the time arguing over something or other.”

“Mr. Darcy isn’t so bad once you know him better,” argued the earl.

She huffed.

“You should be easier on him. You are not an easy lady to keep up with.”

“I was under the impression some men liked that in a lady.”

He smiled. “Luckily for me, it scares away as many as it delights.”

She laughed. “I will try to behave, but I make no promises. You said yourself that I have been unpredictable of late.”

“Now that the sun has come out you are much improved,” he said kindly.

She looked at him warmly and reached up on her toes to give him a kiss. “I shall miss you. I’ll return in two days.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

He handed her into the carriage and sent it on its way, watching until it disappeared over the hill.



She arrived at the Bingleys’ new estate in short order, and immediately went to work helping her sister get organized. They reviewed the servants and discussed with the

housekeeper where more were needed in one area and perhaps one or two less in another.

They chose colors for the guest chambers that were being refurnished and discussed new furniture for the main drawing room. The bulk of their time, however, was spent on sorting out the nursery. The repairs to the windows and floor had been made and the new paper was going up when Elizabeth arrived. Charles had kindly ordered some new pieces for the room, and Mrs. Bennet had sent the Bennet family cradle that she had been saving for Jane. She would not allow her husband's horrid cousin to place his homely offspring in her daughters' cradle.

Jane and Elizabeth laughed at their mother's note, but they were both touched by the gift nonetheless. It was fitting that Jane, as the eldest, receive the cradle. After all, when their father died, they would lose their childhood home forever, and Longbourn would no longer be the seat of the Bennet family, for there would no longer be any Bennets once all their sisters had wed.

Elizabeth was feeling better every day, thanks in large part to the sun finally making an appearance and the wet nurse who took over nursing duties at night, allowing her to finally get more than two hours of sleep in a row.

It was good she was in improved spirits, for they were about to be tried by Mr. Darcy, who was helping Charles settle in his new steward and become accustomed to the duties of a landowner. She supposed it was nice of him to help, and he did

have an estate or two he was reputed to manage well, but he was terribly irksome.

He was constantly arguing with her, challenging her on all sorts of small details that left her feeling irritated and tired. Every time she saw him, she felt the need to nap afterwards. Why could he not just be pleasant? Did he enjoy their verbal sparring? She certainly did not. She found him proud and disdainful, constantly spouting the most ridiculous opinions she sincerely hoped he didn't hold, but was fairly certain he did. She could not insult Jane's home by arguing with Charles's closest friend, but truly, the man was insufferable. Why Charles was such good friends with him she couldn't fathom. Perhaps he was nicer when not in mixed company. Robert had told her that some men didn't perform well in front of women. She could only hope that was the case, or Mr. Darcy would be awful in every situation, and that would be truly piteous.

Oh, well. She was only there for two days. She could tolerate him for that length of time. She was not without patience, after all.



Elizabeth entered the drawing room and heard Charles speaking to Jane.

“It will only be a short while. I'll be home within the fortnight. You know I wouldn't leave you if it weren't absolutely necessary.”

“Of course. I understand,” Jane said stoically, trying to keep her rapidly building tears from overflowing.

“Pardon me, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” said Elizabeth.

She turned to leave the room when Charles jumped up from his seat by his wife and stopped her.

“No, Elizabeth, you aren’t interrupting. I was just informing Jane that I must go to Town on business. As you know, it is a delicate time.”

Elizabeth looked to her sister, her belly distended with her first child, and understood instantly Jane’s distress.

“Will you arrive back in time for the birth?” she asked.

“I plan to. Both Jane and the midwife believe there is another month, and I know you can’t plan these things, but I will be back within a fortnight, possibly sooner.”

“I see.”

“I thought perhaps you could stay with her until I return, or she could go with you to Cressington,” he said hopefully.

“Charles!” cried Jane. “Elizabeth couldn’t possibly be away from her children so long, especially for such a reason. You know she and the earl don’t like to be parted unless it can’t be helped.”

Elizabeth wanted to reassure her sister, but it was true. She couldn’t think of being away from her children for a fortnight just because Charles suddenly needed to go Town. She and the earl had gone away for a few days on their own last summer

after Violet weaned, and it had been glorious, but that was the only time she had left both her children. Baby Bennet couldn't be separated from her and she couldn't ask her husband to give up this time of infancy, which fled by so quickly, for a whim of her brother's.

“Charles, may I ask, what draws you to Town?” asked Elizabeth delicately.

Charles sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “It is Caroline. Hurst has had enough of her and is refusing to allow her to live with them. I am responsible for her income; I need to settle her into her own establishment and see to her allowance.”

“Cannot an agent do that? Or can the Hursts not wait until after the babe is born?” asked Elizabeth.

He looked to Jane. “I doubt they can. But I could ask. Jane, would you rather I go now, before the babe comes, or after?”

Jane looked at her husband and her sister, clearly conflicted. “I think it would be best to go now. Be as quick as you can, and hurry back to meet your son.”

He smiled. “Are you sure, dearest? Elizabeth has rightfully made me feel a beast for leaving you at such a time.” He glanced to Elizabeth as he spoke and she huffed in mock indignation.

“I did no such thing! But if your own heart convicts you, I will not stand in its way.”

He laughed and Jane chuckled softly, a hand rubbing her belly.

“Go to Town now. If I am anything like my sister, I will be a weepy mess after the birth and in need of my husband.”

“Jane!” cried Elizabeth.

The three of them laughed together.

“You will go stay with your sister?” asked Charles.

“If you insist, but I will be fine here on my own. I have already met the midwife and my maid will be with me. There is much to do to prepare for the babe and I would rather not travel, but if it will make you easier, I will go to Cressingdon.”

Charles kissed her hand. “You are truly an angel, Jane, and I do not deserve you. Of course, I will not force difficult travel on you if you would rather not, but I will speak with the housekeeper before I go. I want the entire household to be watching over you.”

Jane rolled her eyes and Elizabeth laughed lightly.

“Do not worry, Charles. Jane already has their love and devotion, as only an angelic creature such as she can have.”

Jane blushed and looked down, then joined her sister and husband in their laughter.



That evening, Jane and Elizabeth were in the nursery examining a selection of baby blankets, while Ben slept in the

cradle against the far wall.

“Are you well, Jane? Truly?” asked Elizabeth gently.

“Oh, you know how it is, Lizzy. Everything seems so much more important when one is with child.”

“Yes, I do,” said Elizabeth with a wan smile. “What troubles you?”

“It is nothing, really. I’m sure I’m being ridiculous. It is just that,” she hesitated, “sometimes I wish Charles was more like Robert.”

Elizabeth sat back, surprised. “In what way?”

“It is so clear that Robert wants what is best for you. He is so obviously concerned with your welfare and peace of mind. He would never dream of leaving for Town while so close to your lying in.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” agreed Elizabeth quietly.

A slow tear made its way down Jane’s smooth cheek and Elizabeth reached out and clasped her hand in hers.

“Jane, do not despair! Charles is simply behaving like every other man of his acquaintance. You must remember that I am not Robert’s first wife, and Violet was his fifth child. Five, Jane! He missed four births before he finally decided to see what was going on behind the closed door.”

Jane gave her a weary smile and Elizabeth returned it.

“Are you saying that Charles will stand by me by my fifth birth?” Jane asked, only half in jest.

“Possibly. I also think he does not know you want him there. Have you mentioned it to him?” Elizabeth asked gently.

“No,” said Jane uncertainly. “But Lizzy, you never asked Robert. He barged in with Violet’s birth, unable to bear hearing you in distress and not come to your side. He loves you, Lizzy! Like something from a fairy tale! I thought that was how Charles loved me...” she trailed off and Elizabeth’s heart broke a little for her sister.

“Jane, please do not see Charles’s willingness to take care of his sister as lack of love for you. He is doing his duty and making every effort to be with you, too. Did he not ask you if you wished for him to stay? If you told him now that you did not want him to go and that he should send an agent in his place, he would stay, would he not? If you asked him to?”

“I suppose. Will you think me terribly cowardly if I admit that I don’t want to ask him for fear of the answer?”

“Oh, Jane!”

Elizabeth pulled her sister to her and Jane wept quietly on her shoulder. They held each other for some time until Elizabeth felt something bumping against her middle and began to laugh.

“I do believe my niece or nephew wants to be released!”

Jane laughed. “He is a strong kicker, isn’t he?”

“Yes. So you think it is a boy?”

“I do not have a feeling, no. I just want to call him something other than ‘it.’ I would be happy with a boy or girl.

There is no entailment to satisfy, and Charles would never enact such a thing, so I am not afraid of a house full of girls.”

“I am,” said Elizabeth with a smile. “But for completely different reasons.”



The next afternoon, Jane stood on the front step seeing off Mr. Darcy and Charles in one carriage, and Elizabeth, her son, maid, and wet nurse in the other. It was decided that Charles and Mr. Darcy would stay the night at Cressington before leaving for Town the next day. Charles wanted the earl’s opinion on what to do about Caroline and Mr. Darcy wished to discuss estate business.

“Darcy?” Charles said as they sat in the carriage.

“Yes, Bingley?”

“Would you think me terribly ridiculous if I wished Jane had asked me to stay?”

Darcy raised a brow in question.

“I know I am ridiculous. You don’t need to tell me. It is just that, childbearing is the concern of women. I am utterly lost! I know not what to say to her when she is distressed, or what to do with all of this. And she will never ask anything of me, she is too good, but I wanted her to want me there.” He looked at his friend pathetically. “See, I am utterly ridiculous!”

“Charles, you are not ridiculous. It is a difficult time. But don’t you think it a little,” he hesitated.

“Ridiculous? Stupid? Idiotic?” interjected Charles.

“Bingley,” reprimanded Darcy.

“Go ahead.” He sighed and leaned back into the squabs.

“I was going to say it is a little immature to expect your pregnant wife to open her heart to you and beg for your presence when you are so eager to run off to Town. She is the one in the more vulnerable position, by far.”

“Is that what I did?” He put his hand in his hair and groaned. “I am a horrible husband. And if my first child is born while I am in Town, I will have started out as a horrible father.”

“Bingley, stop being so dramatic! You are neither a horrible husband nor a horrible father. Plenty of children are born with their fathers in other countries and they are none the worse for it.”

“I suppose so,” sighed Charles.

“Bingley,” said Darcy with frustrated patience, “please tell me that you actually needed to go to Town and didn’t just tell your wife you needed to go to test her affection for you?”

“Of course not!” cried Bingley. “Hurst has put Caroline out and I don’t want her living in our house in Town—who knows what she will do to it. Besides that, it would be unseemly. Knowing her, she would hire a carriage and come here on her own, then pretend we had invited her. That is not what Jane needs at this time.”

“Did you tell your wife all that?” asked Darcy.

“Some of it,” he replied. “I was right. I am a horrible husband! What kind of husband even considers leaving his wife at such a time?”

“Many, I’m afraid, and for much less noble reasons,” said Darcy quietly.

“I will talk to Asheland. He will have the name of a good agent I can send in my place, then I will go home to my wife, where I belong.”

“That seems wise,” said Darcy simply.

When they arrived at Cressingdon, Elizabeth rushed into the house and Robert met her in the vestibule, quickly pulling her to him and kissing her hair.

Bingley and Darcy entered more slowly and stopped when they saw the reunion.

“Asheland would never leave his wife during her lying in,” whispered Bingley to Darcy.

“Indeed,” Darcy whispered back. *What man would leave Lady Asheland for any reason?*

“Excuse me, gentlemen, I hadn’t realized you accompanied my wife,” said Lord Asheland apologetically.

“I’m sorry, dear. Mr. Darcy and Charles are on their way to town and Charles wished to speak to you on an important matter. I told them they could break their journey here and continue on tomorrow,” said Elizabeth.

“Of course. Did Jane accompany you?” asked the earl.

“No, she is not comfortable traveling at this time,” answered Elizabeth.

Lord Asheland’s eyebrows shot up, but he said nothing. Charles elbowed Darcy at this perceived proof of his husbandly failure.

“Molly,” Elizabeth spoke to the maid taking their things. “Please show Mr. Darcy to the green bedchamber. Mr. Bingley will occupy his usual chamber.”

“Yes, my lady.” The maid curtsied and waited by the stairs.

“If you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I wish to see my children.” She smiled politely and she and Lord Asheland left hand in hand, leaving two envious and confused men behind them, though neither could identify their feelings as such.



That night, as Elizabeth lay with her head on her husband’s chest, she said, “I could never be happy with a man like Bingley.”

“Pardon me?”

“He is a good man, but he could never love me properly, nor I him.”

“That is lucky for me, I suppose,” said Lord Asheland dryly.

“You know what I mean. He and Jane are so careful with each other. It’s a miracle anything gets done!”

“You must account for temperaments, my dear. Jane is not as bold as you, and I am twenty years Bingley’s senior. It would be a sorry state indeed if I weren’t more knowledgeable than he.”

“I suppose so,” she agreed reluctantly. “But I still couldn’t do it!”

He laughed.

Asheland knew Bingley would learn the way of things. He was a young man still and his marriage was new. Jane would learn to speak up about what was important to her and Charles would learn to rely more on his own initiative. It would take time, but they would both grow into each other.

His wife’s voice interrupted his thoughts. “Did you give Charles the name of an agent?”

“Yes, I sent him to Blackwood.”

“Good.”

“He had already made the decision to return to her.”

“What?”

“Bingley. He had already decided to return home tomorrow when we spoke. I just gave him the name of an agent.”

“And a bit of advice, I imagine,” she added.

“Of course. He is my brother; it is my duty.”

“Of course it is. And is it also your duty to advise Mr. Darcy?”

“No, that is just a courtesy.”

Elizabeth laughed outright and eventually her husband joined her.

“What did you tell him?” she asked.

“Bingley or Mr. Darcy?”

“Charles, of course.”

“I told him that a lady should be able to rely on her husband without having to ask for it, and that since she is doing him the very great honor of bearing his child, the least he could do was be in the county when it arrived.”

“Well said, my love. And what was his reaction?”

“As expected. He chastised himself extensively and bemoaned what a horrible husband he was and promised to make it right for his angel, etc.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “They really are perfect for each other. Only Jane would be so patient with Charles.”

“And inspire such devotion,” interjected her husband.

“And only Charles would be gentle enough to make Jane feel at ease.”

“Yes, they are well-matched,” he agreed.

“Not as well-matched as we are, but a good alliance nonetheless.”

CHAPTER 10



Darcy stepped out of the house and turned his face to the newly risen sun, the crisp March air ruffling his hair slightly. Cressington was a beautiful estate, well-maintained and prosperous, and a little bigger than Pemberley. He imagined it cleared nearly twelve-thousand a year. Lord Asheland appeared to be a good and fair master. The workers he had seen seemed happy and healthy. None were too thin or bedraggled or had the look of illness about them. Asheland was clearly a generous man. He had offered to loan Darcy a mount for a morning ride before he left for town, just because Darcy had said it was perfect weather for it.

Darcy was just cresting the hill to the east of the estate, admiring the scenery from the back of a borrowed gelding, when he saw a horse and rider come rushing toward him.

“What seems to be the trouble?” called Darcy as the rider approached.

“It’s the master! He’s taken a fall! I’ve come to fetch help.”

“Where?” Darcy asked urgently.

“To the east half a mile, down by the stream, near the big rocks.”

“Go fetch help. I’ll go to the earl.”

The rider continued on and Darcy headed in the direction he’d specified, quickly finding an outcropping of rocks running along a stream.

“Lord Asheland!” he called loudly.

“Here,” came a labored voice from behind the rocks.

Darcy leapt off his horse and scrambled over the stones. He found Lord Asheland on his back, his shirt bloody, a dazed look on his face.

“My lord! What happened?” Darcy asked urgently as he took off his coat and pillowed it under the earl’s head.

“Damn pheasant. Startled Goliath,” he said with labored breath.

“Are you David in this scenario?” asked Darcy dryly. He had taken off his cravat and was pressing it to the earl’s abdomen.

“Very funny, young man. You know it’s bad luck to change a horse’s name. He was... a gift...”

The earl began to drift off into unconsciousness and Darcy spoke louder.

“Who gave it to you, my lord?”

“Brother... Carew...nephew... named him... big... horse,” he breathed.

“Ah, children are always experts at naming horses. If only the horses didn’t outlive the name’s appeal.”

The earl almost chuckled but it sounded more like a wheeze.

Darcy was no physician, but he assumed the earl had at least one broken rib. He’d seen it a few times on the stable hands. There was a large cut that was bleeding on his side. It didn’t look too deep, but if it festered, it could be fatal. He’d known men to die from lesser wounds that had become feverish and diseased. Where was the man with the cart? The sooner they got him to the main house, the better.

Finally, after what seemed an age, a cart with several grooms and the earl’s valet rolled up. Darcy helped the men get him onto it and they began the painful journey to the house. A rider was sent ahead to alert the countess and when they pulled up to the house, she was waiting on the steps, her face pale and her eyes wide and dark.

“Bring him inside. Gently,” Elizabeth ordered. “The physician is on the way.”

They carried the now unconscious earl up the stairs on a make-shift stretcher and deposited him in the middle of his bed.

“Porter,” she said to his valet, “let’s get him out of these riding clothes. Please fetch a clean nightshirt.”

“Yes, my lady.”

She began removing one of the earl’s boots and when Darcy realized what she was doing, he started on the other one. She

removed his stockings as well and began on his cravat, which she untied gently and, Darcy couldn't help but notice, with practiced ease.

She left the room only to return a few moments later with a pair of sharp scissors in hand. She began cutting his coat off, first the seam near his side, then the sleeves, until he was free of the restricting garment. His white lawn shirt, half covered in his blood, received the same treatment.

Elizabeth focused on her work with eyes like flint, caring not who watched her and nothing in her mind but a desperate prayer that her husband would survive this ordeal.

Darcy pulled aside a footman and said, "Please find someone to send for Mr. Bingley. He is on the north road on the way to Hatfield Hall. Tell him there's been an accident and to bring Mrs. Bingley here. Lady Asheland will want her sister."

"Yes, sir," said the footman before hurrying down the hall.

"We need more cloths," Elizabeth said to the housekeeper.

"Yes, my lady."

Elizabeth was cleaning the wound on his side, carefully wiping the blood from his abdomen, her entire body humming with a wild energy.

"Porter!"

"Yes, my lady." The valet was by her side instantly.

"I need you to write a letter to Lord Devonshire."

He immediately moved to the writing desk in the corner and removed a pen and ink pot.

“What do you want me to write, Lady Asheland?”

“Write this exactly as I dictate it.” She dropped a bloody cloth into a basin and took up another fresh one, dipping it into the clean water and wringing it out before beginning to wipe her husband’s face that had become smudged with dirt. “Dear Alfred, You are needed at Cressingdon. Robert was thrown from his horse. Come as soon as you can. Your cousin, Elizabeth.” She dipped the cloth and wrung it out again. “Do you have that?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Read it back to me.”

Porter recited it exactly as she had said it. She dried her hands and quickly signed it, pressing her husband’s seal into the wax.

“Send this immediately. Have Johnny in the stables do it. Tell him to wait for a response.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Porter left the room quickly to deliver the message and Elizabeth continued tending to her husband, pulling a soft blanket over his now clean body.

Darcy stood at the foot of the bed, watching the proceedings with a horrid sense of helplessness. He would have offered to ride to Lord Devonshire, but he hadn’t the slightest idea where the man lived. He thought it might be Yorkshire, but he

couldn't be sure. Two of the footmen who had carried the earl upstairs stood near the window, calmly awaiting orders. Darcy was trying to think of something appropriate to say to Lady Asheland when one of the footmen spoke.

“That’s the physician’s carriage!”

Elizabeth looked up sharply. “Bring him straight here, James.”

“Yes, my lady.”

A few minutes later, a thin, older man with grey hair and spectacles entered the room.

“Lady Asheland. It is good to see you again, but I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“You too, Mr. Oglesby. Did Martin tell you what happened?”

“Yes, he came to fetch me and informed me on the way. The horse was startled by some pheasants who flew up unexpectedly and threw his lordship onto some sharp rocks.”

Elizabeth winced at the casual way the man spoke.

“Yes, that is what I was told. There is a cut on his side.” She gestured toward the injury.

“I’ll examine him now. If you’ll excuse us, my lady.”

“I’ll be staying with my husband,” she said plainly.

The physician bristled and pulled his small frame up taller. “That is most irregular, madam!”

“Lord Asheland would want me to stay,” she said steadily.

The physician was gearing up for an argument when Mr. Darcy said, “Mr. Oglesby, perhaps time could be better spent examining the earl.”

Oglesby looked to the strange man at the end of the bed, then back to Lady Asheland.

“This is Mr. Darcy,” she said. “He is a friend of my husband’s.”

Oglesby nodded and began the examination. “Did you clean the wound, Mr. Darcy? Or was it the earl’s man? A fine job!”

“That was Lady Asheland,” said Darcy evenly.

The physician did not look pleased at the information and carried on in silence.

“I believe there is some internal bleeding,” he said.

“Why?” asked Darcy, hoping to circumvent an argument between Lady Asheland and the doctor.

Mr. Oglesby explained his reasoning and his hope that it would resolve on its own.

“How likely is that to happen?” asked Elizabeth.

“I really cannot say, madam. His lordship is strong and in good health, but he is not a young man.”

Elizabeth huffed and turned her back in exasperation.

Darcy looked at her and then back at the doctor. “Is there nothing you can do?” he asked.

“There are strategies some surgeons would use, but they are more experiments than anything else. I’m afraid his lordship

wouldn't survive them. I can give you a salve for the wound, but otherwise, I'm afraid we must simply wait and see."

Darcy nodded. "I understand. Thank you, doctor."

The doctor nodded and told them to give him laudanum for the pain, then gathered his things and left, promising to look in again that night.

Elizabeth looked blankly at the wall, her hands on her hips.

"Lady Asheland?" came a soft voice from behind her.

She turned to face Mr. Darcy and said, "Forgive me, sir, I had forgotten your presence." She didn't seem to notice the ceaseless tears streaming down her face.

"Understandable, my lady. Is there anything I can do for your relief? A glass of wine? May I get you one?" He spoke softly, as if to an injured child.

She walked to the table next to the fireplace and picked up her husband's brandy decanter. "I think I need something stronger." She poured a half glass of brandy and gestured to Mr. Darcy. "I know it's a bit early, but I can't be bothered to care at the moment."

"Of course, my lady."

He nodded and she poured him a glass. They stood there, looking at the prone form of Lord Asheland on the bed, and drank in silence.



Robert regained consciousness an hour later and Elizabeth had the children brought to him, wanting to give him a chance to say goodbye if the worst should happen. She knew how much it had always haunted him that he'd never said goodbye to his children before they died. She sat in the chair by the fire and nursed Ben in silence while Violet sat next to her father and played with a small doll and Robbie regaled him with his latest visit to the farmyard.

The visit exhausted him and Robert fell into a fitful sleep. Elizabeth faithfully applied the salve to his wound, not wanting it to fester, and constantly felt his forehead, watching for a fever. All through the day, till the sun was high in the sky and falling again, she tended to him diligently, pausing only to nurse her son in a nearby chair.

When he awoke again he asked Porter to take a letter for him, and though it took great effort, he wrote to the future Earl of Asheland, advising him on all and sundry, and the six-page letter was sealed and placed in his bureau until his son was old enough to need it. Elizabeth silently prayed that he never would, that his father would be there to teach him, but the garish purple spot on her husband's abdomen was growing larger and darker by the hour, and she felt the hope slowly draining out of her with each of Robert's labored breaths.

“Elizabeth.”

“Yes, I'm here,” she said. She was seated by his bed, rocking their baby in the shadowy chamber, the fire in the grate and a single candle on the bedside table the only light.

She quickly called Porter and gave him her sleeping son, asking that he be returned to the nursery.

“I’m here, my love,” she said as she sat on the bed next to him. “What can I do for you?”

“Elizabeth, you remember what I told you? About the will?” She looked at him quizzically. “You remember what I told you, about knowing what to expect?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“You know the solicitors, Durham and Brown. Their information is in my desk. A copy of the will is in the third drawer. You remember where I keep the key?”

“Yes,” she said breathily. “I remember.”

He looked at her with aching tenderness, and then he reached up and touched her cheek lightly with his fingertips. “You are the single greatest gift I’ve ever received. These years with you have been the happiest of my entire life. You, Elizabeth,” he choked and coughed and she was horrified to see blood on the handkerchief, “you are everything to me. You have been the making of me.”

“No, Robert, you have been the making of me,” she whispered.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, fighting for composure.

“I know it is selfish, but I am glad to be going first. I have buried many people I loved, Elizabeth, but burying you would have killed me.”

“Oh, Robert,” she whispered, clutching his hand to her cheek. “I love you so, my darling.” She kissed his hand fervently. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“For what?” he asked.

“For loving me. For giving me children to love and to remember you by. For choosing this silly girl from the country and making a beautiful life with her,” she whispered past the lump in her throat.

“My darling girl, thank *you*. For choosing me, for letting this old man love you,” he choked.

“Not old,” she said. “You will never be old to me, my love.”

He smiled wanly and closed his eyes against the pain. Recognizing the end was coming, she tried to set him at ease.

“Do not worry for us. I will teach young Robert to love the land, just as you do. I will show him every path and tree and stream. I will even take him to that ridiculous fishing spot you like so much.”

He tried to laugh, but it sounded more like a wheeze.

“Violet will be well, I promise. She will be beautiful and brilliant and I will guard her with my life, I swear it. And young Bennet.” She swallowed a sob and took a shaky breath. “Ben will know his father is a great man, a man to emulate. I will tell him of you. I’ll tell them all. They will not forget you; I won’t let them!” she declared vehemently.

He squeezed her hand and kept his eyes closed, a single tear falling from beneath his lashes and making its way down his

cheek and onto the pillow where it made a dark spot on the white linen.

He was silent for several minutes and Elizabeth feared the worst. Just as she was about to put her hand to his mouth to check for breath, he spoke, so quietly she could barely hear him.

“Promise me, Elizabeth.”

“Yes, darling. Anything. Anything at all,” she said breathlessly as she kissed his hands.

“Promise me you will love again,” he said softly.

“What?” she asked, astounded.

“Promise me you will not be alone forever. You are young, and not built for a solitary life. You must find someone, Lizzy. Promise me.” Something inside of him screamed and raged at the words, fighting the idea of his Elizabeth in the arms of another man, but he knew he must deny his instincts and do what was best for his wife. His precious, perfect, darling wife.

She shook her head in confusion. “What? No! I do not, I cannot, Robert! No!” she cried.

She laid her forehead on his arm where it lay on the bed and sobbed. Horrible, gut-wrenching sobs that tore at his heart until he thought he might break under the weight of her sorrow.

“Shh, shh, my love.” He patted her head gently with his free hand.

“Robert, please don’t leave me,” she whispered into the blankets.

She noticed after a moment that his hand had stopped moving in her hair and he’d fallen silent. Terrified of what she would see, but not willing to hide from the truth, she raised her head slowly and looked at her husband’s face. His eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, his body eerily still.

A strangled cry escaped her throat and Porter rushed in, stopping next to his master’s bed to stare in horror at the body of the man he had served for the last twenty-five years.

“Oh, my lord,” he cried. He dropped to his knees next to the bed and began to pray as Lady Asheland laid her head on her husband’s chest and wept until he thought she would break in two.

“Lady Asheland, come, my lady.” Porter gently drew her back but she collapsed on the bed next to Robert, unable to bear her own weight in addition to her grief.

“Lizzy?” came Jane’s soft voice. She pushed the door open softly, horror-stricken at the sight of her brother so still on the bed and her sister weeping next to him.

“Is he?” Jane asked Porter hesitantly.

The valet nodded solemnly, his eyes downcast.

“Oh, Lizzy!” she rushed to Elizabeth and gathered her in her arms.

“Jane!” cried Elizabeth. “He’s gone!” she said in disbelief. “Robert’s gone.”

“Jane?” Charles called from the door.

Jane looked up to see her husband in the doorway, Mr. Darcy behind him.

“Is Robert?” he asked, unable to finish the question.

Jane nodded. “Porter, could you fetch Lady Asheland’s maid?”

He left to collect Watson and a few moments later, the maid was at her lady’s side, trying to guide her to her chamber.

Elizabeth took one step off the bed and collapsed to the floor, unable to cease her sobbing. Jane had turned away and was quietly weeping herself, Charles’s arm around her shoulder to comfort her. Darcy took in the scene and made a quick decision.

“Come, my lady,” he said gently as he knelt in front of Elizabeth. He helped her to her feet, then scooped her into his arms, asking Watson to point him in the right direction. She took him through the sitting room and into Elizabeth’s chamber.

“Just put her on the bed, sir.”

He set Elizabeth on the counterpane and turned to the maid. “Mr. Bingley and I will be writing letters in the blue parlor should you have need of us.”

“Yes, sir.”

He left the room and Jane came in shortly after. She and Watson got Elizabeth into a nightshift and under the blankets,

her sister settled next to her. Jane leaned against the headboard, Elizabeth's head on her shoulder, her gown soaked through from her sister's tears. Elizabeth finally fell into a fitful sleep and Jane soon followed.



Deep in the night, Elizabeth awoke after a horrible dream. She looked to her side to tell her husband of it and allow him to comfort her, but in his place was her sister Jane, her blond hair strewn across the pillows.

She rose from the bed slowly, careful not to wake her sister. She tied a wool robe over her nightshift and slipped her feet into her slippers. She padded to her husband's room and looked through the door. She saw Robert lying in the bed, his valet asleep in the chair a few feet away.

She came closer and looked carefully, hoping against hope he wasn't really dead and that it had all been a horrible nightmare. His skin was cold and smooth, his body already being prepared for burial. Someone had closed his eyes.

Feeling an eerie calm descend on her, she stepped into the hallway. Elizabeth made her way to her husband's study in the dark, her expression blank. Each footman or maid she passed gave her a wide berth, but she paid them no heed. She stepped into the darkened room, lit only by the moonlight shining in the large window behind the mahogany desk.

She rested her hand on the smooth surface and opened the center drawer, pulling out a long, brass key. She lit a lantern

and took it to the adjoining room where she set it upon the table beside a large chest. She slid the key into the lock and turned it until it clicked smoothly into place. The doors opened without a sound and she looked at the rifles before her, moonlight gleaming off the metal barrels, lined up neatly in a row on their stands. Steadily, she took the one she was most familiar with, loaded it, locked the chest again, and left the room. She moved quietly through the house, out the side door, and down the grassy slope that led to the stables.

The door creaked loudly as she pushed it open, the horses inside quiet in the late night. She walked down the center row until she came to the large enclosure at the end. Placing her lantern on the floor by her feet, she raised the rifle to her shoulder and looked at the grey beast before her. He stared at her with large, dark eyes and she stared back coldly, pulling the hammer into place.

“Lady Asheland!” came a voice from her right. She felt a hand on her shoulder and vaguely registered someone trying to remove the gun from her hands.

“May I escort you to the house, my lady?”

She turned slowly and recognized the wizened face of Tom Haskins, the head groom.

Slowly, she released the rifle from her grip and he placed it against the wall behind them. “How can I help you, my lady?” he asked kindly.

The horse whinnied and she turned to the stallion.

“Get rid of it. Shoot it, sell it, give it away. I don’t care. But I never want to see that horse again,” she said harshly.

She turned swiftly and marched back into the house, her back stiff and her eyes straight ahead, burning with a hate that threatened to consume her.



She insisted she go to the funeral. Everyone had protested, from her mother, to her brother Charles, to her husband’s family. She stood stubbornly in Cressingdon’s grand entrance hall, prepared to leave regardless of their objections. Finally, Alfred approached her quietly and asked if she really believed she should be there.

“He was in the birthing room with me, did you know that?”

Several eyebrows raised and Alfred nodded slowly. “He told me, yes. He said it was the most miraculous thing he had ever beheld,” he said softly.

She nodded jerkily, her eyes stinging. “He refused to leave my side, and I refuse to leave his. We are neither of us good at going where we’re told.”

Alfred nodded, just once, and led her by the elbow to the carriage. He held up a hand when his cousin began to protest. “Robert would have wanted her there.”

More than a dozen carriages were in the procession to the church. The Bishop was Robert’s second cousin and insisted he perform the ceremony. As the procession passed through

the village, men withdrew their hats and ladies bowed their heads as the church bells rang mournfully.

Elizabeth was in the second carriage, her father and Alfred on either side of her, holding her hands. She vaguely noted the villagers' show of respect and told herself to remember to thank them later. As she walked into the church, she saw it was surrounded by early spring blooms, and she remembered how she and Robert had courted in the spring, and the flowers he had sent her, and how he had compared her cheek to a rose petal.

She was grateful for the heavy black veil that concealed her face from the crowd of men who thought she had no right to view her own husband's funeral. The voice of the Bishop echoed through the stone building, the words lost to her. She cared not what he said. She was there to say her own goodbyes.

When it was over, Alfred led her to the front of the church and looked away, giving her what privacy he could. She kissed her fingers, then placed them firmly on the coffin lid.

“Goodbye, my love,” she whispered.

She turned slowly and walked away, looking ahead but seeing nothing, past the men bowing deeply, past the stained-glass windows whose light bathed her in an ethereal glow, in an odd reversal of the last time she had walked down a church aisle with Robert at the end of it.

CHAPTER II



“**H**ave you given any thought to what you would like to do?” asked Alfred gently.

He was sitting with Elizabeth in the south parlor a fortnight after the burial. She looked at him with mournful eyes and released a heavy sigh.

“I will meet with the lawyers today. They will tell me what I already know. Robert John should be raised at Cressingdon. It is only right.”

“Of course, I’m sure that is what Robert would want,” he agreed. “I will be with you at the meeting, unless you prefer otherwise.”

“No, I want you there. My Uncle Gardiner will be there as well, and my father, of course,” she added. She looked out the window with a vacant expression on her face, one Alfred had become accustomed to recently.

“You know you are welcome to stay with us. We would love to have you and the children. There haven’t been little ones

about in years. Sylvia thought you might like the change,” he suggested.

“Your wife is kind, and I thank you, but I think I want to be alone with my children for now. I will go to Jane in a few days and see her through the birth. She was with me through all of mine, I cannot abandon her when she needs me most.”

“Of course. How long will you stay at Hatfield with the Bingleys?”

“I do not know. It will depend on many things, I imagine: how Jane comes through her lying in, the temperament of the baby, how the children tolerate being away.”

“How are they faring?” he asked.

She sighed again, brushing her black skirt with a pale hand. “Bennet is well, naturally, though he has been very quiet. I think even he feels the changed atmosphere. Violet still asks for her papa each night. She wants him to read her a story. I have told her that he is gone and won’t be coming back, but her mind cannot grasp such an idea. After all, he has always returned in the past.” She bit her lips and blinked until she felt more composed.

“And young Robert?” he said quietly.

“He understands, I think. His dog Daisy died last December and he was greatly distressed, but we explained what had happened and had her buried by the lake. He put flowers on her grave and cried over her.” She took a deep breath. “He asked if Papa has gone to be with Daisy. I told him that he had,

and that afternoon he brought a handful of daffodils he'd picked and asked to put them on Papa's grave."

She sucked in a breath and dabbed at her eyes with her ever-present handkerchief. "I took him, of course." She twisted her skirts in her hand and looked out the window, still unable to comprehend the fact that her husband was gone, and that she was a widow at not yet two and twenty. "I don't know how I will stay here. It is so full of him," she whispered.

Alfred reached out and patted her hand as her shoulders shook silently, her sense of propriety warring with her desire to curl up in the window seat and weep herself into exhaustion.

"I have a suggestion, if I may," said Alfred.

"Of course, cousin. I shall be glad to hear it," she said politely.

"Your birthday is in a fortnight." She nodded, not looking at him. He continued, "Robert had prepared something for you; a surprise of sorts."

She looked at him with interest. "What is it?"

"A cottage at the seaside. He rented it from the end of May until Michaelmas. He knew how tired you had been after the baby..." he trailed off.

"That sounds lovely. We can stay at Hatfield until it is time to depart. Thank you for telling me, Alfred. It is a great relief."

He nodded. "You're welcome, my dear."

“Have you been to the cottage? Where is it situated?”

“Cottage is not really the right word. The house is not large, but it sits on a good deal of land outside Margate. It belongs to a friend of the family. Robert and I stayed there when we were boys.”

“I see. It sounds perfectly suitable, and a stay at the seaside sounds just right at the moment.”

“John will accompany you and see you are well settled, if that suits you.”

“Of course. I shall appreciate the assistance.”

“I shall make the arrangements.”

“Thank you, Alfred. You have been a tremendous help. I don’t know what I would have done without you,” she said feelingly.

“I am honored to be of assistance. Robert loved you very much, you know. He was my closest friend as well as my cousin. I can only be grateful for how happy you made him.”

She gave him a watery smile.

“And I am somewhat fond of you myself,” he added.

She laughed for the first time in over a fortnight.



The meeting with the lawyers went as expected. Young Robert would inherit the bulk of his father’s land and income, as well as the title. Were he to die without an heir, it would fall to

Bennet. Elizabeth was to consider Cressington her home until Robbie came into his inheritance.

Violet received a small but profitable estate in Northamptonshire and an impressive dowry. Bennet would inherit the largest of his father's additional estates, a legacy of fifteen thousand pounds, and ownership of Talbot House when his mother died. The children's inheritances would be held in trust until they came of age, or in Violet's case, until she married someone her guardians approved of or reached the age of five and twenty.

Elizabeth was named the children's guardian, as expected, together with Alfred, and in the event of his death, his son John. The money Lord Asheland had settled on Elizabeth was safely invested. In addition, she was to receive a generous allowance, lifetime rights to Talbot House in London and the dower house at Cressington, and her choice of one of the estates not intended for their children. It would be hers to do with as she wished.

She also received all the Asheland family jewelry (a small fortune in itself) and Robert trusted her to know what to give to each child. His only request was that his grandmother's pearl necklace be worn by Violet at her coming out ball. His sister had worn it at her ball, as had every other Talbot woman for the last three generations.

To Elizabeth's and her relations' surprise, Robert had left a legacy to be added to the dowries of each of her unmarried sisters. She immediately understood his intentions, for they

had spoken frequently of her family, and she knew he had recently made a new will, as he did after the birth of each child. With only three children, and only one daughter to dower, Robert had gifted her unmarried sisters three thousand pounds each. Added to the money he had already put aside for them through Netherfield's income and what her parents had saved, they would have respectable dowries and more options in marriage.

He had also given Charles a valuable collection of rifles, in thanks for his kindness to Elizabeth. Jane received a beautiful necklace with sapphires and diamonds, a Talbot family piece that Robert left with a note for his "dear sister" that brought tears to Jane's eyes when she read it.

Elizabeth thanked the lawyers and her male relations for assisting her, then left them sitting in the library while she attended to the packing. She was taking the children to Hatfield to be with Jane at the end of her confinement, and from there would go to the seaside. She didn't know when she would return to Cressington, she only knew she couldn't bear to be there while every room and view reminded her of her absent husband.



A fortnight after they arrived at Hatfield, and only two days after Elizabeth's twenty-second birthday, Jane was delivered of a boy, Charles Robert Fitzwilliam Bingley. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Hurst stood as godfathers and Elizabeth as godmother,

though she was hard-pressed to remember anything of the ceremony. They had originally intended for Robert to stand godfather. Charles had nervously asked the earl when they were visiting in January, and the younger man had been honored when his new brother agreed. Thankfully, Mr. Hurst had been able to step in.

A day after Jane was churched and the baby christened, Elizabeth and the children traveled to the seaside. She rode in one carriage with Bennet and a selection of books she had no intention of reading, and the second carriage held Robbie and Violet, their nursemaid, the wet nurse, and her lady's maid. Her cousin John rode alongside.

After two and a half long days of travel, they arrived at the cottage. The children were quickly settled in and Elizabeth joined John for a light supper. He would be off to London in the morning.

“How are you, cousin?” he asked.

She sighed. “Is that the first question I will be asked for the rest of my life?” she asked in exasperation.

“It is perfectly reasonable. You have very recently been widowed.”

“I know. I simply tire of talking about it.” She sighed again and pushed her food around on her plate. “Forgive my pique. I am never at my best after traveling.”

“It is forgotten.” He looked at her appraisingly, then said, “Are you eating at all?”

She shot him an irritated glance. “Yes! Of course I am eating.”

She and John had felt like brother and sister soon after meeting. It was inevitable in a way. Alfred and Robert had been more like brothers than cousins. Similar temperaments and senses of humor made Elizabeth and John fast friends.

“You are looking frightfully thin.”

She sighed in vexation. “I am not thin. You last saw me at Christmas when I was roughly the size of a carriage; I only look thin in comparison.”

He chuckled. “I give you points for effort, Lizzy, but your collar bones look like razor blades.”

She gasped. “And you call yourself my friend!” She had the urge to throw a piece of bread at him but refrained. They were not children, after all.

He chuckled. “You know I am only teasing you. But seriously, cousin, you must eat. For yourself and for the children.”

She looked down at her full plate and sighed. “I know. I simply have no appetite.”

He moved to the chair nearest her and squeezed her hand where it was lying on the table. “I know it seems impossible now, but it will get better.”

“How do you know?” she asked in a small voice.

“It always does.”



Elizabeth spent the entire summer and the early autumn at the seaside. Lydia joined her in July for Violet's second birthday and they spent the days walking on the shore and taking long slow rides through the neighboring fields. After her husband's accident, Elizabeth insisted Lydia take extra care when riding, and the two of them never went above a canter.

Lydia's high spirits, though dampened after her brother's death, were good for the children, and Elizabeth appreciated the freedom her sister's presence brought. If she needed to steal away for an hour or two alone, her sister would manage in her stead. Lydia was accompanied by her governess, now acting as more of a companion to Kitty since Lydia had been at school the previous year, and she generously began teaching Robbie his letters. Elizabeth supposed she would need to hire a governess soon. She would write to Alfred and ask if he knew of anyone seeking a position.

Mary had become engaged to the eldest Goulding boy in early March, quite to everyone's surprise after her infatuation with his cousin the year before, and they were due to marry in October, just after the first mourning was past. Elizabeth appreciated that they waited, but she was not looking forward to returning to Longbourn and all her family and friends' condolences. She knew they meant well, but every kind word just reminded her that she was a widow now and that her life would never be the same.



“Are you going to wear that, Lizzy?” asked Mrs. Bennet.

“Yes,” she replied simply.

“You cannot wear black to a wedding!” cried her mother.

Elizabeth looked at her, her expression blank and her eyes cold. “It is expensive material, mama. I had thought that would be enough to satisfy you.”

Mrs. Bennet stared at her daughter in frustration, and just as she was about to speak, Mr. Bennet entered the room.

“Are you ready? The carriages are here.” He smiled and took Elizabeth’s hand and placed it on his arm. “See to Mary, Mrs. Bennet. We don’t want to keep Mr. Goulding waiting.”

Mrs. Bennet sniffed and shifted like an angry hen, then went upstairs to collect Mary.

Elizabeth whispered a quiet thank you to her father and he squeezed her hand, his eyes full of worry.



In deference to the family in mourning, Mary’s wedding was simple and small. There was a ceremony in the Longbourn Chapel where Kitty stood up with her sister, followed by a breakfast at the house. Elizabeth generously offered the use of one of the unoccupied family estates in Somerset for their first year of wedded life, so they might become accustomed to each

other without the curious eyes of his family on them at Hays Park. Mary's husband would eventually inherit, and it would be good for them to understand the workings of the estate before that day came, but Mr. Goulding senior was in excellent health and a little time on their own sounded perfect to the young couple.

Lydia returned to her seminary after the wedding and Kitty was the only unmarried daughter at home. Elizabeth originally had intended to take her to Town, as she had done for Mary and Jane, but she had spent the spring recovering from childbirth and mourning her husband. Going for the Little Season was out of the question. Poor Kitty would miss her presentation and all its attendant activities. She knew she couldn't change it, but Elizabeth did feel badly for her sister's aborted hopes.

To make up for it, Elizabeth penned a letter to her friend, Lady Montgomery, asking her to assist Kitty in society. She would send Kitty and her companion to stay at Ashland House for a month the following spring. She had no plans to return to Town herself any time soon. Lady Montgomery would sponsor Kitty's court presentation and had kindly agreed to host a coming out dinner, and Kitty would accompany them to various events throughout the Season. Kitty was happy to have a season, Lady Montgomery was glad to be of some assistance to her despondent friend, Mrs. Bennet was thrilled to have another daughter launched properly into society, and Elizabeth was glad to simply be left alone.



After Mary's wedding, she and the children returned to Cressington. After a fortnight of nightmares, she removed to Hatfield to stay with Jane throughout the festive season. She would try again after Bennet's first birthday.



"Welcome home, my lady," said Thompson in his deep voice.

Elizabeth smiled weakly at the butler and entered the house slowly. It looked exactly the same. Shouldn't it be different? She was sure the walls would have turned an ugly gray color and the light wouldn't be as bright and cheerful as it had been before. She was so lost without him—wouldn't his home feel the same?

But even Cressington seemed to be surviving without Lord Asheland. She was the only one not going about the daily tasks of life as if nothing had happened. As if the very world had not stopped spinning on its axis.

"It is good to be home, Thompson," she lied. "I'd like dinner in two hours, please."



Sometime in mid-February, Elizabeth was dressing for the day when she realized she had just slept through the night—at Cressington—without Robert. It was a bittersweet realization

and she felt a little weepy, but she went about her day admirably. One night turned into two, then a week, then a fortnight, until finally an entire month had passed without her crying in her sleep or waking in a cold sweat from a dreadful nightmare.

She noticed that it was almost a year to the day after his death. She nearly made a joke about needing a full year to learn to sleep by herself, but she couldn't quite manage it. She knew it would have fallen flat regardless. Her humor was not what it used to be.

She visited his grave every Sunday. Robert John often accompanied her, occasionally Violet and Bennet, too. It was sad, and they often cried, but usually she would sit on the grave with her back to the headstone and talk to her husband. Her children would pile onto her lap and she would tell them stories of their Papa, of how kind he was, how generous, how wise and intelligent and funny. How he had loved her fiercely and them as well. How he had provided so perfectly for all of them and taken such good care of his family.

In April, she celebrated her twenty-third birthday with a trip to Jane's home and a slice of lemon cake, shortly followed by her nephew's first birthday. Young Charles and Bennet were excellent playmates, and Jane and Elizabeth decided to spend the remainder of spring and all of summer at the Margate cottage together. Charles had to oversee the estate, but he would join them in July. She never said she was avoiding her home, but Jane and Charles seemed to understand regardless and did not press her.

The summer was as pleasant as it could be under the circumstances. Lydia joined them once again, together with Kitty, and in the autumn they delivered Lydia to her seminary in Town for the new term and Kitty to the Gardiners where she had been invited to spend the Little Season.

Jane was again increasing and Elizabeth accompanied her to Hatfield for her lying in. She delivered a girl with wispy blonde hair in early October called Jane Elizabeth Cassandra. She was a delightful baby, and by the festive season, the Bingley family was ready to travel and Jane and Charles both insisted they accompany Elizabeth to Cressington. It would be her first holiday in the house without Robert and they wanted to be with her.



“Welcome home, my lady,” said Thompson.

His voice sounded the same as it always had, deep and somber, and Elizabeth took comfort in the familiarity of it. “Thank you, Thompson.” She returned his smile, too preoccupied to notice the worry in her servant’s eyes.

Elizabeth walked through the halls in a daze. She hadn’t spent more than two months at the house since Robert’s death and she wasn’t quite sure how to go about living there without him. She went into the mistress’s study and sat down with an open ledger. She met with the housekeeper and discussed menus. She spoke to the gardener about adding a lavender border to one of the walks.

She was sure it would ache daily, but her son deserved to grow up in the home he would inherit, and her husband's memory ought to be preserved in the place he loved best. It was the least she owed him.

She knew her family would lose patience with her soon. Alfred and Sylvia's letters were becoming more frequent. What were her plans? How were the children? Was she coming to visit soon? They were still her family, they reminded her.

Her mother had grown tired of her mourning a year ago. Mrs. Bennet couldn't understand why Elizabeth hadn't come for a visit, or returned to Town, or taken Kitty for a season as she had promised. Elizabeth merely ignored her mother's letters and wrote to her father, asking him to explain to her mother that she would visit when she was ready, she had not forgotten her family, and Town was not going anywhere—she could visit later.

She knew Mrs. Bennet didn't truly understand her reasoning, but at least her letters insisting Elizabeth do her sisterly duty had ceased. She half wondered if her mother was still writing them and her father simply stole them from the salver. It was like him to deal with problems indirectly—when he dealt with them at all, and he would find his wife's frustration at not receiving a reply amusing.

Elizabeth couldn't decide if the fact that her family never changed was comforting or depressing.

She had been dressing in half mourning for some time, in light grays and lavender, white gowns with black trim, and in three short months, the second anniversary of Robert's death would pass—just in time for the Season. She didn't want to participate, or wear cheerful clothes, or converse with people she merely tolerated, but she couldn't hide at the seaside forever, no matter how much she wanted to. And Kitty would love to accompany her. She could do this; she would.

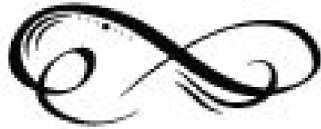
With a deep breath, she wrote letters to her sisters requesting their company in the spring. Then she asked the dressmaker to attend her. She was in need of a new wardrobe.

Lady Elizabeth Asheland was returning to Town.

PART II



CHAPTER 12



Darcy sat in the corner of the club near a window, reading the broadsheet. He'd just received a letter from Charles stating that they would come to Town in March and stay for two months, possibly longer. He mentioned that his sister Elizabeth would arrive near the same time.

Darcy had not seen Lady Asheland since Bingley's son's christening nearly two years ago. He knew from Charles that she had spent most of her time at the seaside or at Hatfield. She hadn't been to Town since the accident, and after labeling her heartbroken and a shell of her former self, the rumor mill had moved on to more active targets.

He was shaken from his reverie by a familiar voice. He looked to his right and saw a group of several men, including his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam, in fervent discussion.

"Darcy! How are you, old man?" cried the Colonel.

Darcy stood to shake his cousin's hand and Fitzwilliam quickly led him to the group. Darcy greeted the men he knew and his cousin introduced him to those he didn't.

“Do you know when she will arrive?” asked Wiltshire, a man Darcy had been in school with.

“I heard it was mid-season.”

“Will she move much in society?”

Darcy was staring at his brandy glass and mostly ignoring the conversation around him. He didn't know why, but he was feeling very contemplative today.

“No doubt we'll hear soon enough. She'll be on everybody's guest list. Even a countess can't refuse all invitations.”

Darcy looked up at this and asked who they were speaking of, unsurprised to hear it was Lady Asheland. He went back to studying his brandy glass, his expression more inscrutable than ever.

“You know her, don't you, Darcy?” asked Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Darcy looked up. “Lady Asheland?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, I know her. You are acquainted with her as well, are you not? She knows your parents,” Darcy responded.

“Of course, Lord Asheland and father were friendly, but I only met her once or twice at a party. We said nothing beyond simple pleasantries. We thought you might be able to tell us more about her than what color she favors.”

He looked at the expectant faces of the men around him and then back to his cousin. "Surely you're not dangling after her!"

"I would hardly call it that, but she is an eligible match, you must admit," reasoned his cousin.

"Come, Darcy, surely you see the benefits of an alliance?" cried Mr. Wiltshire.

Darcy looked at him incredulously, wondering if he was speaking in generalities or of himself specifically.

"Whomever she marries will be as father to the next Earl of Asheland. He'll wield a prodigious amount of influence!" cried Mr. Wiltshire.

"The man Lady Asheland marries or the young earl?" queried Darcy.

"Both!"

"You would seek to attach a fatherless boy to you, to manipulate a child for your own gains?" Darcy asked in disgust.

"I wouldn't call it that, Darcy. We're just being practical," said Wiltshire.

"Curious, I would call it something else," replied Darcy.

"Now, gentlemen, let's be civil about this. Wiltshire, you are speaking of a small boy who has lost his father. Show some decorum, man."

Wiltshire nodded begrudgingly and looked down.

“And Darcy, Lady Asheland is a young, beautiful woman. She obviously must have something to have drawn the earl to her—it’s only natural to be curious. She is wealthy, well-positioned, and incredibly well-connected. Surely you’re not surprised at our interest?”

“She has lost her husband!” he spat. “A husband, I might add, whom she loved deeply and who loved her in return. She is grieving and the least we can do is show some respect to the earl’s memory by not discussing his wife and children like horses at Tattersall’s!”

He nodded curtly and walked away, leaving five wide-eyed men behind him.



Jane Bingley was a gentle woman. She did not pry into others’ lives. She did not insist on having her own way when it would inconvenience someone else—or even when it wouldn’t. She was kind to everyone and serene in even the most tempestuous situations. But despite all her complacency, she did not know what to do with her sister.

Elizabeth had always been special in Jane’s eyes, a force of nature. Jane had always been a bit in awe of her younger sister. Where she was shy, Elizabeth was bold. Where she was fearful, Elizabeth was brave. When she was at a loss, Elizabeth found a solution. When she smiled, Elizabeth laughed.

Her sister was bright and sunny; living, breathing happiness wrapped up in a wide smile and shining eyes.

Or she had been. Since the death of her husband, Elizabeth had been a shadow of her former self. There had been happy moments, of course, and she had learned to find joy again with her children. She was a wonderful mother and a kind sister and was doing her best to resume her former life, but Jane saw through her bravado. She knew Elizabeth was sleepwalking through life, simply carrying out her obligations without truly engaging in life.

Jane was of the opinion that Elizabeth should remarry. She was too young to remain a widow all her life and her children needed a father. Beyond all of that, Elizabeth was not made for gloom. She had found a measure of happiness since Robert's death, it was true, but Jane knew what her sister was capable of—the devotion, the passion, the deep joy and affection she could give.

Elizabeth needed to share her heart. She was not meant to be alone. Oddly, Jane had often thought that of the two of them, it was she who could be happier alone. Elizabeth had joked that Jane would marry and she would be an old maid, but Jane had silently disagreed. She had always been able to find contentment in her sisters and family, in doing her duty, in a dozen small things in her daily life. Jane would not trade her husband for anything, and she had long suspected that once she loved it would be a permanent sort of thing for her, but had she never met Charles Bingley, she could have been content with her life.

But not Elizabeth. She was constantly looking for more, expecting more, hoping for more. She would never have been

happy spending her life at Longbourn with their parents. Hertfordshire was too small to hold someone of Elizabeth's spirit. She needed room to grow and stretch her wings.

Jane had not been surprised at all that a wealthy earl had fallen in love with and offered for her sister. Who would not want such a delightful creature?

Jane couldn't help but feel that it was her responsibility to bring Elizabeth back to herself. She was the closest person to her sister and she knew her best. She also knew what Elizabeth needed, and it wasn't to be alone for the rest of her life, though she was sure her sister would disagree.



“You sound like Lady Sylvia,” said Elizabeth in exasperation.

She and Jane were seated in her private parlor at Asheland House in town.

“Perhaps if so many people are saying the same thing, you should listen,” reasoned Jane.

“You are two happily married women who want to see everyone else happily married. Though I would have thought Sylvia to be more loyal. She seems so devoted to Alfred, I can't imagine her wanting to replace him should he die.”

“Don't be morbid. And they have been married more than twenty-five years. She does not have small children to raise,” Jane added with a knowing look.

“It really is terrible of you to try to force me into marriage for the sake of the children, Jane.”

“No one is forcing you to do anything, Lizzy. But the children do need a father.”

“They have a father. I didn’t find them growing in the garden and put them in a basket to be displayed inside.”

“You know what I mean,” said Jane with a shake of her head. Must her sister always be so stubborn?

“I know. You mean that they need a constant gentleman-figure in their lives. They see father regularly, you’ve seen how he dotes on them, and there is Alfred, too, whom they’ve always been fond of. For younger men there is John, and even Charles. There are plenty of men in their lives; they will not lack for male attention.”

Jane shook her head. “Yes, those men are all available to you and the children and they are wonderful, but it is not the same and you know it.”

Elizabeth shook her head and huffed. “Jane,” she said in a voice that told her sister she was rapidly losing patience.

“What about you, Lizzy?” asked Jane softly. “Do you not wish for a husband?”

“No, I do not.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

Jane shook her head, bemused. “Do you not wish to share your heart with someone? Does all your devotion not long for an object?”

“I am devoted to my children. I share my heart with you and our sisters and my family. I am content.”

Jane continued to look doubtful and Elizabeth elaborated.

“I had a very unusual marriage, Jane. I know that. Robert and I were closer than couples in our circles, or couples anywhere. We shared everything; every thought, every feeling, every desire and idea and dream. We were truly as one. I cannot imagine another such love being granted to me in this lifetime. Nor can I imagine another man such as my husband. After sharing what we did, and living as we lived, I could not accept a cold marriage of convenience, or even a warm one that followed propriety.

“Your husband loves you, Jane, you know what I speak of. Can you imagine lying with a man who only married you because of your money and position? The degradation of it? I am young still; if I were to marry I would likely have more children. Would he stay in the birthing room with me if I asked him? Would I want him there? Would I want to have children with such a man, or allow him to raise Robert’s children?”

She shook her head vigorously. “I am under no delusions that there is another Robert in the world, looking to marry an impertinent woman with three children whom he can shower with affection.” She laughed wryly. “No Jane, I had the best, and I am simply spoiled for others. It would kill me to have

anything less than what I had with Robert, and I do not think that is possible.

“I will not marry again. Please do not ask it of me.”

Jane looked at her solemnly with liquid eyes and said, “Of course, Lizzy. I will respect your wishes.”



“I think it will be Lord Epworth.”

“Lord Epworth? What makes you say so?”

“He is her cousin and the heir to the marquess. And you know how much time they’ve been spending together.”

“No more than anyone else. I’ll admit it would be a splendid match, but to marry her late husband’s godson. It’s unseemly!”

“Her husband was old enough to be her father and knew everyone in town. How is she to marry someone unconnected to him?”

“Really, the things you say, Elvira.”

“It would be a splendid match! She is already accepted by his family and she’s quite pretty. She has proven to be healthy and fecund, and she is fabulously wealthy. What more could be wished for?”

“They *are* rumored to be good friends,” she said slowly.

“Exactly.”

They tittered behind their fans and moved toward the window. Lady Montgomery stepped away from the plant she had been standing behind and made her way to the door.

“Asheland House,” she told the footman as he held open the door to the carriage.

Lady Montgomery swept into the drawing room and sat by her friend who had yet to rise from the chaise.

“Alice! What brings you here today?” Elizabeth asked with a smile.

“Elizabeth, I must speak with you. Privately.” She looked sideways at the children playing on the floor nearby.

“Of course,” Elizabeth said. “Robbie, Violet, go upstairs with Molly for a little while.” She kissed their heads and sent them on their way. “Now, what is all this about?”

“I’ve just come from Maria Bosworth’s.”

Elizabeth made a face. “I see you arrived unscathed. I’m surprised you accepted the invitation. You’ve never liked her.”

“That isn’t the point!” she said, huffing in frustration. “While there, I overheard Elvira Evans and some woman I can’t recall discussing you. And your marital prospects.”

“I don’t like it, but it’s hardly unexpected. We knew there would be talk.”

“But did you know they would match you with John Downing and say you were practically engaged?”

“What?” cried Elizabeth. “Me? With John? He’s like a brother to me! It would be impossible! What, why,” she stuttered.

“Exactly. That is why I rushed over to tell you. We must put a stop to this.”

“How will we do that? Surely, if nothing comes of it, the rumors will die down.”

“Believe that if you will, but we both know that Lord Epworth is one of the most eligible bachelors in Town and you are now one of the most desirable women. It is a compelling story. I doubt it will die down fast.”

“While I must disagree with you on my desirability, I know John is a favorite. But surely the marchioness will correct the rumors.”

“Will she?”

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“Has it ever occurred to you that Epworth’s parents may be in favor of the match?”

Elizabeth spluttered. “What? No! They couldn’t—it would be too strange. No, it cannot be.”

“I can’t know for certain, of course, but we should consider the possibility. You told me yourself the marquess is in excellent health. Their son won’t inherit for years.”

“But I’m sure they give him an allowance. And the family has another estate. They lived there until Alfred inherited a

few years ago. It is a lovely home!”

“Isn’t Epworth’s younger brother inheriting that estate?” she asked slyly.

“I had forgotten about that,” replied Elizabeth. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. The marquess is a wealthy man. I know the title holds at least one other property.”

“Yes, but though it has rank, it does not have as much money as the Asheland title.”

“Really, Alice, how you go on. Alfred may have a tiny bit less in the funds than Robert did, but he is far from poor. They are hardly in need of money!”

“I agree, I just want you to be aware of the possibility. He is well known to you, and he is fond of your children.”

“I thought you wanted to quell the rumors, not convince me to marry my cousin.”

“I do! If that is what you want. If you want to marry your cousin, I will help you with that instead. Either way, you need to know what is being said about you. You can’t hide away forever.”

“I went to dinner just last night!” Elizabeth cried indignantly.

“At Robert’s aunt’s home.”

“Still, I was not at home.”

“Hmm.” Lady Montgomery looked at Elizabeth appraisingly. “So you do not want your cousin, then?”

“No! I most assuredly do not. He is almost like a brother to me. I could never look at him that way.”

“Pity. He is a handsome man.” They laughed for a moment and she continued, “If that is what you wish, we must dispel the rumors before they harm your reputation and scare off the other suitors.”

“What other suitors? I have told you more than once that I am not interested in remarrying.”

“Yes, yes, I know, but the *ton* does not. Now, I propose we go to as many parties and balls as possible, where you must talk and dance with as many men as you can, and that should sufficiently muddy the waters so no one is sure *whom* you favor.”

“I favor no one!”

“A minor detail.” Lady Montgomery waved her hand as if to brush the idea away and sipped her tea. “You can accompany us to dinner at Lord and Lady Marlborough’s tomorrow night.”

“I already declined the invitation.”

“Then write back and say that you have had a change of plans and would love to accept. It will be the perfect opportunity! Will Mr. Downing be there?”

“No, he has gone to Kent for a few days.”

“That,” she tilted her head toward Elizabeth, “is the sort of detail a betrothed would know.”

“Or a sister, or a cousin, or a close friend,” replied Elizabeth.

Lady Montgomery sighed. “I should have known you wouldn’t make this easy.”



The dinner at Lady Marlborough’s was as expected. Elizabeth was known to the majority of the guests and was quickly introduced to those she hadn’t met. Lady Marlborough seemed especially glad to see her, which Elizabeth thought was odd as they had never been particularly friendly, until Lady Marlborough introduced Elizabeth to her younger brother, a man in need of a wife with her own fortune. She smiled tightly and left their company as soon as was polite.

She renewed her acquaintance with Colonel Fitzwilliam, a younger son of Lord Matlock, and they had a pleasant conversation on a variety of topics, but overall the evening was dull and she couldn’t wait for it to be over.

Over the next fortnight, Alice dragged her to two more dinner parties, a music recital, and three balls where she insisted Elizabeth dance at least half the dances. She pulled their friend Julia Henley, Countess of Sheffield, into the scheme and between the two of them, Elizabeth was engaged for some sort of silliness nearly every day. She had made something of a friend of Colonel Fitzwilliam, but she knew he needed a wife of independent means, and while she was not repulsed by him, neither was she attracted. She supposed she

could grow to care for him if she really wanted to and if he made an effort to endear himself, but she didn't wish it and his thin flirtations would not create the fertile ground necessary for love to grow.

She had known she would be something of a prize on the marriage mart, but she hadn't thought it would be quite this bad. At least her sister Kitty was having a good time. Kitty had been called on lately by a few gentlemen and she was quite pleased with her season in town. Last year, Lady Montgomery had assisted her somewhat, but nothing could quite compare to being introduced as the sister of Lady Asheland by the Lady herself.

Kitty was now twenty and of a mind to marry. She had made a small list of the qualities she was looking for in a man and went about looking for them in the gentlemen she met. Cousin John had suggested it as a joke, and poor Kitty, not understanding the jest, had taken him seriously. Elizabeth tried not to laugh when she read the list, but really it wasn't all bad. Honesty and kindness were certainly admirable traits, and thick hair was always attractive.

To Kitty's dismay, Lydia had joined them in town, but to Kitty's relief, her younger sister did not attend every outing as she was still preparing for her presentation. Mrs. Bennet had held a large party for Lydia when she finished school and turned eighteen the previous June, and it had been considered her official coming out. Now she was in London with her sister, testing the waters as she called it.

Lydia was not interested in marrying for some time yet. Elizabeth had given birth to her first child less than a year after she wed, and Jane almost a year exactly. Even serious Mary, who cared for nothing but her music and her books, was with child within a few months of her wedding. No, Lydia was not eager to be a mother. She enjoyed her nephews and nieces and thought they were perfectly lovely, especially when they were clean. She played with them for a few hours and allowed the nurse to take them away again when they became fussy, but Lydia was no fool.

She knew Elizabeth had made a spectacular match. Jane's was very good as well, and even Mary's was considered good by most standards, but Mary did not have half as many servants as Elizabeth had, and Lydia did not want to find herself in a position of changing nappies or giving baths to wriggling babies.

She was in a perfect position now. Youngest sister to the young widowed countess. She was far from on the shelf, and Elizabeth was happy to have her company and take her to grand parties where she could dance with whomever she wanted and not grow fat with child.

Besides, she knew of the dowry scheme her brother had set in place, and with only herself and Kitty to split Netherfield's income, the longer she waited, the larger her dowry would be. She, the youngest of her sisters, could have the largest dowry of them all. Wasn't it a good joke? Mary had had nearly ten thousand pounds after the bequest from Robert. The Goulding

family had been happy when they thought it was nearer six thousand. They were ecstatic when it was increased.

Lydia knew hers had to be somewhere near that now. Could she wait long enough for it to become twelve thousand? She wouldn't want to be an old maid, but certainly twenty-two was a fine age to be married. Jane had been nearly twenty-three when she wed Charles and she was disgustingly happy. Lydia would write to her father and ask how many years she should wait to allow her dowry the necessary time to grow.

CHAPTER 13



Elizabeth and Kitty were sitting in the front parlor when a visitor was announced.

“Mr. Darcy, my lady.”

“Show him in, Franklin.”

Elizabeth stood and arranged her skirts, wondering what Mr. Darcy was doing here, and failed to notice the flush on her sister’s cheeks. The door opened and Thompson was followed in by a tall man with dark hair, a straight nose, and a bright green waistcoat. He was not Mr. Darcy.

“Good day, Lady Asheland, Miss Bennet,” said the stranger.

Elizabeth curtsied and tried to cover her surprise.

“Forgive me, sir. I thought you were Mr. Darcy,” she said with a smile. She sat on the sofa and gestured for him to sit on the chair opposite.

“I am. Mr. Darcy, that is. We met briefly a week ago, but we didn’t speak, so I don’t expect you to remember.”

He smiled affably and Elizabeth couldn't help but smile back. His manners reminded her a little of her brother Bingley.

"I apologize. Do you know my sister, Catherine Bennet?"

"Yes, we've met on a few occasions." The tips of his ears turned red and he looked at her sister with barely contained excitement.

Glancing at Kitty, Elizabeth saw she was blushing fiercely and her eyes were glued to her lap. Kitty wasn't usually shy in company, so Elizabeth was immediately suspicious.

"I know a Mr. Darcy from Derbyshire. Are you related to him?"

"Yes, we're cousins. Our grandfathers were brothers."

"Ah. Yes, I see a resemblance." Truly, she had seen it the moment he walked into the room. Both were tall and lean with broad shoulders and thick hair. But this Mr. Darcy was all smiles and easy conversation, and his eyes were a warm brown, while the elder Mr. Darcy's were cold and blue.

"Do you live in Derbyshire as well?"

"Yes, I do. I have a small estate not too far from Pemberley. I recently inherited it from my mother's brother. But I grew up in Staffordshire, on my father's estate. He's there now with my mother and younger sisters, but my elder brother is in town."

"Will you be in Town for the season?"

"Yes, I plan to remain until May. Will you spend the summer at Cressingdon?"

“That is the plan, though it is undecided whether Kitty will accompany me. She may prefer to spend the summer at our father’s estate in Hertfordshire.” Elizabeth smiled encouragingly at her sister and sipped her tea.

“Yes,” stammered Kitty, “My plans are not yet fixed. Last summer we stayed at the seaside and it was lovely, but Elizabeth wants to be home this summer.”

“There is nowhere like the English countryside in summer, I daresay, though the seaside brings its own joys. Have you travelled much, Miss Bennet?”

“Oh, not too much. I’ve travelled to my sisters’ estates in the north, and I was in school in London, and of course the seaside.”

Before she could say more, there was a loud crash followed by the wailing of an injured child. Elizabeth immediately stood.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she said as she bustled out the door.

She quickly made her way upstairs and found Violet being held by her nurse and a maid picking up flowers strewn across the hall floor.

“She was running from her brother and went right into the table and the vase fell on top of her, my lady,” said the nursemaid as she passed over a crying Violet.

“Don’t worry, Molly,” she said to the nervous girl. “These things happen. Now where is my errant son?”

Robbie shuffled out of the shadows and stood before his mother, his eyes on the carpet.

“Robert John, are you supposed to chase your sister in the house?”

“No.”

“Are you allowed to run in the house?”

“No.”

“Then why did you?”

He shrugged his shoulders and looked ready to cry.

“Come here, love.” She pulled him to her and sat him in her lap, Violet snuggled into her neck and Robbie settled on her other knee where she sat on the floor in the middle of the hall.

“We don’t run and chase in the house because that is how we get hurt. Do you see this mark on Violet’s head?”

He nodded forlornly.

“We don’t want her to get any more of these, so we must do our running outside, do you understand?”

“Yes, mama.”

“Now, why don’t you two go to the kitchen and ask Mrs. Landers for a biscuit, then Molly can take you outside to play. I’ll even ask Aunt Lydia to come and play with you. How does that sound?”

He smiled and agreed and Violet stopped sniffing and peeked out to nod her agreement as well.

Elizabeth dusted herself off and watched them go down the hall with a fond smile. They really were the very best of her and Robert. How they'd managed to have such delightful children, she'd never know, but she was incredibly grateful.

She stopped in the music room where Lydia was practicing and asked her if she would please join the children when she finished, then Elizabeth rejoined Kitty and Mr. Darcy in the parlor. She smiled to herself—it would take time to become accustomed to his name. She had associated the name Darcy with proud and difficult for so long, it would be hard to imagine the name on a man so amiable and charming.

The pair seemed to have stumbled into a stilted conversation, but judging by the smiles and flushed cheeks of both, they were enjoying it. In a moment of mischief, Elizabeth decided to have a little fun and possibly help her sister along if she could.

“Mr. Darcy, we'd be pleased if you'd join us for dinner tomorrow evening, if you have no prior arrangements.”

“Oh, that's very kind of you. I am at my leisure, thank you. I'd love to join you.”

Elizabeth nodded, Kitty stammered something unintelligible, and he bid them goodbye until tomorrow.

“I think you've made a conquest there,” said Elizabeth.

“Do you?” asked Kitty nervously. “He is terribly handsome, isn't he? Do you think he likes me?”

“Why would he not?” Elizabeth smiled kindly at her younger sister. Perhaps she could redirect Jane to matchmake for Kitty and leave her alone. Her sister was at least *interested* in men.



Dear Jane,

It would appear that Kitty has an admirer! She was called on today by young Mr. Darcy, not to be confused with stuffy Mr. Darcy. I have invited him for dinner tomorrow evening and you can tell me your opinion of him. He seems like a nice young man. Does Charles know him, by any chance? I would like to know more about him before Kitty becomes too enamoured.

Elizabeth

Dear Lizzy,

Charles has only met young Mr. Darcy on a few occasions, but he said he seems to be a nice enough man and there are no unpleasant stories told about him. He will ask Mr. Darcy—he will of course know more and tell us the truth of it. You really shouldn't call him stuffy, Lizzy. He cannot help his nature. And he has been very kind to us all, including you, though I daresay you don't like to remember that.

Charles forgot we were having dinner with you tomorrow and invited Mr. Darcy here, and of course when I told him, he

invited Mr. Darcy to join us at Asheland House. He meant to send a note, but then he forgot. He sends his apologies. I told him you would not be so ungenerous as to deny Mr. Darcy a dinner invitation as he is such a close friend of your brother's and even Robert called him friend. If I am mistaken in your magnanimity, correct me at once so I may notify Mr. Darcy.

Jane

Dear Jane,

Don't think I don't know what you are doing. You may be the most angelic of the Bennet sisters, but you are a Bennet sister still, and that must go some way to instilling mischief. Of course Mr. Darcy may have dinner with us. You need not invoke Charles' friendship with him or Robert's memory to induce me to act properly. Mr. Darcy is welcome, he knows that, and I know you do as well, which makes me think there is something else afoot.

I do hope, dear sister, that you are only looking out for Kitty's best interests and not trying your hand at something else. I shall see you tomorrow. Kiss the children for me.

E



Elizabeth quickly sent out invitations to both Mr. Darcys, trying not to snigger as she did so. She was unsurprised the next day when they arrived for dinner together. Young Mr.

Darcy was all smiles and affability, bowing over her hand, asking after the children, and being very attentive to Kitty who could not stop blushing each time he looked at her.

Old Mr. Darcy, though the title was hardly fitting for a man barely thirty, was as he always was. Quiet, solemn, and slightly offensive, though he did surprise her when he kissed her hand at their greeting, and again when he asked after her well-being with such sincerity she felt herself wishing to confide in him, but she merely said she was well and invited him to sit.

They were a small party, only the Bingleys, Elizabeth, Kitty, and Lydia, the Gardiners, and the two Mr. Darcys. Elizabeth had thought to quickly ask another family to join them so it would appear less like the Mr. Darcys were joining a family dinner, but in the end, she decided against it. After all, she had intended to invite the young Mr. Darcy to a family dinner all along so that she and Kitty might get to know him better. How was Kitty to decide if she should accept his suit if she spent no time with him?

Elizabeth was immensely grateful to her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner for allowing her to get to know Robert before she accepted him. There had been no improprieties and they were rarely ever truly alone, but they had often spoken on their own in a crowded room, or walked apart even when they were with the group. The Gardiners had not wished for her to be uninformed and Elizabeth knew it had been a sound decision. She hoped to emulate something of their discretion with Kitty and Lydia while they were in her care.

Before conversation could truly begin, the Bingleys arrived, quickly followed by the Gardiners with their youngest daughter, who would play with Robbie while the family had dinner.

“Mr. Darcy, I believe you’ve met my Uncle, Mr. Gardiner. This is his wife, Mrs. Madeleine Gardiner. She hails from Derbyshire as well,” said Elizabeth with a smile. “Aunt, Uncle, this is Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire, and his cousin, Mr. Darcy, also of Derbyshire if I remember correctly.”

Young Mr. Darcy laughed and said it was true, though he was so close to Staffordshire it almost wasn’t Derbyshire. He happily greeted the Gardiners while the older Mr. Darcy looked on with a solemn expression and said nothing, only nodding and resuming his seat. Elizabeth didn’t bother trying to draw him out. He was not the Darcy she was most interested in that evening.

By the time dinner was served, Elizabeth was impressed with young Mr. Darcy. He seemed kind and amiable and ready to please. She had always thought Kitty would need a man with a sanguine disposition, preferably one not given to low moods or too many dark thoughts. Kitty was a simple girl at heart, though she could be moody herself sometimes, and occasionally doubtful of her place with the people around her. A cheerful, even-tempered man would be good for her.

But she really must think of something else to call him. Two Mr. Darcys in one room was confusing. As they were walking

into the dining room, she said as much to the elder Mr. Darcy, who was escorting her.

“It really is very silly that men are not called by their given names.”

“I beg your pardon?” replied Mr. Darcy.

“Do you not find it ridiculous that a family of women are easily distinguished because the younger sisters are all known by their given names, but a family of men are all called the same?”

“Elizabeth, do not tease Mr. Darcy,” said Jane from her place behind her.

Elizabeth looked over her shoulder with a smile and Jane merely looked heavenward.

As they sat at the table, Lydia replied that Elizabeth couldn't help it and Charles chuckled and replied, “How would men appear dignified if everyone called them by their given names?”

“Is that what makes them dignified? Well, that is good to know,” remarked Elizabeth.

She sat at the head of the table, Mr. Darcy kindly helping her with her chair, and he sat to her right. Next to him was Jane, a small mercy Elizabeth felt equal to delivering, and then Mr. Gardiner and Lydia. On her left was the younger Mr. Darcy, then Kitty, Charles and Mrs. Gardiner. The table was slightly incorrect, but most of the rules of propriety had been followed. She knew Charles should have sat higher than the

young Mr. Darcy, but how was she to get to know him if he was all the way down the table? Family parties need not be so formal, or so she told herself when arranging the seating. She made a concession by placing Mr. Darcy at the top as his position required, and she imagined he was the only one who cared about such things, anyhow.

Of course, had she been privy to Mr. Darcy's thoughts at the time, she would have felt quite differently.

Young Mr. Darcy laughed along with them and told Elizabeth, "If it makes it easier to tell us apart, my given name is Michael."

"Thank you, sir. I don't have much difficulty telling you apart, though you are quite similar," she shot Mr. Darcy a smile to her right, "but it will make conversation easier."

Mr. Darcy inclined his head slightly with a small grin that looked more like a grimace.

Elizabeth spent the remainder of the meal speaking to Mr. Michael Darcy and Kitty, with the occasional comment from Mr. Darcy on her right. Jane and Mr. Gardiner were having an intelligent discussion on a new work of poetry recently published. Charles occasionally made a comment and Mr. Darcy seemed to be listening but never said much of anything to anyone. Elizabeth wondered why he even wished to dine in company if he insisted on being so silent all the time, but her curiosity would not be assuaged this night.

They forewent the separation of the sexes after dinner and Kitty entertained on the pianoforte, followed by Lydia.

Elizabeth occasionally sang with them, but declined to play. She had often played for Robert in the evenings; he had been very fond of music. He would look at her in such a way that she could feel herself flushing from her hair down to her chemise. She hadn't played much since his death, only a few songs for the children every once in a while. She supposed she would have to pick it back up eventually, but since she wasn't in the market for a husband, there wasn't much need for public exhibition. She could return to music at her leisure.

“Will you be playing for us this evening?”

Elizabeth started and turned to see Mr. Darcy standing beside her.

“Forgive me, Mr. Darcy, I didn't see you. No, I will not be playing this evening.”

He nodded and looked at her in such a way that she thought he might have been reading her mind and knew exactly why she didn't want to play. She flushed and his dark eyes moved to look across the room.

“Your sister plays very well.”

Elizabeth looked to where Lydia was playing and said, “Thank you. She does not enjoy it much, but her governess insisted she be able to present herself well. She would much rather be doing something active.”

“Bingley says she is an avid rider. I hope she hasn't found Town too confining in that respect.”

Elizabeth looked at him in surprise. Was he making pleasant conversation with her? And had he and Charles discussed her sisters? “She feels somewhat stifled, of course, but she enjoys dancing and the balls have been a pleasant distraction.”

“My sister rides most mornings in Rotten Row, before the fashionable hour. I’m sure she would be pleased for Miss Lydia to join her.”

“Thank you. I’ll mention it to Lydia. Is your sister enjoying her season?”

“I believe so, though a brother is never a good gauge of these sorts of things.” She smiled and he continued. “She would rather be at Pemberley, playing and riding, but society must have its due.”

He said the last somewhat bitterly and she looked at him thoughtfully. “Yes, it must. I confess I would also prefer to spend all my time in the country. I miss the long walks and the clean air and the freedom to go where I wish without worrying how fashionable my bonnet is.”

He smiled at her tease, looking more approachable than she had ever found him. “I couldn’t agree more, though I would not know about the bonnet. I’m afraid they all look the same to me.”

She laughed, surprised that Mr. Darcy was capable of making a joke. He looked at her intently for a moment, and she looked back with a question in her eyes.

“Lady Asheland, I would like to introduce my sister to you, if it isn’t too great an imposition.”

“Oh!” Her eyes widened. “Of course. I should like to meet Miss Darcy. Why don’t you bring her for tea? I assume she is already familiar with Jane?”

“Yes, she looks on Charles as another brother.”

“I’m glad to hear it, for he is an excellent brother. Shall we say the day after next?”

“I look forward to it.”



Elizabeth did wonder why Mr. Darcy wanted her to meet his sister, but decided not to consider it too closely. He may want to broaden her social circle or he may desire the connection, he may want his sister to be closer to his friends, and he did spend a considerable amount of time with the Bingleys, according to Jane. Whatever his reasons, she had agreed to the introduction and she would reserve judgment until she had observed more thoroughly.

The Darcys arrived promptly and Elizabeth told the butler she was not home to visitors unless it was Mrs. Bingley. She had decided to meet the Darcys on her own but her sisters would join them later in the visit.

Mr. Darcy performed the introductions and conversation was stilted at first, but eventually flowed more easily. Georgiana was painfully shy and could hardly speak more than

two sentences together without flushing and staring at the floor.

“I had the pleasure of meeting your cousin, Mr. Michael Darcy. He is an amiable man,” said Elizabeth pleasantly.

“Yes, he has always been kind to me,” replied Georgiana.

Seeing no more information was forthcoming, she changed direction. “Are you enjoying your season?”

“Yes, and no. I mean, I have met many people and I enjoy being in Town for the theater and the museums, but, it is very busy.”

“It is rather overwhelming, isn’t it?” said Elizabeth sympathetically. “I remember my first proper season in town. Well, really, I suppose it was my second. My first season I was staying with my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner on Gracechurch Street, and their idea of a season is much more palatable than the ridiculous pace set in Mayfair.”

Georgiana looked at her expectantly and she continued.

“That year I met my husband, and thankfully we were able to spend several months in the country before coming back to Town, but when we did,” she looked heavenward and sighed, “everyone was sure to let me know how wrong I was for the title of Lady Asheland and they cared not how little their barbs were appreciated.”

“What did you do?” asked Georgiana in a small voice.

“I behaved as I always had, but with a little more dignity, I believe.” She laughed at herself. “I had the Talbot family

behind me, and a better family I could not have wished for. They cared for me as Robert's wife without requiring more, and my husband made it very plain that he preferred me to be who I was rather than to fashion myself into a version of me that he wouldn't recognize or approve of. Because he was in Parliament, we spent the entire season in Town, and I eventually made friends, some of whom are as dear to me now as sisters.

“It wasn't easy, discerning the insincere from those genuinely interested in friendship, but I had my husband to lean on, and my family to guide me when I was unsure. And now I feel as at ease in Town as I do anywhere else, though I do not love it as much as the country.”

Georgiana smiled and Elizabeth returned it, then looked to Mr. Darcy who was staring at her with a light in his eyes she vaguely recognized as interest. He inclined his head toward her and she understood it for the thanks it was.

Elizabeth looked up and saw Kitty and Lydia in the doorway. Elizabeth performed the introductions and soon the three young women were discussing balls and dance partners and strict instructors.

“Thank you, Lady Asheland. You've eased Georgiana's mind a great deal.”

Elizabeth turned to face Mr. Darcy. “You have a habit of catching me unawares, Mr. Darcy. I never know you're there until you say something and surprise me. It makes me wonder

how many times you've stood nearby without me knowing of your presence."

To her surprise, Mr. Darcy reddened slightly. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"I'm not frightened, Mr. Darcy," she said steadily.

"Of course not. I begin to think you afraid of nothing."

She flushed and looked away, wondering why his words unsettled her so.



Darcy had just had an extraordinary idea. He had long held Lady Asheland as the standard of a good wife and mother and had thought to find a woman like her. Now it occurred to him that with her widowhood and return to society, he could perhaps wed the original instead of a copy.

He had never allowed himself to think of her in that way before. She was, after all, another man's wife. A man he respected and admired. The Asheland marriage had obviously been a happy one and he was not the sort of man to disrupt a healthy union, or even an unhealthy one. But she was now unencumbered and as the men at the club had said, eminently suitable.

She was well-connected, pretty, kind, and healthy enough to bear an heir. More than all of that, he admired her mind and her liveliness. They had had some wonderful debates. He loved watching her engage him in a battle of wits. It was most

invigorating and a pleasant change from the fawning insipidity he was generally subjected to.

He'd never seen a woman more dedicated to her children; it was a very favorable quality. She had been incredibly devoted to Lord Asheland. Any fool could see that. Would she be as devoted to her next husband?

For the first time, he thought the devotion of such a woman might be worth having.



“Where are you off to so early, Lyddie?” asked Elizabeth when she saw Lydia in the breakfast room the following day.

“I’m going for a ride with Miss Darcy, remember? I mentioned it last night while you were rocking Bennet.”

“Of course. I’d forgotten. Rocking a child does have a way of clearing one’s mind.” She smiled at her sister in her smart riding habit. “I rather like that color on you. Is it the new one?”

“No, it is the one from last September, but it’s so pretty I don’t want to stop wearing it. I ordered the new one made in the same style and a similar color.”

“You may order more than one, you know. For a person who rides as much as you do, it makes sense to have several habits.”

“You don’t need to spend all your money on me, Lizzy,” said Lydia with a cheeky grin. “Besides, I’m saving my pin

money for a new mare.”

“Are you?”

“Yes. I want to breed her with our brother’s stallion. Don’t look at me like that, Lizzy! I won’t be making the purchase myself! Percy will handle it for me, of course. He’s already said he would be happy to assist in any way he can. You know how the Gouldings are about horses.”

“Yes. They’re almost as wild about them as you are,” said Elizabeth with a grin.

“Ha ha, Lizzy!” She planted a kiss on her sister’s cheek and walked towards the door. “I’d best go. I don’t want to be late!”

Elizabeth shook her head at Lydia’s retreating back. Who knew the girl would be so wild about horses? She shuddered when she thought about what would have happened if Robert hadn’t given her a horse four years ago. All that energy and passion had to go somewhere. She could only be grateful it was spent on such an innocuous pursuit and not on something embarrassing, like officers, as their mother had done when she was young.



After a dinner at the Bingley home with Lady Asheland, Darcy decided his plan was a good one. Lady Asheland was the perfect woman for him. The more he looked at her, the more attracted he felt. He finally admitted to himself that he had never been immune to her, but his knowledge of her marriage

had kept him from thinking of her seriously. He had indulged in a little innocent flirtation, but it had all been perfectly harmless. Now that he was allowing his imagination full rein, it dreamt up some lovely scenes, indeed.

They would go to the theatre and have intelligent discussions afterward. They would visit museum exhibits and he wouldn't have to worry about her getting bored and wishing to leave before he had seen fewer than half of the displays. He imagined having breakfast with her: she would read her correspondence while he read the broadsheet. He would share what news she would find interesting with her, and she would laugh over her letters and read him the funny parts. They would smile at each other as they ate and she would always ensure his favorite preserves were on the table.

They would be quite comfortably domestic.

He was sure she would soon be with child. After all, she had given Asheland three children in less than four years of marriage. He pictured her growing round with his child and found that he liked the image very much. He was also quite pleased at the idea of begetting said children. She was a passionate woman. It was clear in the way she defended her children and teased her family. There was fire lurking in her bright eyes, and he knew he would be a very satisfied man when that passion turned to him.

He had been stupid not to think of it before now. A small part of him could admit that he had thought of it, but his decorum had kept him in check. Well, no more!

He did not think she was immune to him. She had flushed when he stood near her on their last meeting. Was that a sign that she was affected by him? He was certainly affected by her. She had been wearing somber clothing, obviously not yet comfortable in the happy colors she had worn before, but she looked remarkably well in lavender, he must say, and her dresses always seemed to be touchable. They were not the frilly, overdone concoctions so many women of his acquaintance wore. How was a man supposed to get close to a woman when she had feathers poking out of her head and stiff lace protruding from every seam?

Lady Asheland was so delightfully approachable, so soft and inviting-looking. He could imagine what it would be like to place his arms around her waist, to feel her soft skin under his hands. Yes, Lady Asheland would make an excellent Mrs. Darcy.



A fortnight later, Lydia had ridden nearly every day with Georgiana Darcy and the two had become friends. They had a similar interest in horses and different enough lives that they were each fascinated with the other. Hearing that Georgiana had a dowry of thirty thousand pounds, Lydia wondered how long she would have to wait until her dowry reached the same level, but then decided that marrying at thirty was simply too late.

Mr. Michael Darcy called every other day on Kitty, and they had progressed from blushing and staring at the floor to blushing and staring at each other. The young man's attentions were so marked that Mr. Bingley had taken him aside to ensure his intentions were honorable, and Mr. Darcy had declared that they were as honorable as they could be.

In an effort to promote the match, Elizabeth had invited Michael Darcy to two more family dinners, both of which he attended happily. He was due again that evening for a small musical gathering Elizabeth was hosting. Her former piano instructor had asked her to host a recital of sorts for his two most promising students, a young man on the instrument and a soprano hoping to find her way into an opera company. Elizabeth had agreed immediately and the guest list was small but influential.

The Bingleys, both Mr. Darcys and Miss Darcy, Lord and Lady Sheffield, Lord and Lady Montgomery, two Talbot cousins, and the possibility of Alfred and Sylvia—prized guests due to their high rank and elusive tendencies.

Hosting an elegant party meant wearing an elegant dress, which posed something of a problem for the countess. Elizabeth had only worn bright colors sparingly since the start of the Season—generally when Lady Montgomery was dragging her to some outing or another—and she still felt odd shedding her grays and black trim for pinks and blues. But hosting an event was more important than attending one and she must dress accordingly.

Tonight's dress was a green with blue trim, subdued in nature but still spring-like in style. She had always felt more like herself in light and bright-colored clothes, but she had so long been without them that she felt odd wearing them in company now.

She had always worn what she liked in her private rooms, of course. Nightgowns of pale pink, wrappers of warm red satin. They had been gifts from her husband, or favorites of his, and she felt closest to him in their shared chamber, wearing the clothes he had loved to see her in—and out of.

She had to brace herself for the evening ahead. She was glad it was such a small party. Everyone invited was a friend or at least very familiar to her. This was the best way to ease herself back into her role as hostess.

Thankfully, the evening was a success. The performers were sublime, the guests engaging, and the food delicious. Elizabeth bade her friends goodbye with a cheerfulness she had not felt in some time.

By happenstance, Mr. Darcy was the last guest to leave. Miss Darcy had gone upstairs to spend the night with Lydia, and after saying goodnight to Mr. Michael Darcy, Kitty had skipped happily away to prepare for bed.

So it was that Elizabeth found herself alone in the vestibule with Mr. Darcy as he waited for his carriage to be brought round. She noticed that he smelled slightly of brandy, but only when he stood close to her, and she wondered if that was why she had seen him staring at her the last hour. Unsure what was

on his mind, she made general conversation to avoid any potential awkwardness.

When he mentioned the performers that evening, she said, “Yes, I haven’t given many of these events. Robert was fond of smaller parties and I have always been so busy with the children that we didn’t entertain as much as we might.”

He nodded and they fell silent again. She was studying the fringe on her shawl when she felt him step nearer.

“I have been remiss in failing to tell you how enchanting you look tonight,” he said, in a soft tone she had never heard from him before.

She flushed.

“Green brings out your eyes,” he added.

“Thank you, sir.” She took a step back, hoping the carriage would arrive shortly. She was entirely alone with him, having sent the footman to assist clearing the rooms so that everyone might go to bed sooner. How she was regretting that now!

He leaned toward her again, not stepping forward, but simply shifting all of his considerable focus onto her person. His eyes lingered long on her bust and she began to worry over how much he had drunk. She had never seen Mr. Darcy in his cups before, and she had known him some years.

“Is that the carriage I hear?” she asked somewhat desperately.

He turned his head to the door and listened. “I hear nothing.”

“Hmm.” She turned and paced to the end of the hall, then back, stopping further from Mr. Darcy than she had been.

“Lady Asheland, will you be in Town for the length of the season?”

“It is likely, though my plans are not fixed. Why do you ask?”

“I have come to greatly enjoy your company and I would like to see more of you.”

He smiled at her, a seductive smile, and his eyes swept down her frame and back again, lingering on her bosom. She felt her stomach flip in disgust. Was he asking her for a liaison? His look was one of arrogant confidence, as if he had no idea of being refused.

“Mr. Darcy, I do not think that would be wise,” she said uneasily, her gaze on the floor.

“Why ever not?” he asked, his tone indignant.

“You know why.”

“I assure you, I do not.” His back became impossibly rigid as he tried to stand straighter with each statement of offense.

She was becoming exasperated. “I am a widow with three children,” she said, believing this explained itself.

“Exactly! A widow!” he exclaimed.

It had always been Mr. Darcy’s misfortune that when he most wished to be understood, he gave nearly the opposite impression of the one he intended. He had meant to point out

that she was no longer married and now free to entertain gentlemen callers. Elizabeth perceived that he was throwing the earl's death in her face.

She gritted her teeth. "You forget yourself, sir."

"Do I?"

He seemed to have come a little closer, and she could smell the brandy perfectly now. His cheeks were slightly flushed and his eyes a touch glassy, but he still seemed in control of himself. What concerned her was not so much his state of inebriation, but the look in his eyes as he stared at her. Robert had looked at her in a similar manner before they spent the night tumbling in bed.

She stepped back.

He followed.

She would not allow herself to be intimidated and looked him in the eye. "I have given you my answer, Mr. Darcy," she said firmly. She vaguely noted that he hadn't actually asked her a question, but that was a technicality.

"But no explanation!"

She huffed. Really! Did a lady have to explain to a gentleman why she wasn't interested in a liaison? Why would a simple refusal not suffice?

"I owe you no explanation, sir."

He rolled his neck in exasperation. "Of course not. Why should a lady explain herself?" he said sarcastically.

Elizabeth had had enough. “Do you know who I am?” she cried.

“I know exactly who you are, *Lady Asheland*,” he said, his face tight with rejection.

He said it with such a strange light in his eyes, and such a tone to his voice that she asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“Your status is based entirely on your marriage. You were not born into it,” he replied in a rush. “If Lord Asheland hadn’t married you, you would still be living in a backwater in Hertfordshire.”

If she hadn’t been looking right at him, she would not have believed Mr. Darcy was saying such things to her. Clearly, drink had allowed his true thoughts to exit his mouth.

She flushed with anger. “You are right, I was not born into it.” She raised her chin and threw her shoulders back. “I was chosen. Chosen to be the wife and companion of a great man. A man you will never come near equaling. *Chosen* to be the mother of the next Earl of Asheland. *Chosen* to join one of the greatest families in England! Your status is nothing but an accident of birth. What have you done to earn it? Who chose you? No one!”

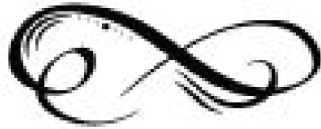
Eyes blazing, nostrils flaring, hands trembling in rage, she stared at him coldly for a moment, then turned and left the hall without another word.

Darcy stared after her in wide-eyed amazement, suddenly sober. He realized that he’d gone too far, and what was worse,

that in the magnificent game he had been playing with her all this time, *she* had not been playing. She had meant every word.

What had he done?

CHAPTER 14



“Good God, Darcy, what possessed you? It does not matter who she *was*. It only matters who she *is*.”

“I do not know. I wasn’t fully aware of what I was saying until we were arguing. I thought she was flirting with me.”

“Apparently, she was not,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam dryly.

“We have had so many nice conversations, I was surprised she wouldn’t allow me to call on her.”

“Conversations or arguments?”

“Stimulating debates.”

“Debates?” scoffed the colonel. “Only you would consider debating with a woman a form of courtship.”

Darcy dropped his head to his hands and groaned. How was he going to resolve this?

“Now you’ve made her skittish and ruined it for the rest of us.”

“You weren’t pursuing her, were you?” Darcy asked, disturbed.

“Not entirely, but if she had shown any interest, I would have. She is a beautiful woman, and lively and clever. A man could do worse.”

Darcy stared at his cousin in astonishment. “Did she ever return your interest?”

“Not that I could tell. Either her heart is not easily touched, or she is still pining for her husband,” said the colonel. “Either way, I didn’t think I’d see much success.”

“Her heart can be touched. She can love quite deeply. She was very attached to the earl,” Darcy said quietly.

“Aye. And no man will ever live up to him, I wager.” He slapped Darcy on the shoulder. “Best move on from that one, my friend.”

Darcy thought his cousin may be right, but he feared he was already attached to Lady Asheland. He had become so without reason and entirely against his will; he was in the middle before he knew he had begun. Darcy had long ago acknowledged attraction and general admiration for her. But attachment? That was another thing altogether. Could he un-attach himself? Did he want to?

One thing he was certain of. He did not agree with his cousin about the lady. Perhaps no man would ever live up to Lord Asheland; Darcy himself had looked up to the man. But Elizabeth was a passionate woman and he couldn’t believe that she would choose to live the rest of her life alone when she had every opportunity to marry a man of her choosing.



Elizabeth took her breakfast in bed and spent the morning in the nursery. She told the butler she was not home to callers that day and didn't come downstairs until she was sure Miss Darcy had been returned home.

She told no one what had happened with Mr. Darcy. His sister was friends with Lydia, his cousin was courting Kitty, and he was her brother Charles' closest friend. What a horrible muddle it was! She couldn't tell them that someone they all trusted and respected had propositioned her in her own home.

No, she would keep this to herself.

Two days after the argument in the vestibule, she returned home from a call to see an arrangement of flowers on the table that had not been there before. There was a note beside them on crisp white paper.

She eyed the card suspiciously and finally picked it up by the edges. There was an elaborate D on the stamp. She broke the seal and read it warily.

Dear Lady Asheland,

Please forgive me for importuning you. I would like the opportunity to apologize in person if you will grant me an audience.

Your servant,

F. Darcy

She wasn't sure what to make of it, but given his connection to the family, she could hardly refuse. She quickly sent a note saying she would receive him in one hour and went upstairs to change.



Darcy approached Asheland House with a firm stride and an anxious stomach. He couldn't remember the last time he had been so nervous.

Once the butler had left them alone, he turned to her and said, "Lady Asheland, I must apologize for my behavior two evenings ago. I was churlish and I beg your forgiveness."

He looked at her so solemnly she believed he was telling the truth. But how to reconcile that with the inappropriate man in her vestibule?

"Mr. Darcy, I accept your apology. But I must ask you to refrain from speaking on such subjects to me again."

He seemed disappointed, but nodded and agreed.

After another moment of awkward silence, he asked, "I know I have no right, but would you be so kind as to tell me what your objections were? I'm afraid I am at a loss."

She looked at him in surprise. "Mr. Darcy! Surely you don't expect me to speak of such a thing, in my drawing room in broad daylight, with my children upstairs?"

He looked confused. "My lady?"

She huffed. “I refused your advances. That is all. I have nothing else to say on the matter.” She folded her hands primly on her lap and looked toward the window.

Darcy was more confused than ever. He had drunk too much, that he knew, but surely he hadn’t done something completely ungentlemanly? He would never forget himself in such a way. And wouldn’t he remember it if he had behaved so very badly?

“My lady, I must beg your indulgence. I thought we merely quarreled. Was there anything... more, that I should apologize for?”

She looked bemused for a moment, then seemed to grasp his meaning. “No, Mr. Darcy. Your insults were all of the verbal variety.”

He winced.

There was more silence, and now Elizabeth felt that she must be satisfied on another point as well. “I would like to know, sir, why you thought such a request would be welcome?” she asked carefully.

She was equal parts confused and angry, and she hoped there hadn’t been something in her manner that had encouraged him. She had been missing Robert dreadfully of late, in the way a wife misses her husband, but she never thought it was obvious to anyone else. Could it be that it was? How humiliating!

Darcy flushed. "I had thought we were friends, and that as such, getting to know one another better would not be unwelcome. Had I known the idea so repulsed you, I would have kept my own counsel."

"Friends! Mr. Darcy, many people are friends without sharing further intimacies!"

"Intimacies?" he repeated quietly, confused by both her choice of words and her vehemence. Finally, he seemed to understand what she was referring to and flushed crimson. "Oh, good God! You thought I was suggesting—that you would... Oh!" he cried.

Elizabeth went completely pale. "You were not?" she asked slowly.

"Madam, I assure you, I would never make such an offer to a respectable lady such as yourself. Or to any lady!" he added hurriedly. He could feel his ears burning and his collar was uncomfortably tight.

"Oh!" Elizabeth stared: at him, at the empty fireplace, at her hands, and back at Mr. Darcy. "So, you were not?" she trailed off.

"No!" he said vehemently. "I was not," he added more calmly. "Why did you think I was?" he asked curiously.

"You said we should *see more* of each other!" she exclaimed, feeling defensive and thrown off kilter. "And you were looking down my gown when you said it!"

She seemed to realize what she had said a moment too late and flushed, dropping her eyes back to the carpet.

“I see,” he said gravely. He remembered that part of it. Her gown fit uncommonly well and he had enjoyed watching her all evening. It was only reasonable that she had noticed. “I must apologize, Lady Asheland. While my eyes were drawn to your... while I was looking where I shouldn’t, I certainly did not mean to imply anything untoward. My only excuse must be the brandy.”

“I see. Please forgive my misapprehension.”

She felt a nervous laugh trying to work its way out and fought it valiantly. She had never thought she would be sitting in a drawing room with Mr. Darcy, discussing how he had inappropriately stared at her bosom while insulting her in her entrance hall. A tiny giggle escaped her.

“Forgive me, Mr. Darcy.” Another laugh fled from her lips. “I am so sorry. But it is terribly funny!” she said in her own defense.

He began to chortle slowly, his shoulders shaking though he tried to keep a straight face. It eventually evolved into a chuckle, and she found herself wondering how he could manage it without showing his teeth or making more than a polite amount of noise.

She took a deep breath and asked, “If you weren’t requesting something illicit, what were you requesting?”

Suddenly, he stopped smiling and straightened his shoulders. “Now that I see the misunderstanding, it is no wonder you denied me so violently. In truth, I was simply asking to call on you.”

“To call on me?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

He looked a bit sheepish, and she felt dreadful for having misjudged him.

“Mr. Darcy, I must be honest with you.”

He nodded and edged forward in his chair.

“I have no intentions of remarrying.” He seemed surprised by this but she continued on. “I had a wonderful marriage with Robert and I do not think it likely to happen again, and it would break my heart to find myself in an unhappy union.”

“I see,” he said to the floor.

“However,” his head shot back up, “I am always in need of a friend, and I am willing to be yours if you would like it.” She gave him a soft smile and he eventually returned it.

“I would be glad to be your friend, Lady Asheland,” he said sincerely.

“Good. I’m glad.” She paused and looked at him mischievously. “And you should be, too! For I am a very loyal friend.”

“As am I,” he said seriously.

“I expected no less,” she replied, all trace of archness gone.



Elizabeth was surprised at herself for offering friendship to Mr. Darcy, and equally surprised he had accepted it. She had always thought he disliked her, or tolerated her at best. That he felt an attraction to her was quite shocking and she couldn't remember the last time she had been so surprised.

The biggest shock of all, however, was when she arrived at her sister Jane's home to fetch young Robert. He had been having riding lessons with his Uncle Charles for a few weeks now and Elizabeth had gone to see his latest accomplishments. When she arrived at the small yard, she saw Mr. Darcy walking next to a dappled grey, her son in the saddle.

“That is very good, Robert John. Hold the reins a little tighter. You mustn't let her get away from you.”

She stood by the gate, mouth agape, for several minutes before the mare turned and her son saw her, calling out a greeting and asking if she saw what he was doing.

“Yes, dear, I see. You are handling her quite well.” She gave him a proud smile, then looked to Mr. Darcy with a quizzical expression.

“I have been helping Bingley with the lessons. I ... thought you knew,” he said uneasily.

She paused for a moment, then said, “No, I did not. But that is not unusual. My brother occasionally forgets things. It is of

no matter.” *What are Jane and Charles up to now?* She smiled tightly and asked how much longer they would be, then told Robbie she would see him on the terrace for tea after he was finished.

Even though she had begged everyone else not to call him that, Elizabeth had slipped into calling her son Robbie. In a way, it was to separate him from her husband. Some had called him Lisle, one of her husband’s lesser titles, when he was a baby (Mrs. Bennet always loved to introduce her grandson as Viscount Lisle), but neither she nor Robert had liked it or thought it suited him. She supposed he should be called Asheland now, but she couldn’t stand the idea of burdening a tiny boy with such a grandiose title. He would understand his role in the world soon enough. He would go to school where everyone would call him Asheland, and he might even ask his family to do the same. But for now, he was her little boy and she would treat him as such. There was plenty of time to be serious later.

She had made a habit of having tea with her children at least once a week. She didn’t hold to the aristocratic idea of allowing hired servants to raise the children. She had always been close to her father and thought she was better for it. She hoped to do the same and more for her own children.

Jane joined her for a time, but then was needed inside when young Charles skinned his knee and wanted his mama. Elizabeth shooed her away and waited patiently for her son. Finally, Mr. Darcy and Robert John climbed the stone steps to join her. Darcy stood with one arm behind his back and young

Robert tried to emulate him, his small shoulders stiff and his chin lifted ever so slightly. Elizabeth nearly laughed at seeing her tiny boy imitate a man more than twice his size, and she felt a twinge of sadness that her Robert wasn't the man he was copying.

She smiled brightly to cover her grief and held out her arms for her son. "Come here, darling boy. I want to hear all about your ride."

Young Robert smiled widely and immediately climbed onto the cushion next to her and hugged her tightly before launching into a detailed description of the mare, how to properly tighten the girth, how to hold the reins, how to rub the horse down when the ride was over, and how this particular horse preferred carrots to apples.

"And what is the mare's name?" she asked indulgently.

"Aphrodite! Uncle Charles says it is because she is so beautiful! She is a very pretty horse," he added seriously.

"That she is," replied Elizabeth, in an equally serious tone.

"And her nose is very soft," he whispered.

Elizabeth smiled at him, feeling herself melt a little at each confidence he whispered in her ear. *This* is why she did not want to remarry. Nothing could be better than this sweet joy, and she would not let any man come into her life and dictate how she should raise her and Robert's children.

She poured tea for Mr. Darcy and her son, and Robert solemnly told her he would like his with one lump of sugar.

She smiled as she stirred it gently for him, and he very carefully picked up the china and took a sip, trying not to spill any on his riding clothes. Mr. Darcy said nothing and she set a cup of black tea in front of him, though he didn't touch it.

Mr. Darcy watched the scene with a thoughtful expression. His mother had been a good woman, and he could remember having tea with her in her private sitting room, or on a terrace such as they were now, but he did not remember any of the warmth he saw between Elizabeth and young Robert. Lady Anne would kiss his cheek lightly, and receive the same from him, but she had not held him tightly as Elizabeth held her son. Or at least he did not remember it if she had. Watching Robert John lean his head on his mother's bosom, and close his eyes in contentment as she kissed his hair, made him think he had missed out on something rather important, and he suddenly felt futilely jealous of a four-year-old boy. *Stupid man.*

He once again thought he should find an affectionate woman to marry and bear his children. They would surely benefit from it, unknown to him as they were. Of course, the woman before him was an excellent mother and unattached, if only she would think of herself as such. She was determined not to marry, and she had no need for it. If she did not wish it, there was no one who could make her.

Did he have within him what it would take to change her mind? Did he even care to attempt it? Before he had thought it through he knew that he did. Getting Lady Asheland to love him and agree to be his wife would be the hardest thing he had

ever done. Such a woman was a prize worth winning and he knew, quite suddenly, that if he could accomplish this feat, it would be the greatest achievement of his life.

Somehow, he knew she would be the making of him.

CHAPTER 15



Darcy went about his campaign to woo the Countess of Asheland as he did everything else: with wholehearted fervency. He called on her frequently. He invited her for a drive in the park, which she declined, and for a picnic with their sisters and her children, which she accepted—though it was so crowded he was barely able to speak to her. He joined the Bingleys for dinner twice when Elizabeth was expected and Jane seated them together. Surprisingly, the Bingleys were his biggest supporters. Without ever talking about it, Charles and Jane seemed to know his wishes and set about helping him in any way they could.

Halfway through the Season, the Bingleys organized an excursion to the gallery. A new exhibition was on display and they were to hold a dinner afterward. Colonel Fitzwilliam, Georgiana, Lydia, Kitty, Mr. Michael Darcy, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, and Lady Asheland were all invited. The group seemed to separate naturally. Colonel Fitzwilliam escorted Georgiana and Lydia, Mr. Michael Darcy offered Kitty his arm, Bingley escorted Jane, and Elizabeth was left with Mr. Darcy.

He offered his arm with a smile and she took it lightly, recognizing a plot when she saw one and not pleased with her sisters. Truthfully, she would have rather walked with Colonel Fitzwilliam. He was more entertaining and seemed to have given up trying to court her interest. But she had agreed to be Mr. Darcy's friend, and she was beginning to think he wasn't wholly bad, despite his tendency to always be more serious than a situation required.

"What do you think of the exhibition?" he asked after they had walked in silence for some time.

"It is lovely, though I confess it all begins to look the same after a while."

"Yes, the artist appears fixed upon one theme," he agreed.

She didn't answer and he followed her gaze to her sister Kitty and his cousin. Their heads were bent close together in front of a large landscape. Her blush was visible even from that distance.

"Do you approve?" he asked quietly.

She looked at him in surprise. "Approve, sir?"

"My cousin and your sister." He nodded in the couple's direction. "They seem to have made a match."

"Yes, they do," she replied softly. "And yes, I do approve, not that it's necessary."

"Is it not?" he asked, brows raised in question.

She furrowed her forehead in thought, a gesture he thought utterly adorable on her pretty face, and replied, “It would be uncomfortable if I did not like him, but I am not her father. She may marry where she wishes.”

Darcy raised his brow, wondering if he should challenge her on so false a statement. “Forgive me, my lady, but you are a countess. I know she is not your daughter, but you are the highest ranked person in your family. Surely your opinion matters a very great deal.”

She tilted her head and considered him for a moment before replying. “I suppose you are right. But I would never stand in the way of my sister’s happiness. She knows that—my entire family does. As long as he is a good and honest man and can support her, I will approve.”

“That is generous of you.”

She shrugged. “It is easy in this case as young Mr. Darcy is very likeable.”

He nodded, thoughtful. “If he is young Mr. Darcy, what does that make me?”

She looked up at him and flushed, then quickly turned her eyes to the floor.

“I believe that is the first time I have bested you in conversation, Lady Asheland,” he said, with no small amount of amusement.

She sighed silently and tried to will away her blush with little success. “Enjoy your victory while it lasts, Mr. Darcy.

You may not gain another,” she said archly.

He laughed. She looked at him in astonishment, wondering if she had ever heard it before. She had seen him smile, and look amused, and smirk, but never truly laugh—shoulders shaking, voice booming, teeth visible laughter. It was discomposing.

And very attractive.



After the trip to the gallery, Elizabeth became more guarded. She was careful not to be alone with Mr. Darcy and constantly surrounded herself with sisters and friends to avoid private discourse. She found him utterly vexing and did not wish her composure disturbed further.

After a week of avoiding him, he finally caught her at her sister’s house. Jane had gone to see to another guest who had newly arrived, and he cornered her by the window.

“Are you in good health, Lady Asheland?”

“Yes. And yourself, Mr. Darcy?”

“Very well, thank you.” He had thought to tease her about calling him old Mr. Darcy, but there was a skittishness in her manner that stopped him. He should tread carefully here, lest the lady bolt.

“Are your sisters here tonight?” he asked.

“Kitty has gone to a musical evening with Lady Montgomery, but Lydia is here. She is talking with your cousin.” She gestured to Colonel Fitzwilliam on the other side of the room. He was apparently engaged in a lively conversation with her youngest sister. “Don’t worry, Mr. Darcy, Lydia has no desire to be soon married and I’m sure the Colonel is only making polite conversation.”

“I wasn’t worried,” he said, bringing his eyes back to hers. “But perhaps I should be.” His mouth quirked as if he were amused. “Every man I have in mind for Georgiana ends up falling in love with one of your sisters.”

She looked at him in surprise. Was he making a joke? A funny one?

“Surely Colonel Fitzwilliam is too old for Miss Darcy,” she said. It was not their ages she referred to. Colonel Fitzwilliam had the air of a man of the world; Georgiana had a naïve innocence about her.

“Of course. I would never consider it. Even if he weren’t too old for her, he shares her guardianship. They have a familial relationship.”

“Ah,” she tilted her head. “I see. I had no idea you had intended Mr. Bingley for Georgiana.”

“Not intended. It was merely an idea. I knew she needed someone kind and gentle, and I trust Bingley.” He shrugged.

“He is a good husband,” she agreed. *Just as Robert said he would become.* “I must assume the other man you intended for

Georgiana is your cousin, Mr. Michael Darcy?"

He nodded. "Again, I had made no arrangements. I had simply thought they may suit. He is kind and Georgiana is not forceful. She would not be able to contend with an overbearing man."

Elizabeth nodded, agreeing with his assessment.

"I am sorry to disrupt your plans, Mr. Darcy. I suppose we Bennet women are simply irresistible," she teased.

He looked at her, her eyes sparkling up at him, her impish mouth tilted up at one corner, her delectable brow raised in challenge and amusement.

"You really don't know, do you?" he asked quietly, his voice thick.

"Know what?" she asked, her expression betraying her confusion.

"How bewitching you are," he stated simply.

She flushed immediately and continued to stare at him, unable to remove her eyes from his. Her mouth opened to speak, but no words emerged and she closed it again with a snap.

After another minute of silent staring, sure that all his desires were on display in his expression, he said, "Have a care, Lady Asheland. It is not fair to make half of London fall in love with you if you never intend to reciprocate."

He bowed and left her with her tumultuous thoughts.



The next time Elizabeth saw Mr. Darcy, it was at a large dinner hosted by some old friends of her husband. She went with Lord and Lady Montgomery. Lady Montgomery, Alice as Elizabeth called her, was intent on matching her with every eligible man over twenty-five and under fifty in the place.

Mr. Darcy was present, of course. Somehow, he had escaped Lady Montgomery's machinations and was standing with a group of men across the room. Elizabeth noticed him immediately, though it wasn't hard. He was taller than nearly everyone present and bore the most serious expression in the room. He looked over and met her gaze, a slight smile brightening his countenance as he nodded to her in recognition. She nodded back and returned to her friend.

This continued all evening. He glanced her way when she was escorted into dinner by another man. He sent her small smiles while she sat next to the Viscount Carlton, as if they were sharing a private joke. When the ladies rose to withdraw, he looked at her steadily, then let his eyes rake down her figure and back up, lingering on the necklace that fell to the edge of her satin gown, until finally gifting her with a smile of approval. She flushed and left the table as quickly as possible.

The effrontery of the man. How dare he look at her like that! As if she had dressed for him! He had no right to stare at her so, to smile at her as if they were intimate friends, to look

at her as if he knew what she looked like in her shifts. No living man possessed that right.

She would show him his error. The remainder of the night she talked with and smiled at other men, and ignored Darcy completely. He did not exist for her. She knew it would particularly gall him if she flirted with his cousin, so she made Colonel Fitzwilliam her next conquest. She laughed and smiled and teased, and was rewarded with a look of surprise and interest on the colonel's part. Good. She had achieved her objective.

Mr. Darcy knew she was not his to toy with nor look at with knowing smiles. She had much better things to occupy herself with than him. He was the furthest thing from her mind.



Darcy had to stop himself from smiling like a fool. Lady Asheland was not immune to him. He had made no secret of his admiration for her and she had not been pleased. This did not surprise him; she was often displeased with him. It was part of her charm. But what did surprise him was her reaction to his appreciation. She had flirted—yes, flirted!—with more than one gentleman after dinner. She had smiled, and teased, and done something with her eyes that made the man she was looking at turn into a blithering idiot. She could bring a man to his knees with those eyes.

And yet, he, Fitzwilliam Darcy, had managed to unsettle her. To make her angry enough to want to seek revenge on

him. That she recognized his interest sufficiently to know that flirting with other men would bother him was a good sign in itself. That she cared enough about their friendship—or him—to allow it to bother her was wonderful news.

He would work his way into her affections. If he had to call on her every day for a year and make a thousand blunders, he would do it. He was determined.



Elizabeth was going mad. Everywhere she turned, there was Mr. Darcy. Not the man himself, thought he was present enough, but tales of him, mentions in conversation, and suggestions for invitations. She was planning a dinner—invite Mr. Darcy! They would host a picnic at the park—where is Mr. Darcy? Tea at her sister's—who should drop in unexpectedly but Mr. Darcy?

He continued to help Charles with Robert John's riding lessons, and her son was filled with tales about Uncle Charles and Mr. Darcy. How tall they were, what big horses they rode, and how fast they could gallop.

Mr. Darcy also rode with Georgiana and Lydia occasionally, and her youngest sister was filled with nothing but praise for her friend's older brother. He was a very good rider, with a magnificent gelding, and his seat was one of the best she had seen. Elizabeth had stifled a laugh at that comment and looked to her sister to see Jane nearly choking on her tea.

Mr. Darcy had invaded nearly every part of her life! He rode with Lydia, he was instructing her son, he was constantly visiting the Bingleys, and he called with his cousin when he visited Kitty. Would she never be free of the man?

Finally, a week after the Dinner Dilemma, as Elizabeth had come to think of it, she attended a ball hosted by Lady Montgomery. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Darcy was there. She hadn't been in the ballroom above five minutes before he approached her.

“You look very well, Lady Asheland.”

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy. Are you well?”

“Quite well.”

“And your sister? Is she here this evening?” she asked politely.

“No, Georgiana was tired and remained at home. Are your sisters here?”

“Kitty is here, but Lydia also remained at home.”

“I hope she is well.”

“Yes, she is merely tired. The Season can be exhausting.”

He knew she was deliberately keeping the conversation dull so that he would leave her alone. Or she was trying to frustrate him. Perhaps she was punishing him for his impertinence at their last meeting. Regardless, it would take more than a little dull conversation to deter him.

“May I request a dance, Lady Asheland?” he asked.

She looked startled. "You may."

"Is the first set free?"

She pursed her lips. Her first set was free. She was engaged for the second with her brother Charles, and Mr. Michael Darcy had requested the one after that, but her first was still available.

"Yes, it is."

"Shall we? The music is about to begin." He held out his hand and she took it reluctantly, angry at him for entrapping her.

They danced the first ten minutes in silence, Elizabeth wondering why he aggravated her so, Mr. Darcy wondering how long she would keep it up. It was clear that she was not built for anger. Lord Asheland had been circumspect when it came to speaking of his wife, but he had given Bingley, and by extension Darcy, marital advice upon occasion. The earl had spoken of allowing for different temperaments, and treating one's wife with respect and care. It had set Darcy to thinking.

Elizabeth was of a sanguine temperament. Even with all she had lost, she was still an optimistic woman. She had not allowed her husband's death to rob her life of joy. She was a wonderful mother and a good sister. He imagined she extended the same care to her parents. A woman like that could not stay angry for long. She wasn't made for unhappiness.

Elizabeth was becoming tired. Not from the dance, it wasn't vigorous enough to tire her, but of the cold silence between her

and Mr. Darcy. Were they not supposed to be friends? Why was she angry with him, anyhow? Oh, yes, because he had gazed at her inappropriately.

Possessively, Elizabeth. He looked at you as if you were his to do with as he pleased.

This angered her more than the inappropriateness. She had been the recipient of more than one flirtatious look from a man. She was not surprised by a man's appreciation for the female form. What she was surprised by was *Mr. Darcy's* appreciation. He was so staid in every other way. So solemn. So private. And yet he looked at her as if she were a treasure chest he had found the key to.

She could find it in herself to be flattered by his interest, even gratified. He was an attractive man, and an elusive one. But she could not condone his assumption that he had a right to her, as if she were somehow his for the taking.

She released a long breath and Darcy looked at her with concern.

“Are you well, my lady?”

“Yes, I am. Thank you,” she replied, still agitated.

They were waiting at the top of the line and had a rare moment of relative privacy.

“Are you angry with me?” he asked quietly.

She looked at him in surprise. She had not expected candor. She looked to the floor and sighed. “Not truly, Mr. Darcy. But I will confess that you confuse me.”

“I do?” His eyebrows rose.

“Yes,” she said impatiently. “Your behavior is not consistent.”

“Isn’t it?”

She threw him an irritated look as they began to move down the dance and he smirked. Predictably.

“No, it is not! You say you are my friend, and happy to be, and then you behave in decidedly *unfriendly* ways.”

“While that is a grave misdeed, I do not think it qualifies as inconsistent.”

She stopped herself from retorting in the middle of a crowded ballroom, but her eyes spoke all the words she could not say. He somehow managed to look both boyishly sheepish and confident all at once.

Thankfully, the music ended and Elizabeth saw she was near her friend, Lady Sheffield. She curtsied to her partner and joined her friend. She danced the sets she had promised, then left the ball without saying goodbye to anyone but the hostess.



Elizabeth and Kitty were talking in the yellow parlor when the butler announced both Mr. Darcys. Would they receive them here or in the drawing room? Elizabeth said they would see them here, suspecting as she did that Michael Darcy would soon offer for her sister and would then be family. They could meet in the less formal room.

Kitty quickly led Mr. Michael Darcy to a sofa near the window and Elizabeth was left to entertain Mr. Darcy on her own. She was reminded of a similar situation when her sister Jane was being courted by Mr. Bingley. She had been twenty then, with only two children, and most importantly, married. Now she was a widow with three children, Jane was expecting her third child and Mary her second. Where had the time gone?

She rang for tea and invited Mr. Darcy to sit.

“Does your cousin spend the summer with you?” she asked.

He smiled at her, a little too happily she thought, and answered, “He has in the past, but he has no plans to this summer, though he knows he is always welcome at Pemberley. All Darcys are.”

“That is generous of you.”

“Not particularly. He is family. It is the family seat.”

She nodded and the newly arrived tea tray saved her from a longer response.

“Milk or sugar?” she asked.

“Milk, please. No sugar.”

She nodded and set about making his cup, adding the milk first, then pouring in the freshly steeped tea. Kitty had done most of the serving this season, but Elizabeth thought she remembered he liked his tea extra milky. She handed it to him and before he had completed his first sip, she had prepared him a plate of little cakes, artfully arranged.

He was pleased she had remembered his preference and noted that the cakes with currants were left on the tray. He had never liked them.

“You look very pleased, Mr. Darcy. Shall I assume your tea is well prepared?”

He looked at her arch smile, her teasing brow, the way her eyes sparkled as she watched him, waiting for a response. God, how he loved her!

“You remembered how I take my tea,” he said softly.

“Yes,” she replied, bemused. “You like it with sugar when you are not having cakes and with milk when you are.”

He continued to stare at her and she looked back, puzzled.

“Most people who haven’t served me tea in over two years would not remember that.”

She sat up a little straighter. “I am not most people, Mr. Darcy.”

“No, my lady, you certainly are not.”



That night, Elizabeth paced her bedchamber. To the window, turn, eight steps to the fireplace, turn. With every swish of her dressing gown about her ankles, her anxiety mounted. What was Mr. Darcy about? She had been very clear with him—she would not remarry. And yet he continued to call and behave in a decidedly suitor-like manner.

The way he had looked at her this afternoon—it sent shivers down her spine to think of it. She knew that look. When she first became engaged to Robert, she had noticed it. The way he smiled when she entered a room, how she could calm him with nothing but a touch from her hand, how a flirtatious glance could bring him to her side in an instant.

He was in her power.

She had known that Robert's happiness rested with her. He was so obviously content in her presence. She could bring him out of a dark mood with a kiss to his cheek, or settle his spirits after a row with his peers with an embrace.

That was what she recognized in Mr. Darcy's expression today—his happiness at merely being with her. As if his day was brighter for having seen her.

And it terrified her.

He should not feel this way! She had told him, in no uncertain terms, that she was not looking for a husband, or a lover, or a man in her life of any kind. She had offered him friendship and he had accepted. He was not supposed to fall in love with her! It would ruin everything.

Though, if she were being honest with herself, she could admit that she felt a tendril of excitement at knowing she had affected such a man. Any woman would feel thus, she told herself. And it had been a very long time since she had been with a man—since she had felt the solidity of broad shoulders beneath her hands, since her face had been held tenderly and kissed with hunger, since she had felt strong hands running

over her body, holding her close on a cold night, embracing her with passion.

She was lonely. She could admit that to herself, alone in her room in a dressing gown and nightshift. She missed the companionship she had had with Robert. She missed the intimacy, the tenderness that had been between them. Sometimes she thought her heart might break in two with the weight of missing him.

And yet, for an hour this afternoon, she had not missed him. She had felt seen, as a man sees a woman, and desired, as a man desires a woman. She had blushed under Mr. Darcy's gaze and not out of embarrassment. She had felt heat rushing through her when he touched her, and her heart, her wounded, pathetic heart, had stuttered and stumbled when he kissed her hand upon leaving.

What was she to do with that?

CHAPTER 16



Grief came in unexpected waves. Elizabeth had been doing remarkably well for some time. Months had gone by without her dissolving into a heap of tears and damp handkerchiefs. She had been sleeping through the night with no disruptive nightmares for a year now. She didn't know why she suddenly woke in the night in a cold sweat, reaching for her husband only to realize he wasn't there. It was like the first day after his death all over again, and she spent the next day confined to her rooms, unable to control her weeping and wondering if she would ever be peaceful again.

She had her children, and she felt joy in taking care of them and watching them grow, but she was not happy. She could admit this, despite what her sister and her cousin Sylvia said. She knew she was not happy. But unlike her family, she knew something else: it was unlikely she would ever be happy again. So, given the circumstances, she thought the level of contentment she had achieved was quite impressive.

But some days, even mere contentment was impossible to grasp and she found herself staring into the distance, seeing

nothing.

The sleepless nights and difficult days continued for a week and she eventually had to be at home to callers. She couldn't hide away indefinitely without causing talk. Lady Montgomery visited her with little effect on her mood. Charles offered to take her riding and she refused. Jane offered quiet comfort that soothed, but even that was short lived.

Relief came from a surprising quarter. One Wednesday afternoon, a few days after she had stopped weeping ceaselessly but before she felt entirely master of herself, Mr. Darcy called. Not young, cheerful Michael Darcy, but serious, solemn Fitzwilliam Darcy. It was almost past the hour for morning calls and she instructed the butler to admit no one else that day. Darcy sat with her in the blue parlor, her favorite room when she was feeling low, and quietly informed her of the rides her sister had been taking with his, and of the gentlemen that had danced with Georgiana and Lydia at the ball he had escorted them to a few days before.

Quite to her surprise, he chattered on about inconsequential subjects, carrying the conversation and relieving her of the burden of entertaining him. Jane had reminded her a few days before of Mr. Darcy's role in the worst day of her life. She had forgotten his presence on the day of Robert's death, other than a vague recollection of him talking to the doctor. She had been so focused on Robert she had noticed little else. Jane told her of how he wrote letters to the family, and directed the servants, and made sure Charles was brought back with herself so they could be of aid to Elizabeth. Jane also reminded her of her

collapse at Robert's bedside and how Mr. Darcy had picked her up, as if she weighed nothing at all, and carried her to her room when she was too stricken to walk.

She had been embarrassed to hear it when Jane mentioned it a few days ago, but now, sitting with him in her favorite parlor on a day when she struggled with even basic social graces, she was grateful for it. Grateful that he had been with her in her darkest hour, and therefore wouldn't have to be told how much she had struggled with letting her husband go. He would understand her grief, and know her sorrow in a way no one else could. She did not have to present a brave face for him, and for that she was immensely thankful.

"Mr. Darcy," she said.

"Yes?"

"Thank you," she said sincerely.

"Whatever for, my lady?"

"For being a good friend," she replied with a soft smile.

"You are very welcome, my lady."



The following day, Elizabeth was surprised to find a bouquet of flowers awaiting her when she came down for breakfast. Curiously, she read the accompanying card.

My Dear Lady Asheland,

I hope this morning finds you in good spirits. Should you have any need of companionship, I am at your service. I hope you know I will do anything in my power for your comfort.

Your friend,

Fitzwilliam Darcy

She stared at the note for several minutes before sliding it into her pocket. It was very kind of him to send it, and the flowers. She was relieved he had not chosen to plead his suit when she was vulnerable. Had he pressed her yesterday, she could not honestly say what she would have done. She was so very low she might have made a choice she would regret later. It was gentlemanly of him to refrain.

Dear Mr. Darcy,

Your kindness is much appreciated, and I thank you for it. Today I am engaged with Lady Montgomery, but I will take Robert John and Violet to the park tomorrow morning, if the weather holds. You are welcome to join us if you like. I would enjoy your company.

E. Asheland



The next morning, Mr. Darcy was at Elizabeth's door before breakfast was finished. He could admit to himself that he was perhaps over-eager, but he could not deny that he was

immensely pleased to have been asked to join Elizabeth for a walk. The children would be there, of course, but he was quite fond of Robert John, and he was sure that Lady Violet would be as delightful as her mother.

The butler showed him into the breakfast room where Lady Asheland was eating and reading a letter.

“Mr. Darcy! Good morning. Forgive me, sir, I must have lost sense of the time.”

“Not at all, my lady. I am early. Please, do not rush on my account.”

She smiled and invited him to sit. “I must thank you for the flowers. It was very kind of you.”

“You are very welcome.” He almost asked if she were feeling better, but he could see that she was. He shouldn’t mention it. It was probably an awkward topic on the best of days, though he supposed they would have to talk about it eventually.

A footman stepped in to say the children were ready and waiting in the hall with their nurse. Soon, they were walking down the street, Darcy with Elizabeth on his arm, the nurse with Robert John and Violet by the hand.

“Does Master Bennet not enjoy the park?” he asked.

“Oh, he enjoys it too much! He runs positively wild and his poor nurse exhausts herself chasing him,” she said with a smile. “We always bring a second nurse on outings, but she is

away visiting her mother. Molly will bring Bennet to the park this afternoon.”

He nodded and watched Robert John and Violet running toward some geese waddling near the lake. Their nurse stayed close behind. It was a perfect day. The sun was shining, the children were happy, and he had a beautiful woman on his arm. There was every reason to be content.

“Mr. Darcy, might I ask you something?” Elizabeth’s voice sounded anxious to his ears.

“Of course, my lady.”

“How old were you when you got your first pony?”

Of all the things he had expected her to say, that had not been it.

He thought for a moment. “I suppose I was five or six. She was a small pony, very docile. My father gave me a mare when I was bigger. Why do you ask?”

“I have been thinking. Robert John will be five years old soon. His birthday is in June. Charles suggested getting him his own pony. Do you think it is too soon?” She worried her lip and twisted her hands together.

“Ah, I see. No, I do not think it too soon, though you should choose the pony very carefully. Temperament is very important, as is the animal’s size.”

“Yes, of course,” she said quietly.

A few minutes passed as they watched the children play.

“It must be difficult,” he said quietly.

“What must be?” she replied, looking up at him.

“Raising such small children. It is good to see them grow and learn, but it is sad to see them leaving other aspects of childhood behind.”

“You sound experienced, Mr. Darcy.”

“Georgiana. She is twelve years my junior and looks on me more as a father than a brother. Perhaps one day, when she is older and married, we will behave more like siblings, but today...”

“It is difficult to watch her grow up,” she said softly.

“Yes.”

She smiled and looped her arm through his, pressing her hand into his coat for a moment.

“It is not easy to raise a child, you are right. One is so proud of how they grow and change, and yet sad that they are changing at all. Bennet is so big now. He follows his brother around like a puppy and copies everything he does. He is so eager to be older.” She sighed. “It feels like yesterday he was a tiny babe, wanting nothing more than to be held by his mama.” She shook her head. “It is strange. I never thought Bennet would be my youngest child. When he was born, I was sure he was third in a long line of Talbot children.”

“Yes, it is strange,” said Darcy quietly.

She gave him a sad smile and they continued their walk along the lake path.



Surprisingly, Elizabeth found that having a male friend such as Mr. Darcy proved advantageous in certain circumstances, especially when she wanted to be left alone by wife-hunting men and matchmaking women. Her cousin John was equally protective, but he was a fun-loving chap and was often off on his own adventures. Darcy always seemed to be nearby, available to converse with when she didn't wish to dance, fetching her a glass of lemonade when she was thirsty, allowing her to be silent when she became overwhelmed. And his glare could send the most stalwart gentleman running in the other direction. It was rather amusing, really.

Quite to her surprise, she found his company more enjoyable the more time she spent with him.

Her walk with Mr. Darcy left Elizabeth more confused than ever. He was being so *pleasant*. So kind, and understanding, and patient with her. What had come over him? He had been haughty and disdainful in the past, always quick to argue with her. Then he had pursued her as if she were a prize to be won—amusing at times, and certainly flattering, but disconcerting nonetheless. But now, he was gentle, and unobtrusive, and discreet. She found that she quite enjoyed his company.

Beyond all of that was her uncomfortable and partially acknowledged attraction to him. He was so very different from

her husband. Robert had been playful and loving. He brought out more kindness in her than she had known she possessed. He taught her how to manage their household and deal fairly with servants, how to handle the *ton* without allowing them to change who she was in essentials. More than anything else, she became confident. Under his loving care, she matured from a naive girl to an elegant woman.

She couldn't imagine what she would have been like without his influence—what her family would be like! Her mother would have put them all out at fifteen as she had planned, and in all likelihood, they would have been five single ladies out, for years on end, with no suitors among them. Mary would be pedantic, Jane withdrawn, and Lydia positively wild. Kitty would likely have chosen one of her sisters to emulate and proceeded to follow her everywhere—she had never had many ideas of her own. She could only hope Kitty would have chosen herself or Jane to copy, but it could just as likely have been Mary or Lydia, and then where would they have been?

She knew with certainty that her family's significance and prosperity was due to her husband. She also knew that she would not be the woman she was today without Robert's leadership. His steadfast partnership, his unwavering respect, his perfect decency had been the greatest influence on her young life and she was incredibly grateful to have been the recipient of his love.

Now she simply had to learn to live without him. She had accustomed herself to sleeping alone, making decisions for the

children by herself, and managing the household with no one's preferences in mind but her own. The only thing she had yet to adapt to was the lack of a husband—the companionship and closeness of a man she cared for and who cared for her in return.

For a wild moment, she wondered if she should take a lover. Widows did it all the time, and the longer she remained unmarried, the more she understood why. But no, that would never do for her. She would surely become with child and then what would she do? Go away to a hidden cottage until her lying in, endure an agonizing birth with no loved ones about her, and hope she survived it so her children would not be entirely parentless? No, it was too great a risk. She could not do it.

And yet, she found herself noticing things she had not paid attention to in some time. On her walk with Mr. Darcy, she noticed he smelled of leather and soap and something that reminded her of a forest. She recognized that his shoulders were broad and his person lean, and his hands strong with long fingers, like a pianist's, but not as delicate. He was a man, and she was keenly aware of him as such.

She liked having someone *there*—to escort her to the park and to talk to about her children. It had been a relief to discuss Robert John's riding with him. She had talked to Charles, of course; he was a kind brother and they had a close relationship, but it was not the same. Her cousin John Downing was also a pleasant companion, but he was rarely available, and unfortunately, the speculation of a marriage

between them made it nearly impossible for them to spend as much time together as they would like. She quickly thought that one of the benefits of remarrying could be a closer relationship with John, but just as quickly dismissed the idea. One did not marry a man just to spend more time with one's cousin.



Feeling as conflicted and lost as she was, it was no surprise Elizabeth found herself in Lady Montgomery's sitting room having a quiet conversation. She had need of a friendly face. They covered a variety of topics as dear friends are wont to do. They spoke of their children, of Alice's husband, of how tedious the season was becoming after so many weeks in town and finally, they spoke of Robert. He had been a friend to Lord Montgomery and their conversations often included some mention of him.

“He was incredibly good to me. I found confidence and a sense of purpose I don't think I would have gained without him. Robert was so kind and generous, and he encouraged me to be so as well. He had a wonderful sense of humor. He could perform the funniest impressions!” She laughed lightly and sighed. “My humor only improved with him. And he gave me respect beyond what I thought I would ever see from a man.”

“That is rare indeed,” said Alice. “But you know he felt just as lucky to have found you.”

“Perhaps,” Elizabeth said softly. “If I had never met him, I imagine I would have become a rather vain creature. I was so sure I understood the world around me. I was convinced of my own correctness. He showed me a broader world, and I am better for it. He respected my intelligence, but also saw my limitations. And like the wonderful husband he was, he provided me with opportunities to expand my knowledge, to fill in the gaps in my education. He never mocked me for reading books on science or crops or history. He enjoyed my mind, very much. We would have the most interesting debates. We could speak for hours. And they ended in the most delightful ways,” she added quietly and smiled to herself. “Well, that’s in the past now.”

“Is it?”

She looked at her friend with a question in her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Surely there are other men you could debate with. There must be one other man in England who enjoys an intelligent woman. I daresay there are several. And you may choose whomever you wish.”

“Must we go over this again? I have told you I will not marry again,” said Elizabeth impatiently.

“Really, Elizabeth, must you be so tiresome?”

Elizabeth looked at her friend with wide eyes. Alice was never vexed, but she looked very put out now.

“You continue to say you do not want a husband, yet you sit here, lonely and miserable, reminiscing about Asheland as if you are sacrificing yourself on the altar of his memory.”

Elizabeth’s mouth opened in shock. She stared at her friend, not knowing what to say.

“I am not trying to wound you,” said Alice gently, “but Elizabeth, don’t you see that you are only hurting yourself with this stubborn insistence to remain alone?”

“I, I cannot,” Elizabeth stuttered and took a deep breath. “I will not deny being lonely. We have been friends long enough that you see it without my telling you. But marriage is a very great risk. One that I am not equal to making right now.” She looked down and picked at her skirt for a moment.

“I think you are more ready than you think,” said Alice softly.

Elizabeth looked at her in surprise and her friend smiled gently, then changed the subject.



Lady Montgomery had given Elizabeth much to think on and she spent the next several days wondering if Alice was right. Was she sacrificing herself to a memory? Was she sacrificing herself at all? No amount of pacing in her chambers could answer the question for her, and two rides through the park with her brother Charles did little to clear the cobwebs from her mind.

She finally found herself at Alfred's door. The butler led her into his study and she sat down in front of his desk, ruffled and agitated.

"This is a pleasant surprise," he said. "To what do I owe the honor?"

She took a deep breath, studied the curtains behind his desk, and finally looked at his kind eyes. *Eyes like Robert's*. "Alfred, I am in need of some advice."

"Of course," he said immediately. "How may I be of assistance, my dear?"

"The children," she hesitated, "I am their guardian, as well as yourself."

"Yes?"

"And I know Robert asked you to allow me to raise them as I wish, as we had wished to do, and for you to assist me with finding schools for them, things like that."

"Yes," he said suspiciously.

"What I want to know is, what would happen if I remarried? There is no one," she added in a rush, "no one I am... considering. But I do not want to entertain the idea, I don't want to even think about it, if it..." she trailed off.

"If it would be detrimental to the children," he finished for her.

"Yes," she said in a small voice, hating this conversation.

“Well, as Robert’s will dictated, the children are to remain in your care until they come of age or you are unable to care for them. I am to assist where necessary in business matters and when the boys are older, give them a bit of guidance.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Legally, if you were to remarry, nothing would change regarding Robert’s children. They would still be in your care, not your husband’s. He would have no power over them or rights as far as money and contracts go.”

She nodded, looking relieved.

“However, if you were to reside in the same home as your husband, as I imagine you would, he will necessarily have some influence on the children, regardless of the legalities. If he is a good man, or not very involved, I foresee no problems. Especially once the children go to school. But if he were not a good man,” he looked at her significantly, “it would be my duty to intervene. For both you and the children.”

“Could I be removed from my husband’s home?” she asked.

“It would not be easy, but you are part of a powerful family. They would not want to see harm come to you and would use their combined influence to remove you. The children would be easier, legally speaking. As one of their guardians, a judge could easily grant me sole guardianship.”

Elizabeth went pale. Her hands were cold and she felt an icy sensation along her spine.

“Elizabeth, please, don’t be alarmed. I am not trying to frighten you. I know how devoted you are to the children. I would never dream of taking them from you. You know that. I am sure Robert would come back from the grave and thrash me if I even tried it.” He smiled but she did not relax. “I only tell you what *could* happen, legally, and what would precipitate it. You have excellent judgment. I am sure any man you choose would be kind and good to the children.”

“And if he weren’t, I would lose my children, and possibly go through a scandalous separation,” she said quietly. “I think I have my answer.”

“Now, wait a moment. That is only one possibility. You could meet a kind man and go on to have more children and live quite peacefully. I was not trying to frighten you, Lizzy, truly. I apologize for doing so.”

“If I had more children with this potential husband,” she continued as if she hadn’t heard him, her voice strained, “and he was not a kind man, or mistreated us, or you didn’t like him, you could take my children. And I would not be able to leave him with my new children, and thus would be trapped in a horrible situation.”

“Really, Elizabeth, that is highly unlikely. Yes, if you were to marry a man who mistreated you, and you had children with him, it would complicate matters, but I need not remind you that you have some very powerful connections. The Asheland title carries much sway, as does Devonshire, and you know I would support you. And don’t forget that Robert’s mother was

an Edgemont and a Cavendish. Lord Sedbury is very fond of you, all the Edgemonts are. If you ever did find yourself in an untenable situation, we could extricate you—with your children. I'm sure of it," he said comfortingly.

She nodded, feeling overwhelmed and frightened. "Thank you, Alfred. You are a good cousin."

He walked around the desk and she rose, trying to hide the trembling of her hands.

He put his hands on her shoulders and asked, "Are you going to be all right, dear?"

"Yes, I will be well." She gave him a false smile and he looked at her doubtfully. "Truly, I will. Any other words of advice?"

"Honestly?" He lifted his brows and gave her a small smile. "If you want to remarry, introduce him to the family before there is a public engagement. Let everyone take his measure. And if you really want to be clever," he said mischievously, "find someone less powerful than yourself."

A startled laugh burst out of her and she felt the tension release her from its grasp.

"That is good advice. Thank you, cousin."

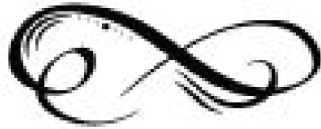


Elizabeth had much to think on, and she believed Alfred was correct. She should not marry at all, or marry when she was too old to have children to avoid potential complications, or at

least after her children were of age and away from any negative influence. Alternatively, she could marry sooner, but the gentleman would have to be vigorously scrutinized by her family. Robert had had connections to more titles than she could count, and she was sure that she could call on many of them to meet and assess a potential suitor for her.

And truly, she was only thinking of one gentleman, and it was only a thought. Just an idea, really. 'Twas nothing serious.

CHAPTER 17



Mr. Darcy couldn't help but notice the changes in Lady Asheland. She was both more aware of him and more withdrawn. He rightly assumed she had conflicting feelings about being attracted to a man other than Robert Talbot, and he knew he should be patient with her.

When they walked in the park with the children, as they had now done four times, he had noticed her noticing him. She would look at his hands for long moments, or stare at his mouth when he spoke, or sweep her eyes over him when she thought he wasn't looking. She gazed at him with a soft expression in her eyes and carefully listened to his future plans for Pemberley and how he thought to manage a border dispute between tenants. She soothed his fears over Georgiana and told him not to worry over her shyness—the right husband would eventually come along and like his sister just as she was. He found her kind words comforting, and the way she would squeeze his arm where her hand rested was surprisingly calming.

Her power over him was both exhilarating and alarming.

Darcy was fairly sure he was not the only one affected by their blooming friendship. Elizabeth blushed and smiled and he had made her laugh more than once now. Though the first time he heard the musical sound, so close to his ear as she walked with her hand tucked tightly in the crook of his elbow, would remain a great triumph in his mind. The Day Mr. Darcy Made Lady Asheland Laugh.

He found all of this encouraging and believed they were moving in the right direction. But just when he was ready to say something, to ask to call on her, or request to see her over the summer, she would become cold again and behave as if their closeness had never existed.

It was disconcerting.

The season was coming to a close, and Darcy would be returning to Pemberley shortly. He knew Elizabeth would go to Cressington, and the Bingley family would go on to Hatfield Hall. They would not return until the following spring. Mrs. Bingley was expecting her third child in early autumn and the family would not want to travel far with an infant; the Bingleys weren't the kind to leave a young babe with a nurse.

Would Lady Asheland visit her sister? He thought she would be there for the lying in. She had been there for the first two children. He supposed he could see Elizabeth there, but he did not want to intrude on his friend's family at such a delicate time. And the idea of using his friend to encounter the lady he

was pursuing was distasteful to him. He would much rather meet her by his own means.

He had every reason to believe his cousin Michael would propose to Miss Kitty Bennet before the season was out. Perhaps they would marry this summer? Should that be the case he would surely see her at the wedding. It was probable the ceremony would take place in Hertfordshire, as Bingley's had. He could offer to escort her. Was that too forward? *You want to marry the lady, Darcy. Appearing forward is the least of your problems.*

He was due to have dinner at Asheland House that evening. Lady Asheland had sent him an invitation with nothing on it but a request for his presence at dinner. He did not think it was for a specific occasion, but he dressed with care nonetheless.

He arrived at Asheland House and was quickly shown into the large drawing room where an impromptu celebration was underway.

"Forgive me, Fitz. I wanted to wait until you arrived but we couldn't hold it in!" his cousin called as he rushed to greet him.

"Are congratulations in order?" asked Mr. Darcy.

"Yes! You must congratulate me, for I am the luckiest man in all of England!" said Michael, a wide smile on his face. "I can't believe she accepted me," he said quietly to his cousin.

"Did you honestly think she would refuse you?" Darcy asked.

“I hoped she wouldn’t. I’ve never been so nervous in all my life!”

Darcy clapped his young cousin on the back. “Congratulations, cousin. You’ve done well for yourself. She is a sweet lady. You’ll be very happy.”

They smiled and shook hands and then Michael was off, speaking to the other guests so quickly he was nearly incoherent.

“Forgive me for not welcoming you properly, Mr. Darcy,” said Lady Asheland.

He turned and saw her standing not a foot from him. “There is no need to apologise, Lady Asheland. I understand it is a joyous occasion.”

“Yes, they are very happy.” She looked around the room, then back at him. “Do you know everyone here? My Aunt and Uncle Gardiner you’ve met on more than one occasion, and I believe you know Lord and Lady Montgomery?”

“Yes, we’ve met.”

“Wonderful. Perhaps you might introduce me to your cousin. I assume that is he coming towards the door?”

He looked to the doorway and saw his cousin, Edmund Darcy, Michael’s older brother, being led into the room. He escorted Elizabeth to him and performed the introductions.

“It is nice to finally meet you. Your brother has told us so many things about you, I feel as if I know you already,” said Elizabeth with a bright smile.

“The pleasure is mine, Lady Asheland. I must thank you for hosting this dinner on such short notice. It is very kind of you.”

“Thank you, but it was not a hardship. I am happy to see Kitty so well settled and content. They are a handsome couple, don’t you think?” she said as she turned to face the young couple standing together on the other side of the room.

“Yes. I will go congratulate them. Excuse me.”

He stepped away and Elizabeth laughed.

“What is so funny, my lady?”

“I seem to have a surfeit of Mr. Darcys in my drawing room,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes. She looked around the room and counted, her lips moving but no sound coming out. “There are seven men here, and three of them are Darcys,” she said brightly.

He couldn’t help but smile back, though he didn’t see why it was so amusing to her.

It was impossible for Mr. Darcy not to notice how different she appeared this night. There was something different in her demeanor—an openness that had not been there, a sensuality that she had previously kept hidden but was now released. He couldn’t stop staring at her sparkling eyes, her soft skin that seemed to glow with happiness, the way the light reflected off her hair.

“You shouldn’t look at me that way, Mr. Darcy,” she said, only partially teasing.

“What way?”

“That way! As if you know my innermost thoughts!” When he continued looking at her seriously, she added quietly, “As if we are intimate with each other.”

“Ah, but have I not already told you? It is unfair to make men fall in love with you when you mean to remain so elusive.”

“I am doing no such thing!” She looked around the room, grateful for all the noise that covered their inappropriate conversation. “Mr. Darcy,” she said with great patience, “you seem to fancy yourself infatuated with me. I do not wish to injure you, but you must see that we would not suit!”

“We wouldn’t?”

“No!” she cried. “Not in the least!”

“Are you sure of that, my lady?” he said it with such earnestness, his eyes boring into hers. His body was so close she could feel the heat coming from him.

She felt herself waver. “Quite sure,” she said weakly.

He smiled. A tiny quirk of the lips that said he did not believe her, but he would allow her the fantasy for a while.

“As you wish, my lady.”



Kitty’s wedding was planned for the twentieth of June. Elizabeth was surprised by the haste—it was the end of May

now—but after discovering Kitty and her betrothed in a passionate kiss in the garden, Elizabeth agreed that sooner was probably better. The family let it be known that the couple wanted to go on a wedding tour while the weather was warm, and Kitty wanted her sister Jane to be at her wedding, therefore the ceremony had to be before Mrs. Bingley's lying in.

Kitty asked Lydia to stand up with her and Elizabeth bought them both new gowns as a gift. The sisters did some very rushed shopping for Kitty's wedding clothes, and then they were packing up and traveling to Hertfordshire.

Longbourn was filled with family members. Michael Darcy and his brother Edmund stayed there, as well as their parents and two sisters. Mrs. Bennet was beside herself with excitement. When Jane had married, only Mr. Bingley's limited family had come and they had stayed at Netherfield. The Gouldings lived locally and had hosted their own guests when Mary wed. Elizabeth's marriage had been a larger affair, but only Lord Asheland and his cousin had stayed at Longbourn. And it had been so long ago!

The house had three guest chambers in addition to the girls' rooms. The Darcy family took up all the guest chambers and Michael's two sisters took Mary's former room. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner stayed in Jane's old room and their children used every available space in the nursery. Miss Darcy had accompanied Lydia and was staying at Longbourn with her. Jane and Elizabeth had each decided they, and their children, would stay with Mary at her home. That left Mr. Fitzwilliam

Darcy. He had said he would stay at the inn, but Mrs. Bennet had immediately declared that the inn was nothing to Longbourn and that they still had one chamber free if he would like to stay with his sister and cousins. He accepted, and without realizing it until it was done, he was placed in Elizabeth's former chamber.

Her belongings had been removed long ago, but there were still traces of her in the colors of the wallpaper and linens, and the sampler on the wall. There was a simple painting of the seashore propped on a small shelf with a large shell beside it. He wondered if they were mementos of a childhood holiday.

He lowered himself to the bed carefully, taking in his surroundings with something akin to wonder. Would he succeed in his attempt to win her? He told himself he would; he was determined, and Darcy always succeeded when he put his mind to something. But sometimes, when she rebuffed him for the twelfth time in as many days, his certainty wavered. He had never tried so hard to achieve anything in his life. And what was worse about the situation was that the end result was out of his control. It was not like a jump he was hoping to master or a skill he wanted to acquire. No amount of practice would guarantee his success.

She must simply learn to love him. He prayed that she would, for in his quest to earn her love, he had fallen so deeply under her spell that he wasn't sure he would recover from the loss of her should she decide against him.



After the wedding, the family would travel north together. It was a large party including the Bingleys, the Gouldings, Lydia and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, and the Gardiners.

Everyone was gathering at Cressingdon to celebrate Robert John's fifth birthday. Alfred's wife Sylvia had wanted to bring the family together for some time, and Robbie's birthday was the perfect occasion. It was more than a celebration of his young life, at least to the Talbot family. It was a recognition of the continuation of the Asheland title, and all the authority and prosperity that came with it.

With equal parts trepidation, excitement, and mischief, Elizabeth penned an invitation to Mr. Darcy. Her husband's family would be there in large numbers—what better way to test his motives than to surround him with people who wanted the best for her and her children? He might be a little overwhelmed, but such was her situation. If he could not support that reality, it was best their flirtation go no further.

It is time to make Mr. Darcy as discomfited as he enjoys making me.



The plan was to leave for the north the day after the wedding. Mr. Darcy accepted Elizabeth's invitation; he would travel with them until the road split for Cressingdon, when he would

go on to Pemberley. He would join them a few days' later in time for the birthday celebration.

Elizabeth had decided to give Robert John a pony for his birthday. Her brother, Percy Goulding, had written to say he had a few small Welsh ponies to choose from—they were very popular with young riders. Elizabeth was unconvinced that a Welsh pony could be small enough for her boy, though Robert John was tall for his age. She thought they should still consider a Shetland. Her brother Percy had cautioned her that Robbie was tall already, and he may become attached to the pony and then be too big for her in only a year or possibly two. Given his temperament, Percy thought an animal Robbie could keep for a longer time would be best. Better to purchase a Shetland for Violet and Bennet—they would be able to keep it longer.

Lydia had been right when she said the Gouldings were ardent horsemen. They had a very successful stud and were becoming better known for it every year. Mary's dowry had allowed them to expand and just last year, they had sold a horse to the Duke of Cumberland, something her mother could not stop boasting about.

Alas, Percy and Mary were quiet people and did not like to leave Hertfordshire often. They found contentment in their home and friends, and to everyone's surprise, Mrs. Bennet and Mary had become quite close. At least twice a week, Mrs. Bennet would take the carriage to Haye Park to spend time with her granddaughter. This trip to Cressington was unusual, and Elizabeth understood it for the show of support it was.

Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, Michael's parents, were soon on easy terms with the Bennets, as were their daughters who quickly made friends with the Bennet sisters. They were traveling in the same direction and had decided to drive part of the way together. When Elizabeth heard this, she invited them to Cressington for a week to join the birthday celebration. They were family now, after all, and Elizabeth wanted them to know she considered them as such. She had greatly enjoyed joining Robert's family and now viewed them as her own. She hoped her sisters would be able to do the same with their husbands' families. She knew it was preferable to be surrounded by a caring family than to be on one's own all the time.

She thought, with a degree of sadness, that Mr. Darcy might need a lesson in that. He seemed friendly with his Darcy relations, but he also did not seem to know them well. He had not known that his youngest cousin Amelia was coming out next season, or that the eldest brother Edmund was courting a distant cousin on his mother's side. Elizabeth had been told all of this in the space of one afternoon tea. She assumed Mr. Darcy only ever saw the men who did not think to tell him of their family's goings on, or he did not spend much time with them.

He was often with the Bingleys, so he was not friendless, and she had seen him on a number of occasions with his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. It could just be her perception, and she partially hoped it was, but he seemed lonely to her sometimes, as if he didn't trust those around him. Perhaps that was why he kept limited company? Regardless of his reasons,

Mr. Darcy seemed somewhat alone in the world. She could certainly understand the sentiment.

Fewer conditions could be designed to stir up more compassion in her.



The skies were clear and the roads dry; they made excellent time. Late in the evening on their second day of travel, they pulled into the drive at Cressington. The lanterns had been lit in anticipation of their arrival, and the upper servants were awaiting them outside.

Elizabeth couldn't help the smile that spread over her face. She was riding with her sisters—minus Kitty—and they teased her gently about her excitement. The weary travelers piled out of the carriages, nearly a dozen of them lined up along the elegant drive. She took a deep breath of the clean country air. No matter where she went or how long she stayed away, coming back to Cressington always felt like coming home.

She searched for her children in the crowds exiting the carriages. Bennet had ridden with the Bingley children and their nurse so he could play with young Charles. Violet had gone with her grandmama, and Robert John was with his Gardiner cousins. Her children quickly found her and wrapped their arms around her skirts. Laughing, the family made their way up the stairs to greet the butler and housekeeper.

It was a well-known fact that the upper servants at Cressington adored the Talbot children. Well, perhaps not all

the servants, but the housekeeper, Cook, and butler all seemed inordinately pleased to see them. They had been with Robert for many years before he married Elizabeth and they were glad to see the family continuing.

“Welcome home, my lady,” said the butler in his calm voice.

“You may smile, Thompson. I know you are trying to suppress it,” Elizabeth teased as she removed her gloves.

The butler gave her a small smile in return and she said, “See? You are much more handsome when you smile.”

The housekeeper stifled a laugh and Elizabeth fought the urge to embrace her. When she first came to Cressington, eighteen and untried, they had gotten off to a rocky start. Elizabeth had nearly driven the woman mad with questions on how the house was run and what was necessary or not and who was in charge of what. It had been exhausting and the good housekeeper had feared for her job, but they had eventually found their way and over the years had formed a solid respect for each other.

“All is as you requested, my lady. The Gardiners, Bingleys, and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have their usual rooms. Miss Darcy and Miss Lydia were placed in adjoining chambers—the rose rooms—and Mr. and Mrs. Goulding in the tapestry rooms.”

“That sounds ideal, Mrs. Hobbs. Your judgment is excellent, as always. Shall the nursery hold so many children, do you think?” she asked, a smile on her lips.

“We have prepared additional rooms down the hall. We thought the older children could use them, if it suits you, my lady.”

“I think it a fine idea, though I will ask my aunt her thoughts on the matter.”

Soon enough, everyone was settled. Cressingdon was a large home and between the family and guest wings, there was ample room. Lord and Lady Devonshire would arrive the next day, and each day after that would bring more guests until they celebrated Robert John’s birthday at the end of the week.



After separating from the traveling party, Darcy arrived at Pemberley hours before he was expected. He bounded up the steps, a smile on his face that greatly confused the servants he passed along the way. He would see Elizabeth in five days. At her home.

He could not be imagining the welcoming looks she had given him recently. She had been quite receptive, he was sure of it. And she had invited him to Cressingdon—the home she had shared with her beloved husband. That must be a sign that she viewed him favorably. She must trust him, at least a little, or she would not have invited him to her son’s birthday celebration. Nearly everyone invited was family member in some degree. His inclusion was a sign of her growing affection for him, it must be.

It could not have come at a better time.

He had some business to attend to at Pemberley, then he would make the journey to Nottinghamshire. He needed to find a gift for young Robert John. Something for Lady Violet would also be nice. He wanted to give the boy a new saddle; he knew Elizabeth was giving him his first pony and a saddle would go perfectly with it. But he had spoken with Bingley and his friend thought someone else in the family planned to give Robert a saddle as a gift, not to mention it was too large a gesture for someone unconnected to the family.

He thought about other things that went along with riding: a new crop, riding boots. He even considered a blanket for the animal. His sister had given him one years ago. She had embroidered his name and the date on one corner and his horse's name on the other. It had been slightly childish—she was only eleven when she gave it to him—but he had liked it and used it regularly. Finally, Darcy thought of the perfect idea. He would ride into Lambton tomorrow.

CHAPTER 18



Cressington was magical in summer. The flowers were blooming, the birds singing, and the sun shone brightly across the estate. Elizabeth couldn't have chosen a better day for her son's birthday celebration.

The house was full of friends and family—only three chambers remained unoccupied. She rose before her guests to make sure everything was ready for the party. She met with the housekeeper, the cook, and the butler. She spoke to the groom and was assured Robbie's pony would be clean and brushed and ready for its debut at the appointed time.

After confirming everything was prepared outside and in the house, she went up to the nursery. The nurse assured her that the children's clothes were pressed and ready, and Violet would be sent to her mother before the event to have her hair done by Watson. Elizabeth wanted it curled for the party and had chosen new ribbons for her daughter's hair.

Seeing all was in readiness, she went to the breakfast room. She was just sitting down with her tea when she was informed a carriage was arriving. Elizabeth rose to greet the newcomers

—she was expecting the last of her Talbot relations today. She was just descending the stairs in front of the house when the carriage pulled up and, to her surprise, Mr. Darcy stepped out.

“Mr. Darcy! Welcome to Cressington. I had not expected you until this afternoon.” She extended her hand and he kissed it briefly before rising and smiling brightly.

“I hope it is not an unwelcome surprise?”

“Of course not. Friends are always welcome, whether they are expected or not.”

His brows rose at her comment and he couldn't help but smile at her again.

“Come, I'll have someone show you to your room,” she said as she turned and walked into the house. “You are only a few rooms away from Miss Darcy.”

“Thank you. How is my sister?”

“She seems to be doing quite well. With Lydia, her cousins, the children, and the stables, she has been much occupied,” she said with a smile.

“Thank you for allowing her to travel with you. I know she is enjoying being in the company of ladies closer to her age.”

“It is no trouble. She is a sweet girl and we have enjoyed having her in our party.” She smiled and sent him off with a footman.



In the late afternoon, the entire party gathered to celebrate Robert John's fifth birthday. Elizabeth had decided to take advantage of the warm weather, so a sumptuous picnic was arranged beside the lake. There were blankets and cushions to recline on, and a few chairs for the older guests. Tables were set up beneath a large oak tree and covered in food and sweet confections. Cook had made all Robbie's favorites, and everything was presented on colorful linens.

Elizabeth had asked for lanterns to be hung in the trees and ribbons strung along the branches. Games were prepared for the children and croquet for the adults. Robbie squealed with delight when he saw his new pony, brought out by his uncle and wearing a bright blue ribbon.

As a surprise for her son and guests, there was a marionette show put on by a troupe of players, and the children laughed continuously throughout their performance. When the show was over, the performers wandered through the crowd on stilts as they juggled colorful balls. One man twirled a hoop round and round endlessly, and women in bright clothing made paper crowns and flower wreaths for the children. Gossamer wings had been made for Violet and the other young girls present and they ran along the lake, giggling and joyful, like tiny fairies dancing in the sunset.

After the sun had sunk low in the sky, the lanterns were lit and more food was brought out. The youngest children had been taken to bed, but Robert John, as the guest of honor, was allowed to stay up, as well as the older Gardiner children.

Darcy wandered among the revelers, glad to be present for such a memorable event and marveling at Elizabeth's ability to create such a magical day. Now it was full dark, the moon was bright, and nearly everyone was feeling the relaxing effects of the punch. Bingley had escorted an exhausted Jane to bed a quarter of an hour ago, and Darcy was looking for Elizabeth. He had a suspicion her eyes would look especially becoming in the lantern light as it reflected off the lake and he wanted to see if he was right.

Finally, he espied her sitting on a pile of cushions and blankets near the lake's edge. He made his way to her and approached quietly when he saw young Robert John lying on the blanket next to her, his head in his mother's lap, fast asleep.

"May I join you?" he asked quietly.

"Of course." She looked up at him and he smiled as he lowered himself to sit beside her.

"Lovely crown," he said with a teasing smile, nodding towards the spray roses adorning her head.

"Thank you!" She said with a playful grin. "Violet was having one made and wanted me to have one as well." She smiled, and he couldn't help but be impressed at her lack of embarrassment.

She was very becoming, in her gauzy summer gown, her hair piled prettily atop her head, a crooked wreath of flowers perched on her curls.

“I was right, you know.”

“About what?” she asked.

“I thought your eyes would look especially bewitching in this light. I’m glad to see I was not mistaken,” he said softly.

Her hand stilled where it was stroking her son’s hair and her face flushed.

“Are you enjoying the party?” she asked, her voice almost calm.

“Yes. You’ve done remarkably well. I don’t remember when I’ve had a more pleasant time.”

“Thank you. It has been so long since we have been together as a family. Not since...” she trailed off, not allowing her mind to dwell on unhappiness today. “I’m glad you’ve enjoyed yourself,” she added with a smile.

“I think everyone has had a good time. Many are still enjoying themselves,” he said with a sly smile and a look over his shoulder.

She smiled and shook her head. Some of her younger cousins had made a little too free with Cressington’s wine and were now rather lively. Providing no one came to any harm, she saw no reason to intervene. Alfred was near—he would stop anything truly unruly from happening.

One by one the guests returned to the house, some stealing away, others waving at her before they left. She and Darcy sat quietly by the lake, watching the moon reflected in its gentle ripples, staring up at the stars, and saying nothing.

“I should take Robbie inside. It is late,” she said quietly.

The servants were beginning to pack up the food and blankets, and only the most determined guests remained.

“Allow me,” said Darcy. He gathered up Robbie and gestured for Elizabeth to lead them to the house.

She smiled softly at her sleeping son and began walking along the path. “Thank you, Mr. Darcy. You’ve saved me some trouble.”

“It is no trouble, I assure you, my lady.”

“I should thank you again for Robbie’s gift. It was very thoughtful of you.”

Darcy had given Robbie a set of saddlebags, just the right size, with his initials and the date tooled into the leather on the underside.

“You are welcome. I hope he is able to use them.”

“Oh, there is no danger of him not using them!” she said with a happy laugh. “He was so excited to see his pony. I can’t believe Percy found one so docile, but I am grateful for it. Robbie will spend the next few days trying to name it, I’m sure.”

Darcy chuckled. “I’m sure he will.”

They reached the house and she led him up the stairs to the nursery. She opened the door quietly and led him into the dark room. Violet was asleep across the room, and Bennet slept

nearby, as did young Jane and Charlie. She pulled back the coverlet and Darcy laid the boy down.

“It’s amazing he’s still asleep,” he whispered in the darkened room.

“Yes, he can sleep through anything,” she replied.

She unlaced one shoe while Darcy undid the other, then she gently maneuvered him out of his jacket. Robbie slept through it all. She kissed his forehead and tucked him in, then slipped out of the room and closed the door quietly behind her.

“Thank you, Mr. Darcy,” she said.

“Think nothing of it, my lady.”

It was a simple statement, and yet she felt herself warming from her head to her toes. She looked to the floor, then back to his face, then to the floor again. She continued to steal glances at him as they descended the stairs, surprised at how peaceful she felt in his presence.

She stepped away at the bottom of the steps and faced him. “Goodnight, Mr. Darcy.”

“Goodnight, my lady. Sleep well.”



The entire party slept well into the morning. Elizabeth entered the breakfast room and found no one but her cousin Alfred and a man she vaguely recognized but couldn’t remember the name of.

“Good morning, Elizabeth,” said Alfred cheerfully.

“Good morning, Lord Devonshire.”

Alfred shook his head—he disliked being called by his title when amongst family. “Did you meet Captain Williamson yesterday? He arrived late with Charles and Mary.”

“I believe we met briefly at the party,” she said politely. “You’re Mary Williamson’s son?”

“Yes. You and I are second cousins. My grandfather and Lord Asheland’s were brothers.”

“I see. I believe you were always at sea when I met your mother. She’s very kind.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

Elizabeth sat and began preparing her tea and the gentlemen joined her.

“Charles, that is, Mary’s brother, and Robert were friends,” added Alfred.

“Oh?” Elizabeth replied. Robert had been friends with a great deal of people. Since his death, many of them had brought themselves to her notice, hoping she would remember what great friends they had been with her husband. If only they knew how Robert had really felt—he was *friendly* with most people, but *he* only called a select few his friend.

“Yes. He and Mary spent several summers at Cressingdon when they were children,” continued Alfred.

Elizabeth looked up, suddenly suspicious of Alfred. She buttered her scone slowly and said flatly, “Did they? How nice. Cressingdon is lovely in summer. I’m sure they enjoyed it.”

Captain Williamson shifted in his seat and asked about the arrangements for the coming week. Elizabeth answered and when she had finished eating, she asked Alfred to join her in the rose garden.

“What are you planning, cousin?” she asked as soon as they were far enough from the house not to be overheard.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Do not dissemble with me, Alfred. You have no talent for it.”

She glared at him and he looked back stubbornly. She crossed her arms and he sighed heavily, finally saying, “I thought you might like Captain Williamson.”

“You thought I might like him?” she said in confusion. Another look at Alfred’s sheepish expression and she understood. “Alfred! You can’t be serious!”

She walked quickly away from him and he hurried after her.

“What were you thinking?” she hissed over her shoulder and continued walking, her boots crunching on the gravel.

“You seemed interested in marrying again. He is a fine man, from a good family.”

“Yes, this family!” she cried.

“What is so bad about that?” he asked indignantly.

She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Nothing, cousin, you know that. Please do not misconstrue my words. You know I love this family and am happy to be in it.”

They shared an uneasy smile and walked on, more slowly now.

“But do you not think it somewhat... strange... that I would marry into the same family twice?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Possibly, but not necessarily. You need someone you can trust. We have known Captain Williamson his entire life. He is trustworthy and would not treat you unkindly. He would be good to the children. They are his blood, too. It must go some way to engendering affection.”

She tilted her head, considering Alfred’s words. “Your reasoning is sound, but I cannot help but think it odd to marry my own husband’s cousin.”

He took her arm and looped it through his, patting her hand affectionately. “You are a young woman. It is only natural that you would want to remarry.”

“But that is the point! I don’t know that I *do* want to. Remarry, that is. It is all so risky and difficult and there are days when I think it is not worth the trouble.”

“And on other days?” he asked gently.

She sighed. “On other days, I think it sounds like a very good plan,” she said. *As it did last night*, she thought traitorously.

Alfred chuckled lightly. “I must admit to you a little secret, Elizabeth,” he said with amusement. “Many people feel that way about marriage long after the ceremony.”

She laughed.

After a few minutes spent walking in silence, Alfred asked carefully, “Is there someone you would consider marrying? A gentleman you... like?”

She sighed again. “There is someone I have... flirted with. But it has not gone beyond that,” she added hurriedly. “I have tried to imagine the future, and it is unclear to me.”

He gave her a look that told her he thought her silly and she clarified, “When Robert first courted me, my aunt asked me if I could imagine a future with him. Walking, visiting, living a life together. And I could. I could see it all, in my mind, as clear as day. And now, now I cannot see anything! My life stretches before me like some dark sea that I cannot see beneath the surface of. I do not know where I will be, what I will do, or who will be with me when I do it. It is disconcerting.”

He squeezed her hand. “I cannot imagine what you have gone through and how you must feel, but I do know what it is to lose someone you love. I do not wish to make you sad, I just want you to know that I understand such loss, and how grief can surprise you.” He stopped walking and turned to face her. “If you say you are not ready, I will not press you, and neither will the family. But if you are, we will do what we can to support you.”

“Thank you, cousin. That means a great deal to me.”



Over the next two days, Alfred observed Elizabeth closely. He assumed the man she was *flirting* with was here at the house party. *Half of society is at this house party.* He was a little surprised by what he saw.

Mr. Darcy, showing his cousin every attention—*flirting* with her. Mr. Darcy! And Elizabeth returned his flirtations, much of the time. Her cheeks were frequently flushed and when she sent him shy smiles, the man lit up like a torch. And she *smiled* at him! Clearly, Darcy’s attraction was not all on one side. How long had this been going on?

He decided that the length of time did not matter, though he assumed it had begun in Town, probably shortly before Elizabeth came to see him to ask about remarrying.

If Darcy wanted to join the Talbot family—and Alfred viewed it as such; after all, Elizabeth was a Talbot now, quite indelibly—he would have to show himself worthy.

He asked his wife what rumors she had heard about Darcy and his family. There was some gossip about his Fitzwilliam cousins, and one gentleman that seemed particularly wild, but nothing too scandalous or out of the ordinary. Financially, Alfred knew he was sound. He would review Elizabeth’s settlement to ensure her fortune remained intact. He didn’t think Darcy was the kind of man to insert himself into others’

concerns, but if he was, Alfred did not doubt his ability to deal with the situation.

The gentlemen had planned a day of fishing. Young Robert John was being taken by his Uncle Bingley and Mr. Gardiner was bringing his two eldest boys. It was the perfect occasion to have a little sport with Mr. Darcy.

“Good morning!” said Alfred jovially to the men gathered outside the house.

Greetings were mumbled back to him, several of the men clearly unused to being outside at this hour. Alfred chuckled to himself and went about his plan.

“Mr. Darcy, have you met everyone here?” he asked as he joined the younger man on the way to the stream.

“I believe so, though I’m sure there are a few I haven’t been introduced to yet.”

Alfred nodded. He saw his son approaching and called to him. “John, you know Mr. Darcy, don’t you?” He gave his son a significant look and John smiled back. “My eldest son, Lord Epworth.”

“I believe we met some time ago. A pleasure to see you again,” said John affably.

Darcy replied in kind and they spoke of the weather and the fishing. Alfred would greet everyone who came near—and call out to those who didn’t—and introduce them to Darcy.

Had he met his youngest son, Lord George Downing? Did he know Stephen Carew, Robert’s late sister’s husband and

nephew of the Earl of Petherton? Was he acquainted with Lord Stanfield? They were cousins, somewhat distant, but the families preferred to maintain the connection. What about Lord Sedbury's son? The older gentleman had remained at the house but his son had grown up with Robert and Alfred and was a very dear friend.

Mr. Cavendish was connected to Robert through the Edgemonts on Robert's mother's side—his maternal grandmother had been a Cavendish. Did he know that? They were not truly related to the Downings, but they were very friendly nonetheless. Lord Fife was on the McClaren side of the family—the grandmother the first Lady Violet had been named for—and had come especially to visit young Robert on his birthday and see his cousin Lord Sedbury.

The introductions continued, and after a dozen such meetings, Darcy's head was spinning. He seldom felt like the lowliest gentleman when in company, but beside this stream in the English countryside, he realized he might very well be the lowest—and the poorest—man here. It was both ridiculously funny and horrifying at the same time. At least Charles Bingley and Captain Williamson were here; they were nearer to him in rank and his income exceeded Bingley's, and he imagined the captain's as well. But they were both well known to everyone there. The captain had always been part of the family and Bingley had married into it—had been the earl's brother—some time ago. Darcy was the outsider here.

He wondered wryly if there was an earldom in England not represented? He knew the Cavendish cousin was closely

related to the duke, and he'd been told Lord Sedbury's wife was the Duke of Cornwall's niece. And, of course, there was the Marquess performing the introductions.

After a moment of gathering his wits, Darcy looked at Lord Devonshire more closely. The gentleman was enjoying this entirely too much. He had heard Elizabeth speak of "Alfred." She had portrayed him as genial and kind, the sort of man who enjoyed a good joke. Darcy was seeing none of that now, unless... he just happened to be looking their way when Lord Devonshire and Mr. Carew exchanged a conspiratorial glance. In an instant, everything fell into place.

They were testing him.

Darcy straightened to his full height and pulled his shoulders back. He enjoyed a challenge, and he had never backed away from one yet. If they wanted to try him, they would find him ready.

It wasn't until he was preparing for bed that night that Darcy realized something. If the family was testing him, Elizabeth must be seriously considering him.



Darcy sought out Elizabeth the next day. He wanted to see her, to hear her voice, to compliment her and watch the blush form on her cheeks. He found her in the library after breakfast. Several of her extended family members had left that morning, including his own Darcy cousins, and many of the remaining

guests had gone on an excursion. It was the perfect time to seek her out.

He entered the library quietly and closed the door behind him. She was curled up in the window seat, her feet tucked under her and her head resting against the glass. A book lay forgotten by her side.

“Lady Asheland, may I join you?”

“Mr. Darcy!” She jumped up in surprise and smoothed her skirts. “Forgive me, sir, I thought I was alone.”

“You were. Forgive me for surprising you.”

“Just because it is a surprise does not mean it is unwelcome,” she said politely and resumed her seat.

“I had an interesting conversation with your cousin yesterday,” he said. He walked to a shelf and examined the books there, his back to her.

“Lord Devonshire?”

“Yes. He seems to be under the impression that I pose some danger to you.” He turned to face her. She could not read his expression.

“That is preposterous!”

“I’m glad you think so,” he said, moving toward her. “I would never harm you.”

“I know,” she said so quietly he almost didn’t hear her. “Why would Alfred think such a thing?”

“I believe he noticed my attentions, and wanted to let me know you are not alone and unprotected.” She flushed and looked away. He continued, “Of course, his warnings were unnecessary. I knew you weren’t alone, and I would never think you weak.”

She studied the tip of her slipper peeking out from beneath her skirt. *Go on, Lizzy. Don’t be a ninny!* “And just what are your intentions, sir?”

He smiled. “They are purely honorable, I assure you.”

She looked down in disappointment when he didn’t elaborate.

“Lady Asheland, you know how I feel.” She looked up and he was before her. He took her hand in his and held it tightly. “I would declare myself this moment if I thought your answer would be favorable.”

“You would?”

“Yes, I would.”

“What would you say?”

He shook his head. “Oh, no, my lady. I shall not debase myself for your entertainment. When you are ready, then we will hold this conversation in earnest.”

She pursed her lips in annoyance and squinted her eyes. She hated it when he was right. She was not entitled to demand declarations that she had no intention of responding favorably to. Nonetheless, she had her pride.

“I may never be ready for you, Mr. Darcy,” she said haughtily, every inch the wealthy countess.

He looked at her skeptically. “Truly, my lady?”

She looked back at him indignantly. “Truly, sir.”

He sighed and looked down, shaking his head in amusement, then looked back at her.

“Believe what you will, Lady Asheland, but you know what they say about the truth.”

“What?”

“It shall make you free.”

She stared at him in astonishment until he left the room and she was left alone with her unsettling feelings.



Elizabeth rode her mare over the lush green grass, filling her lungs with the warm summer air. She skirted her way around the village until she came to the church at the south end. She tied up her horse and went into the churchyard, making her way to the iron gate that separated the Talbots' plots from the rest of the yard.

Robert's grave was the newest one, a row behind his first two wives and their children. She touched a hand to each of the children's headstones, saying a silent prayer, and stood before her husband's grave. She traced the letters of his name and the date he had died, feeling too many emotions to put

names to any of them. Finally, she sat down and leaned against the stone.

“Alfred thinks I should remarry. And Sylvia. And Jane. Alice has had her say, as I’m sure you can imagine.” There was no reply. She sighed. “Dearest, I wish you were here to advise me—you always knew what to do in difficult situations. I know that is ridiculous. Why would I marry again if you were here?” She plucked at the grass to her side and leaned her head back to look at the sky through the branches of the oak planted just beyond the churchyard wall.

“I think I might be falling in love with Mr. Darcy,” she said quietly. “I know you always liked him. You told me not to judge him harshly, that he wasn’t at his best in mixed company.” She hesitated and twirled a blade of grass between her fingers. “But I think he has found his way in that regard—at least around me. He can be quite charming when he wants to be. And he is a kind man...”

She sighed again and stared at the clouds. “Robert, I am so sorry,” she whispered, tears choking her voice. “Can you forgive me for wanting another man? Do I have a faithless heart?” She exhaled heavily, her shoulders falling.

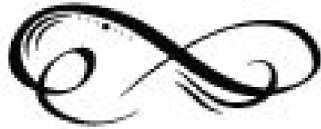
She sat there silently, tears forming tracks down her cheeks. “Do you remember the last thing you said to me? You seemed so earnest, but you were dying! Did you mean it? Do you truly want me to marry and love again? You will not hate me if I do?” she added in a small voice.

She lay her head against the stone and curled her knees beneath her as the sky above darkened. A cloud had moved over the sun and she sat in its shade, remembering her husband's face, the way his arms had felt when they held her, how his lips were smooth against her cheek. She reveled in her memories of him, holding them close and cherishing every bittersweet pang that proved she had not forgotten him.

Finally, after she had lost all sense of time, the sun came out again. She turned her face up and felt its heat on her skin, peace flooding her body.

“All right, my love. I will believe you.” She stood slowly and rested her hand on the headstone, looking at it solemnly. “It is time,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 19



The change in Elizabeth was obvious to Darcy. She smiled more freely, she laughed more often, and most importantly, she did not pull away from him. He asked her to accompany him on a walk in the gardens; she agreed. He offered to join her on a ride with young Robbie and she welcomed him happily. She began seating him nearer and nearer to her at dinner, until finally, she declared one evening that they would dine informally and allowed her guests to choose their own seats. She gave him a look that summoned him to her side with alarming rapidity, and he spent the meal happily engaged in conversation with his lady love.

The morning after the most delightful dinner of his life, Darcy arose early and prepared for a ride. Just as he was about to leave the stables, he saw Elizabeth walking in.

“Will you ride this morning, my lady?” he asked.

“Yes, I will take Marina out.” She seemed to hesitate and he was debating whether he should offer to join her or if it would be wiser to wait for her to invite him when she spoke. “Would you care to join me, Mr. Darcy?”

Her cheeks were flushed and her voice less than confident, but she had invited him and he couldn't help the smile that spread across his face.

“I should like that very much, my lady.”

They ambled over the fields—well away from where Lord Asheland's accident occurred—and they were some distance from the house before they spoke.

“I have a request, Mr. Darcy.”

“Yes, my lady?”

“Violet has been a little jealous of all the attention Robbie has been getting lately, especially from the guests. I wondered, would you like to take tea with the children and me this afternoon?”

She looked at him with a mischievous smile, as if she knew he could not deny her but neither would he wish to say yes. He would surprise her. “I would be delighted.”

She beamed and they rode on in silence for some time.

“Are we still on Cressingdon land?” he asked.

“We've just passed the edge of the estate,” she pointed to a row of trees behind them. “This is Mr. Worthington's land. He doesn't mind if I ride here. His sons often ride at Cressingdon as well. He is a good neighbor.”

Before he could reply, there was a loud rumble of thunder and the horses had to be calmed. They looked at the sky and saw dark clouds rolling in quickly.

“We won’t reach the house before the rain falls. Is there shelter near here?” asked Darcy.

“Yes, less than a mile this way. Follow me,” she called over her shoulder.

They hurried to a small hill partially covered with trees. The sky was quickly darkening and the horses were restless. Elizabeth led him into the trees and dismounted, leading her horse as far into the shelter of the dense branches as she could before tying her to a branch.

“There is an old temple through there.”

She gestured to her left where he saw a partially crumbled stone structure, overgrown with ivy and hidden by branches. He tied his horse next to hers and they ran to the temple, just as the rain began to fall.

Elizabeth removed her riding hat and shook it out, then patted her hair into place and smoothed the front of her dress.

“We made it just in time,” said Mr. Darcy looking out at the steadily falling rain.

“Yes, it is a good thing we were so close.”

Several minutes later, Elizabeth said, “May I ask you a question, Mr. Darcy?”

“Of course.”

“Why did you follow me out into the rain when we were at Netherfield?”

“When we first met? Four years ago?”

“Yes. Was there another time you chased after me and demanded I return to the house that I do not recall?” she teased.

He grinned sheepishly. “I wish I had a better answer for you, but I’m afraid it is as simple as I thought you were doing something foolhardy and as a gentleman, it was my duty to stop you.”

She raised a brow and he could tell she was holding in her laughter. “Do you make a habit of rescuing damsels in distress?” she asked.

He shook his head and looked at his boots, then looked back at her and smiled. “Only very pretty ones, my lady.”

She blushed and shook her head. “I hope you have learned the error of your ways,” she teased.

He walked towards her slowly, his eyes intent on her. “Yes, you put me in my place quite effortlessly.”

She laughed nervously. He was only a yard away. “I should not have lost my temper, but you wouldn’t move out of my way!” she cried. He was an arm’s length from her now. “You left me no alternative,” she said breathily, leaning her head back to look into his eyes. She did not step away.

He was directly in front of her now, his bright eyes burning with a passion she had never seen there before. “You were beautiful.”

“Even though I resembled a half-drowned cat?” she jested weakly.

“Beautiful.” His voice deepened. “Just as you are today.” He reached out and tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear. “I was thoroughly irritated to be attracted to such a stubborn creature.”

She almost laughed, the sound sticking in her throat and coming out in a breathy gust. He continued to touch her face, tracing his fingers over her brows, the line of her nose, down her jaw and across her lips.

She watched him, the rain falling in a steady rhythm around them, her heart beating wildly in her chest, her mind whirling with possibilities.

He held her face tenderly, searching her frightened eyes, and whispered, “Let me love you, my lady. Do not push me away.” He stroked her cheek. “Your heart is safe with me, I swear it.”

She stared at him for a long moment, her heart pounding, and swallowed heavily. Finally, when he thought he would burst from waiting, she pushed up onto her toes and tentatively pressed her lips to his. Slowly, she placed her hands on his shoulders and pulled back to look into his eyes. Why had she ever thought they were a cold shade of blue?

They stared at each other for a moment, breath ragged, then all at once he pulled her to him and crushed his lips against hers. She wrapped her arms around his neck and ran her hands into his hair. He pulled her body into his, so tightly that her feet were off the floor. His hands ran up and down her back, seeking, exploring, and she moaned softly into his ear when he kissed her neck.

She was pure delight—he had never felt so much joy and fervor and fire all at once. His skin felt hot and his mouth wanted to taste every bit of her that she would allow him.

Elizabeth was awash in sensation. She flushed and cooled and flushed again. Every nerve was alive and she nearly cried with elation when he ran his strong hands over her body. She clutched him to her, not wanting him to retreat an inch, and ran her hands over his back, through his hair, down the length of his strong arms. Had anything ever felt so heavenly?

A loud cracking sound startled them both and they looked up to see a branch falling from a nearby tree. They stared at each other, breathing heavily, until Elizabeth looked out and commented that the rain was slowing. His arms were still wrapped around her back and her hands were on his elbows.

“Elizabeth,” he said softly.

She turned away from the rain and looked at him, startled. “I believe that is the first time you have ever called me that.”

“Do you like it?”

“I do. You may say it again, if you like.”

“I do like. Elizabeth,” he said deliberately. He smiled and she couldn’t help but return it. He stroked the hair at her temple and pushed away a curl that insisted on falling forward. “I have been wanting to do that for a very long time.”

“Kiss me or say my name?” she asked impishly.

“Both,” he said and kissed her swiftly.

She laughed.



Elizabeth hurried to the nursery for tea with the children. She had been talking to her cousin Marianne, Alfred's daughter, who was expecting her second babe. Marianne had a hundred questions for Elizabeth and when those were answered, she wanted to complain about her mother-in-law, the dowager countess.

Marianne had always been a perfectly sweet girl with a pretty face and good prospects. When her uncle died and her father was declared the new heir to the marquess, she went from being a girl with good prospects to one with wildly high expectations overnight. Her dowry was increased and she was declared a great beauty, for the daughter of a marquess would always be more desirable than the niece of one.

Unsurprisingly, Marianne Downing had married the Earl of Rockingham and was in the process of producing an heir for her husband. She desperately hoped this one was a boy, for her last had been a girl and her husband had been dreadfully disappointed. Marianne would never admit it to anyone but Elizabeth, but sometimes she wished her father had never inherited and she had remained merely pretty and moderately dowered, and married a nice gentleman with a simple country estate, or perhaps even a colonel in the regulars.

Elizabeth sympathized, of course, and could understand her cousin's frustration. But she really did need to go to the

nursery. Her children were waiting. Marianne offered to go with her, but Elizabeth insisted she should rest. For the sake of the baby, of course.

Finally, she burst into the nursery just as the maid was setting down the tray. The children were dressed in their best clothes and Violet was wearing an old pair of lace gloves Elizabeth had cut down for her. But nothing prepared her for the sight of Mr. Darcy, sitting between Violet and Robbie, his knees nearly up around his chin.

Her hand covered her mouth before a laugh could escape. “Mr. Darcy! There are larger chairs if you would prefer.”

“I’m quite comfortable, my lady, thank you.”

“Very well.”

Elizabeth sat in one of the small chairs around the children’s table. She often sat with them there, if only because they were more comfortable that way and she was not so tall that it was difficult for her. But there was a larger table across the room. She was surprised that he had not suggested it.

She poured tea for her children and Mr. Darcy, and let Violet choose her own sugar lump. There was a small argument over the last orange cake, but it was quickly resolved when Elizabeth cut it in half and split it between her sons.

“Master Bennet, I understand you want a dog of your own,” said Mr. Darcy.

Bennet blanched in his seat beside his mother and then burrowed his head into her arm.

“Bennet is the shy one in the family,” she said with a smile. She gently pried him from her side and asked him, “Do you still want a puppy, Ben?”

He nodded and glanced at Mr. Darcy briefly before diving back into his mother’s side.

She kissed the top of his head and lifted him into her lap. “Is that better, love?”

Bennet nodded and from the safety of his mother’s lap, was willing to look at Mr. Darcy. He only spoke a few words, generally yes or no, but he was only two-and-a-half. Darcy was inordinately proud of himself when he made the young boy smile.

When tea was over he bowed to the children and kissed Lady Violet’s hand and she giggled, giving him a wobbly curtsy. Elizabeth told them she would come to see them before they went to bed and they left the nursery together.

“I wasn’t sure you would be here,” she said quietly as they walked down the hall.

“I always keep my promises, my lady,” he said seriously.

She stopped walking and looked at him appraisingly—at his strong back and broad shoulders, the proud tilt to his chin, the impressive height of him. She sighed.

Yes, he kept his promises.

And now she must keep hers.



Once she had made up her mind about something, Elizabeth was quick to act on her decision. She spent the evening examining her feelings and running a hundred possible outcomes through her mind. She was inattentive at dinner and nearly wore a hole in her carpet with her pacing that night. In the end, she knew she must speak to Mr. Darcy. She had resolved her feelings, and now it was time to resolve the details.

Darcy was dressing for the day when he received a note. Elizabeth was requesting he meet her at the summer house on the other side of the lake. Pleased and more than a little curious, he changed into his riding clothes and called for his horse.

The summer house was situated on a gentle rise and secluded on one side. He found it easily enough and tied his horse next to Elizabeth's mare. He stood at the entrance, silently watching her pace back and forth.

“Good morning, Lady Asheland,” he said.

She stopped pacing and turned to face him. “Good morning, Mr. Darcy. I think you should call me Elizabeth while we are here.”

His brows shot up. “Really?”

“Yes. I thought we could have an earnest conversation.”

His eyes brightened in understanding. “Very well, Elizabeth. You have my attention.”

She blushed when he said her name. “Mr. Darcy—”

“Fitzwilliam,” he interrupted her.

“I beg your pardon?”

“My name is Fitzwilliam. If I am to call you by your Christian name, you should call me by mine. Elizabeth,” he said the last with a warm glance and a half smile and she felt a flock of butterflies take flight in her stomach.

“Very well, Fitzwilliam,” she said softly. “You said your intentions are honorable.”

He nodded.

“I assume that means marriage?” she asked.

He nodded again. “Are we having that conversation, Elizabeth?”

“Partially,” she said softly. It was difficult to concentrate when he looked at her like that. His expression showed his confusion and she clarified. “Before I could in good conscience accept any proposal, or even hear one, I would have to discuss some... details with the gentleman.”

“And I am the gentleman in this case?” he said with an amused smile.

“Must you make jokes now?” she cried.

“Forgive me, my dear. You were discussing details. I am listening,” he said steadily. His eyes were still full of

happiness but she supposed she couldn't fault him for that.

“Yes, details. I have three children, Mr. Darcy. I cannot enter into any marriage without considering it very carefully.”

“Of course. You know I am already very fond of Robert John. And Lady Violet is charming. I have not spent much time with Bennet as yet, but I am sure we will get along admirably.”

She smiled. “Thank you, that is kind of you to say. I am sure you are right, and I know you are a kind man. My brother Bingley gives me every assurance of your honor and goodness.”

I shall have to thank him, thought Darcy to himself.

“I'm sure you have seen that I spend a great deal of time with my children?”

He nodded.

“I would not want that to change. I want to continue to care for them as I have done, and any other children that come along. I am trusting your honor and asking you to tell me the truth, Mr. Darcy. Would you interfere in the raising of my children? Or demand any we had together be raised differently?”

He looked at her solemnly, realizing the weight of his answer. “No, I have no intention of interfering with your children, the earl's children, that is. I quite admire the way you are bringing them up. They are delightful and I have often

thought you an excellent mother, even when the earl was still alive. I have no desire to change that.”

She flushed at his praise. “And what of any children we have together?”

He took a deep breath and walked several steps away and back again. “You know, the day I decided I would not abandon my pursuit of you, it was because of your care for young Robert.”

She looked at him in surprise and he continued.

“You had come to collect Robbie from his riding lesson and had not known I would be there. It was shortly after our quarrel.”

“I remember,” she said softly.

“I thought he was a lucky boy, to have such a mother. I was actually jealous of him, if you can believe it. I wished I had had such a mother. And then I wished it for my children. That they would know the warmth of a mother’s affection—of *your* affection. I knew then that I could see no other woman as my wife. I was so in love with every aspect of you—even the ones that had nothing to do with me. I would never be satisfied with anyone else.”

Her mouth opened slightly and she stared at him, unable to think of anything to say.

“Elizabeth, if we were blessed with children, I would hope that you would love them as lavishly as you have your other

children, and teach me to do so as well. They could only benefit from your attention.”

Elizabeth stared at him, feeling an almost overwhelming desire to throw herself into his arms. “Do you mean that?”

“Every word.”

She embraced him then, her arms wrapped tightly around his middle and her head on his shoulder. He held her tightly and a relieved sigh escaped her as her body relaxed against his.

“Where would we live?” she asked quietly, her voice muffled by his coat.

He looked to the floor. This was a truly difficult question. “If we were to have a son, he should be raised at Pemberley. He must learn to love the estate,” he said softly.

She nodded. She had expected this. “Robert should be raised at Cressington—it will be his one day. He should learn to love it.” She pulled back to look at him and imagined the sad look of resignation on his face matched the one on hers.

“I will not give you up because we cannot agree on where to live,” he said with determination.

“Perhaps we can come to an agreeable solution?” she asked hopefully.

“We needn’t spend the entire Season in Town; a few weeks would suffice,” he said. “Some years we could even avoid it altogether.”

Understanding what he was doing, she said, “I assume you like to be at Pemberley in spring for the planting?”

“Yes, but we could easily spend the summer between here and Derbyshire.”

“And it is only forty miles.”

“And what is forty miles of good road? Merely half a day’s travel.”

“Winter is lovely at Cressington,” she said.

“Pemberley will be covered in snow.”

“We could travel before the roads become difficult.”

“And we needn’t follow the same pattern each year. We may alter our plans if we like,” he pulled her closer, excitement building in his chest.

“So I must not give up my children’s home?”

“I would never ask it of you.”

He took both her hands in his and brought them to his chest. “Are there any other details we need to discuss?” he asked gently.

She looked down for a long moment, then raised her head and said, “No, dearest, that is enough.”

He looked at her in surprise and she couldn’t help but note how much the expression of heartfelt delight, diffused over his face, became him. “You are very dear to me, Fitzwilliam. How could you not be?” she said softly.

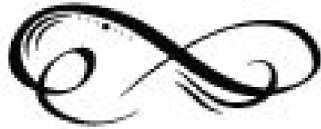
He kissed her then. Gently, tentatively, until she relaxed against him and he wrapped his arms around her, one hand pulling her waist to him, the other on the back of her neck, gently caressing the curls that fell there.

He pulled back and looked at her with heavy-lidded eyes. “Will you marry me now?”

She smiled and he thought his heart would stop while he awaited her answer.

“Yes, Fitzwilliam. I will marry you.”

CHAPTER 20



Elizabeth spent the remainder of her day being inattentive to her guests, humming softly to herself, and gazing wistfully out of windows or at whatever piece of furniture was nearest. They had not discussed whom they would tell first or when—they had been too busy with more pleasant pursuits. Thankfully, only close family remained and they did not mind if their hostess was a little less gregarious than usual.

After dinner, Lydia and Georgiana suggested a walk in the gardens and half the party agreed, including Elizabeth and Darcy. They walked arm in arm through the twilight, falling far behind their party and whispering between themselves. She did not want to ruin the evening, but she knew there was something she must speak of.

“Fitzwilliam?”

“Yes, my heart?”

She smiled and felt heat rushing to her cheeks. It would take some time to become accustomed to his terms of endearment.

“There is something we did not discuss.”

“Go ahead, my dear,” he said kindly. Whatever she wanted to say, it obviously weighed on her heavily.

“I am a widow,” she said haltingly. “I loved my husband. It was not a marriage of convenience. I couldn’t, I won’t be able to,” she stuttered and sighed heavily.

“Elizabeth, what are you trying to tell me?”

“There will still be days when I miss him, when I wish he was here to watch our children grow up. I would not want my husband to be angry with me for that,” she said in a small voice, her eyes on the path.

Darcy hesitated a moment, wondering how to respond. “Of course. He was a great man. I was proud to know him, and to be called his friend. That you find me worthy, after having been married to such a man, is a very great compliment,” he said solemnly.

Elizabeth felt tears pricking at her eyes and she swallowed thickly. “Thank you, Fitzwilliam. I’m happy to see I underestimated your kindness.”

“I know how you felt about him. It does not make me love you less. It makes me respect you more. But Elizabeth,” he said, stepping in front of her and taking her hands in his, “I want all of you—every corner of your heart. I am too selfish to share you. If you feel sorrow, so be it, but you must share it with me. I want every joy and pain and triumph. I will be as a father to your children and live in your home and welcome your family. But you,” he squeezed her hands, “you Elizabeth, *you* must be mine. And mine alone.” He looked at her fiercely,

blue eyes burning into green. “If you cannot do that, we should have nothing more to do with each other.”

She watched him with wide eyes, her breath coming rapidly and her mouth open in surprise. She felt such a wave of fire in her she nearly lost her breath.

“I will be yours, Fitzwilliam. Yours alone,” she whispered.

Anything else she might have said was muted by his lips pressing against hers.



Though they had discussed many things, it didn't take Darcy long to realize they had missed an important detail: the wedding date. He would like to wed as soon as possible, but he suspected his lady might require more time. And, of course, there were the children to consider. Would he move into Cressington? Would the family move to Pemberley? He suspected that no matter how much he might wish for a brief engagement, there was little likelihood of it coming to pass.

Elizabeth was also wondering about the date. How had they not discussed it yesterday? It seemed as if they had spoken of nearly everything else. She would like to wed as soon as possible—she simply saw no reason to delay. She told herself that her need to be near him constantly was not unduly influencing her decision. But the settlement would need to be drawn up and she suspected it would be a complicated business. She also had to have an awkward conversation with her children. Would they even understand what she was telling

them? And where would they live? They had agreed to decide the details later, but immediately following the wedding, they would have to sleep somewhere.

Mr. Darcy must want to take her to Pemberley. She had never seen it and while she was not particularly concerned—she did have Cressington, after all—it would be nice if she liked her new husband’s home.

She knew everyone would ask for more information than she currently had as soon as they knew of the impending wedding, so it was best to seek out Mr. Darcy and decide upon a few matters first. She knew that once her mother found out there was another wedding in the near future, there would be no peace until she walked down the aisle. She was tempted to let them return to Hertfordshire without telling them her news, but they would not be able to travel back for the wedding and would most likely not forgive her for such a slight.

With a deep breath, she went to find her betrothed.

“Mr. Darcy,” she said when she found him on the stairs, “I was just coming to look for you.”

“And I you, my lady. We have things to discuss.”

She wondered how he managed to make such a simple statement sound so utterly appealing.

“Yes, we do. Shall you join me in the parlor?”

She led him to her favorite room, a west-facing parlor she had redone when she first moved to Cressington. As soon as they were inside, he grabbed her arm and pulled her to him,

trapping her between himself and the wall. She accepted his kiss hungrily, her hands reaching into his hair. She pulled it gently and he groaned in sweet agony.

He finally released her mouth, resting his forehead against hers and doing nothing but reminding himself to breathe until she opened her eyes and looked at him in that way that always made him feel incoherent and a little desperate. He pulled back and straightened his jacket, then tucked a loose tendril of her hair behind her ear. “We should choose a wedding date. Soon,” he whispered.

“That might be wise.” She stepped away from him and settled into a chair near the window. “When would you like to wed?”

“As soon as possible.”

She laughed. “Mr. Darcy, while I certainly appreciate your enthusiasm, we must be realistic. There are letters to write, lawyers to consult, decisions to be made.”

“I’ve already written to my lawyer. As soon as we have chosen a date, I will send letters to my family. What else needs to be done?”

She laughed at his tone and said, “I had no idea you were so efficient. We have been engaged less than two days and already you are planning for the future.”

“Elizabeth, I have been planning this in my mind for a very long time. Now I am merely setting those plans into motion.”

She felt heat rushing to her cheeks as he gazed at her fervently and began to think he had the right of it. "I must speak to Alfred. He is in charge of my business matters," she said softly, still watching him watch her.

"Of course. Would you like to marry from Cressingdon?"

"I think it appropriate, don't you? It would be inconvenient to travel to London, and it is uncomfortably warm this time of year. I had hoped for a small celebration. What had you imagined?"

"I would also like something small. Only my family and yours, if it suits you."

"I'm afraid my family is rather large, but they may not all make the journey, especially since they have just been here."

He nodded. "Do you think Lord Devonshire could manage the necessary documents in a few weeks?"

"I do not know. I shall ask him. Where would we go following the wedding?"

"We could go to Pemberley. Or even The Lakes, if you like."

"I would love to see Pemberley, and I have never been to The Lakes," she said with excitement. "We had talked of going, but every summer I was with child and the one time I wasn't, Robert's cousin died and we had to travel to Yorkshire instead."

He smiled. This was something he could give her. It was not easy courting a woman like Lady Asheland. What could he

give her that she did not have already? He was pleased such a mutually beneficial arrangement had presented itself.

“So it is settled. We will wed from Cressington as soon as we may, and travel to The Lakes,” he said decisively. “We can break our journey at Pemberley.”

“I will ask Jane if the children may go to Hatfield Hall while we are away. I would like to travel there from The Lakes. I promised Jane I would be with her for her lying in.”

“Of course. I will speak to Bingley.”

She smiled, feeling a sense of disbelief that all had been worked out so quickly and satisfactorily. “I suppose I should go speak to Alfred now.”

“I should speak with him as well,” he said. “I should ask for your hand and his blessing.”

“Alfred is not my father, Fitzwilliam. I am of age—a widow with three children. You do not need to ask anyone’s permission but my own.”

“Then let us call it his blessing. I believe he would appreciate being asked,” he said convincingly.

“Very well,” she conceded.

He rose and extended his hand. “Shall I escort you to Lord Devonshire?”



Elizabeth sat before Alfred, wondering how to word what she wanted to say. In the end, she decided bluntness was called for and simply said, "I have decided to marry."

"Oh? And who is the lucky gentleman?"

Alfred wasn't nearly as surprised as she thought he would be and she briefly wondered if he somehow knew what she was going to say.

"Mr. Darcy."

He nodded. "Very well. When will you wed?"

"Alfred!" she cried. "Why are you not more surprised?"

He chuckled. "Forgive me, my dear, but you are not as circumspect as you think you are. Mr. Darcy has been obvious in his attentions and it was clear to anyone who knew you that you were not immune to him."

Elizabeth sighed. "Perhaps I shouldn't even make an announcement, since everyone seems to know already."

He laughed again, more loudly this time. "Elizabeth, you are a treasure! What will we do without your humor?"

"You are not losing me, Alfred. We will still spend a great deal of time here, especially in the beginning. Mr. Darcy will not insist we live at Pemberley until I bear a son."

His brows rose. "Are you sure of that? Most men have a great deal of pride in their family seat, especially one such as Pemberley."

“You were friends with Mr. Darcy’s father, were you not?” she asked, unwilling to discuss her living arrangements.

“Yes. He was slightly older than I was, but we knew each other at Cambridge. He was a good man, very affable—always generous to the poor.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Is Pemberley very beautiful?”

“It is. It is a large estate, nearly the size of Cressington. There may even be enough walking paths to satisfy you!”

She laughed with him and then asked if he would arrange her settlement and other business matters. Once she had his agreement, she sought out her sister.



While Elizabeth was speaking to her sister, Mr. Darcy was meeting with his. He asked her to join him for a walk in the garden and they strolled arm in arm, Georgiana quietly telling her brother of the plans she was making with Lydia and the ribbons she had purchased for Violet’s birthday. He listened to her lilting voice with a smile on his face.

“I have something to tell you, sweetling,” he said. “I am to be married.”

“You are?” Georgiana gaped at him. “To Lady Asheland?”

“Yes. You like her, do you not?”

“Yes, of course I like her. She has been very kind to me.” She looked down and asked quietly. “Where will you live?”

“We thought we would divide our time between here and Pemberley, and of course London. Robert John will inherit the estate, he should live here at least some of the year. Once he goes away to school, we will likely spend more time at Pemberley, though that is some years in the future.”

She nodded, her eyes still on the ground.

He stopped walking and turned towards her. “Georgie, are you unhappy about my marriage?” he asked warily.

“No! I know you care for Lady Asheland and it is obvious she cares a great deal for you.”

He couldn’t help the swell of happiness her words caused. But Georgiana was clearly upset. “What troubles you, dearest?”

“Will I live with Lady Catherine or Lord Matlock?” she asked quietly.

“What? Why would you live with either of them? Georgiana,” he tipped her chin up so he could see her face, “do you not wish to live with me any longer?”

She sniffled. “No, of course not. But you will be newly married and Lady Asheland will not wish to share you with a younger sister.”

He smiled kindly at her. “Georgie, I am already sharing Lady Asheland with three small children. Surely you do not think you are more troublesome than they are,” he teased. She did not look cheered and he looked at her seriously. “You are my blood. Your home is with me.”

“Truly?” she asked tremulously.

“Always.”



Elizabeth sat with Jane in her private parlor and told her sister she had decided to marry Mr. Darcy. He had pursued her for some time, and she felt she could trust him because of their long acquaintance and his friendship with Bingley.

Jane stared at her sister silently for some time, then said, “I don’t know what to say! I am shocked! I had no idea that you were warming to Mr. Darcy.”

“Truly?”

Jane shook her head. “I had hoped you would, and I occasionally thought you were friendly. There was some flirtation, but you often flirt, so I thought nothing of it.”

“I do not flirt!”

Jane shot her a look. “You have always enjoyed a little raillery, Lizzy. It is in your nature. In truth, I was glad to see you teasing again. Your humor has been absent for some time.”

“Since Robert’s death, you mean. You may say it, Jane. He will not be any more dead if you do.”

Jane shook her head. “Lizzy, I am happy for you. But are you certain you feel for Mr. Darcy what you ought? Do you care for him? Truly?”

Elizabeth looked down and traced her fingers over her skirt. “I care for him, Jane. I am well on my way to being in love with him.”

“Then I must congratulate you. Mr. Darcy is a good man. You will be very happy together.”

Elizabeth smiled and thanked her, then sought out her aunt.



Her Aunt Gardiner had a similar reaction when she told her later that day.

“Mr. Darcy? Truly?”

“Oh, dear! If you and Jane do not believe me, how will I tell mama and papa?” she cried in amusement.

Mrs. Gardiner laughed. “I believe you, dear. I was merely surprised. It has been clear Mr. Darcy is in love with you but I thought you would put him off a while longer before you gave in and accepted him.”

Elizabeth gasped. “Did you truly think I would do such a thing? I am not the sort of lady to torment a respectable man!”

“No, but you are a lady who has lost a beloved husband and it is not strange to think it might be difficult for you to receive another man in his stead.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I loved Robert, truly loved him. But I was so young. A girl, really. As I grew up I loved him more,

but I sometimes wonder what it would have been like had we met each other when I was older,” she said thoughtfully.

“You will never know. Perhaps it would have been just the same. Or perhaps you would have behaved differently after being out longer in society. Perhaps Asheland would have been lonely and you would have been desperate to get away from Longbourn. It will have to remain a mystery.”

Elizabeth nodded. “It is different, with Mr. Darcy. I am full grown now. I do not view the world in the same way as I did when I married Robert. Things feel very... different this time.”

“That is only natural. You were eighteen when you married Robert. You are four and twenty now.” She looked at Elizabeth sternly. “You must not compare them. They are different men and will each love you differently. Comparing them will only drive you to distraction.”

“I know you are correct. I will consider each man in his own right,” agreed Elizabeth.

“And regardless of how much you loved Robert, the sad truth is that he is not here, and other gentlemen are. If Mr. Darcy wants to marry you, and you care for him and believe you could be happy together, do not let silly fears restrain you. You must live life, Elizabeth.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more.”



The conversation Elizabeth was dreading the most was with her children. She had no idea what to say to them or how to explain it in a way that they would understand. In the end, she decided to just begin and hope the words would come to her.

She went to the nursery, dismissed Molly, and sat down with Bennet. He was building a tower with blocks and she began building one next to him. She called Robbie and Violet to her and told them she had some important news for them.

“Mama is going to be married.” Three blank faces looked back at her and she would have laughed had she not felt so wretched. “Do you remember Mr. Darcy? He took tea with you a few days ago.”

Robbie said he remembered, of course, and Violet nodded her head.

“Mr. Darcy and I will be married soon. That means we will go to the church and have a ceremony, and afterward we will live together and be husband and wife.”

The children continued playing, a simple, “All right, mama,” in Violet’s high voice was all she heard from them.

“Will you tie this ribbon on my doll’s hair? It came undone.” Violet thrust a doll and a yellow ribbon into her hands and she mechanically tied it.

“So Mr. Darcy will live with us. All the time. Sometimes we will live here at Cressington, or we may be in Town like we were this spring, or we will stay at Mr. Darcy’s home. It’s called Pemberley,” she said brightly, smiling at them.

“Pempemley,” said Bennet loudly. Then he knocked over his tower of blocks and squealed with glee as they tumbled to the floor.

Elizabeth looked at them with a frown. She didn’t know what else to say to explain to them what was happening, and they didn’t seem upset. They didn’t seem to care at all! She was mildly disappointed—it was a momentous occasion and her children were the most important people in her life. But she recognized that they were too young to realize how much was changing and that it was probably a blessing in disguise. In this way they would not resent Mr. Darcy for stealing their mother’s attention or feel that anyone was trying to replace their father as they might have done had they been older.

“After the wedding, I will go on a trip with Mr. Darcy, and you will go to Aunt Jane’s house with Molly. Aunt Lydia will be there, and Charlie and Jenny. Aunt Gardiner and the children will be there, too. And maybe even Miss Georgiana.”

“Miss Georgie?” asked Violet, suddenly interested.

Violet had taken an instant liking to Georgiana when they met. Lydia called her Georgie and Violet copied her aunt. Georgiana liked it and refused to let anyone correct the child.

“Yes, would you like that?”

Violet nodded her head vigorously and Elizabeth sighed in relief. All would be well.



Darcy tied his horse to a branch and entered the churchyard, quickly making his way through the creaking gate to the graves at the back. He stopped in front of Lord Asheland's grave and removed his hat. Darcy was not a superstitious man, but Lord Asheland had been a friend and he thought it only right that he pay his respects.

He took a deep breath and began.

"I do not know what to say." He hesitated. "I am marrying Elizabeth. That is, Lady Asheland," he added quickly. "She is, she is everything I ever wanted," he said quietly. "I see why you were willing to defy society to have her." He looked down and tapped his hat on his leg. "I cannot imagine...leaving her...losing her. That must have been... impossible." He rolled a small rock beneath his boot. "I wanted to tell you that she will be well looked after. She will want for nothing."

He turned his hat in his hands. "Young Robert John is a credit to you. I have no doubt he will grow into a fine man. You would be proud. Lady Violet is as delightful as her mother. Her eyes sparkle when she laughs, just like Elizabeth's," he said with a fond smile. "Bennet is shy, but I believe I understand him." He paused for a minute, thinking on what he should say.

"I am taking Robbie fishing tomorrow. Bennet wanted to come but Elizabeth thought it best that we go on our own. She thinks Robbie admires me," he said with a slight flush. "He is a fine boy. Intelligent, kind. He looks like you." Darcy glanced to the sky, then back at the silent headstone. "I cannot imagine

my son being raised by another man. It would be... insupportable.” He squared his shoulders. “You have my word that I will be a good father to your children. I will look after them and guide them to the best of my abilities. And I will not insist they forget you. I will ensure Robert John is proud of his heritage. I would never deny him that. You have my word as a gentleman.”

He took a deep breath. “One other thing we should discuss.” He looked at Robert’s name on the headstone. “I know you loved Elizabeth, and she loved you in return. But she is mine now,” he said solemnly. He placed his hat on his head and straightened. “I’m glad we understand each other.” He bowed slightly and left the churchyard.

CHAPTER 21



Elizabeth peeked out of her room and looked around. All was quiet. There were no footmen about and she could barely see by the moonlight coming through the window at the end of the corridor. She tiptoed away from the apartments where her guests were sleeping and slipped up the back stairwell. Once on the deserted third floor, she quickly rushed across the north wing and paused when she reached the main stairwell, a grand affair that reached four floors. Hearing nothing, she tiptoed across the hall, making sure to stay in the shadows, until she reached the south wing. Nearly all her guests had gone home and the rooms were empty. She slipped down the stairs at the end of the corridor and back onto the second floor, now in the guest wing. Some of these rooms were occupied and she crept along quietly, listening for sounds of movement. All was silent. She counted the doors until she reached the green bedchamber.

“What are you doing, Lizzy?”

She jumped a foot in the air and brought a hand to her chest.
“John! You scared me!”

He smirked in the moonlight and stepped closer. “Going on a call?”

She gave him a nasty look. “No. I was merely checking on something.”

He raised his brows. “Hm. Is that so? And what are you wearing under your wrapper?”

She gasped and clutched it closer to her. “I beg your pardon!” she cried.

He laughed. “You do not fool me, Lizzy. I can see the hem of your gown.” He looked down and she followed his gaze. The ruffled skirt of her morning dress—put on so she might have something to wear the next day—was clearly visible.

She clenched her teeth and exhaled forcibly. “This is my home. I may go where I like.”

“Oh, in that case, please allow me to escort you.” He gallantly extended his arm and she took it grudgingly. “Tell me, Lizzy, do you often go on nighttime rambles in inappropriate clothes?” he asked as they began walking toward her room.

“That is Lady Asheland to you, *Johnny*,” she said haughtily.

Her cousin only laughed as they walked away.

Shortly after they left the corridor, Mr. Darcy poked his head out of the green bedchamber. He could have sworn he’d heard voices.



Elizabeth spent the next day thinking of ways to be alone with Mr. Darcy. She wouldn't have thought it would be so difficult. They were both adults, there were no chaperones, and she was a widow living in her own home. But because the wedding was so near, her close family had stayed longer than they had originally planned in order to attend. Thus the Bingleys, Bennets, and Gardiners, her sister Lydia and his sister Georgiana, Lord and Lady Devonshire, their daughter Marianne and her husband, and their sons Lord Epworth (known to Elizabeth as Meddlesome John) and Lord George Downing, were all staying at the house.

She was happy to have them, and the children were certainly enjoying being with their relations, but it did make clandestine meetings more difficult to achieve.

After much deliberation, she realized her error. She had attempted to make her way to Mr. Darcy's room. It was only natural she had run into John. His room was near to Mr. Darcy's, as were his brother and sister's as well as Lydia and Georgiana's adjoined chambers. Elizabeth's own room was out of the question. Not only was it near the rooms her parents and sisters were staying in, but it was also the same room she had shared with Robert. Having a lover in her husband's bedchamber was insupportable—she couldn't think of it.

Finally, she came upon a solution. The third floor was now unoccupied and boasted a great number of comfortable

bedchambers. She herself had never stayed in one, but the guests had never complained. In fact, there was one in particular that she had always favored. It was decorated in soft colors that reminded her of spring and had a lovely view of the lake in the distance. It would be the perfect location.

She sent Mr. Darcy a note the next day. In it, she merely listed directions to the room and a time late that evening. She never wondered if he would be offended by her suggestion until she was preparing for bed, then she quickly dismissed the thought. They would be married in less than a month, and he had spent the last weeks stealing kisses whenever he could and looking at her with such naked desire she blushed thinking about it.

She had asked Watson, her maid, to personally prepare the room for use. She then took a gown and some basic supplies for the morning and stored them in the dressing room. She locked the chamber behind her. Only Mrs. Hobbs had another key and the housekeeper had no reason to go there. They would be assured privacy, and then she could spend the night there and ready herself in the morning without having to creep back to her room at the break of dawn.

She was rather proud of herself for her ingenuity.

She slipped a dressing gown over her plain white nightshift—under which was a prettier nightgown in the event she needed to feel more alluring—and stepped into the hall. All was quiet and her cousin John was on the other side of the floor in another wing. She crept along the dark corridor to the

back staircase as she had done the night before. Once she was on the third floor, she made her way swiftly to the room she had chosen and unlocked the door. The other benefit of this room, besides its comfort and seclusion, was that the room beneath was her parlor and sure to be empty in the night. Satisfied with her preparations so far, she lit a candle on the far wall and removed her dressing gown. She draped it over the back of a chair and released her hair from its braid. She wondered if she should change her nightgown.

Deciding that she had come this far, what was one step further, she slipped off her linen nightshift and put her dressing gown back on over her silk nightgown. Darcy had complimented her each time she wore green, so she had chosen this nightgown with him in mind. She thought he would like the warm color, and hoped he liked the daring cut even more.

She opened the window for some fresh air. It had been a warm August, but the nights were cool and a breeze wafted into the room.

As she waited for her betrothed, she reflected on how different she felt from what she had expected. She had thought the first time she spent the night with another man would be difficult and uncomfortable, maybe even frightening. But she felt nothing but anticipation. She was a little nervous, of course, but it was a good kind of nervous—the kind of excitement that precedes something momentous.

She supposed she could have waited until the wedding, and while she had a litany of reasons prepared in the unlikely event that she had to defend herself to her family (namely Jane or her Aunt Gardiner), the truth of it was that she simply did not want to wait. She had been alone for two and a half long years, and she wanted to feel the man she loved embracing her in passion. She wanted to feel his heart beating against hers, their heated skin pressed together as they chased their pleasure.

That was the heart of the matter. She loved Mr. Darcy, and she wanted to show him that in the best way she knew how. It was as simple as that.

Her love for him had surprised her in its intensity. She thought she was familiar with the feeling; after all, she had been in love before. But what she felt for Mr. Darcy was so different from what she had felt for Robert that the two were hardly comparable.

She had not loved Robert when she accepted him. Rather, she knew that she *could* love him. He was a dear friend that she knew she could be happy with; she respected and esteemed him. She had felt attraction, and the knowledge that he loved her was very compelling. He had been so wholly devoted to her, to their marriage and their family, that she could not help but be moved by his tenderness and care. By the time they said their vows, she was able to promise to love him with honesty and great joy.

When she accepted Mr. Darcy, she had not loved him completely, though she knew she was vastly approaching the

ledge over which there would be no return. She cared for him and enjoyed his company; she respected and liked him. She was attracted to him. She knew that courtship and marriage could do much to strengthen the bond between a man and a woman, and she had expected it to take its natural course over their betrothal; when she said her vows, she would mean them with all her heart.

She could not have been more wrong. She was not growing in respect and love for Mr. Darcy.

She was consumed by it.

Every action, every word, every morning spent riding with him and afternoon taking tea with the children only proved to her that he was the man, in disposition and talents, most suited to her. She could not adequately describe her feelings, but she felt herself so much more grown up than the first time she had loved, so much more aware of what she wanted and the place she wished to occupy in the world. This increased awareness of herself, of her own wishes and desires, changed how she felt about everyone else—especially the men she loved.

She had promised her aunt she would not compare the two men in her life, and she tried not to, but she could not help but note that *she* was not the same eighteen-year-old girl that had fallen in love the first time. If she herself was not the same, how could she expect her experiences to be the same?

What she felt for Robert was brought on by what he had felt for her. Had he never loved her and pursued her, she may never have come to feel more for him than friendship. It did

not lessen the love she felt for him, but it did change its composition.

While Mr. Darcy had similarly made his feelings known before she was aware of her own, he had not tenderly ushered her into affection. He had challenged her, angered her, and thoroughly perplexed her until she found herself knee-deep in feelings she could not understand. He had awakened a fire in her she did not know she possessed. His courtship had been so full of missteps, and yet she had seen his heart, in all its many facets, and had come to desire a life with him.

She would not say she loved him any more than she had loved Robert. It felt wrong to even think it, and it wasn't true, anyhow. She simply felt differently.

She could not compare them, not truly. It was like comparing a fish in the stream to a bird in the sky. But oh, how she was flying!

In some ways, her love for Mr. Darcy felt selfish to her—he was something that she wanted and she decided to let herself have him. But she had it on good authority that the gentleman did not mind that he was her gift to herself. He believed wholeheartedly in her goodness, even more than she did. She knew she could be catty and difficult at times. She could be stubborn and contrary. And yet, he continued to love her. She was content to allow him to do so.

She looked up from her reverie when she saw the door open. Quietly, Mr. Darcy stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. She stood from her seat by the window and

moved towards him. He took a few more steps into the room and stopped, his expression grave and somehow happy at the same time.

“Elizabeth, I have never seen you more beautiful.”

She smiled and stepped closer to him. “So you were not offended by my suggestion to meet here?”

“Not at all! I was coming close to suggesting it myself, but I thought you might be uncomfortable with your family in the house.”

“I am not uncomfortable.” She smiled and closed the distance between them until she stood immediately before him, daring him to reach out and touch her.

He did not disappoint.



Darcy was overwhelmed. From the first time she had told him she cared for him to the moment he opened her note and understood her intentions, he had been going from elation to elation, hopping wildly from one uncontrollable joy to another. He had not known he could be so happy. But as his betrothed would say, just because it is unexpected does not mean it is unwelcome. He was so very pleased with her, he sometimes felt ridiculous with it.

She was so very lovely, so teasing and alluring and delightful. She challenged his mind and made him view the world differently than he had before. She brought out greater

kindness and compassion in him than anyone ever had, and he felt himself better for being near her.

And when she loved him, Lord, when she loved him! He had never experienced anything like it. Being so close to her, feeling so deeply for her—it had been indescribable.

She had given him a perfect memory, one that he would treasure all his days. He would never forget hearing her say she loved him. He could hear her voice in his mind as he thought about it, picture her face when he untied her dressing gown and slipped it from her shoulders. “I love you, Fitzwilliam,” she had said. Simple. Unadorned. With no qualifying statements or flowery words.

He was undone. Her trust, her respect, her love, was the greatest gift he had ever received. He couldn’t help but think, as he was drifting off to sleep with his love in his arms, that all the difficulty and pain and doubt had made victory that much sweeter.

She was worth every bit of it. And he would do it all again to earn her love.



The next morning, Elizabeth awoke with a lazy smile on her face. She hadn’t slept so well in ages. Her body had a certain soreness accompanied by a warm feeling of vitality she had not felt in some time.

Darcy burrowed his nose into the back of her neck and pressed her closer to his body. She smiled when she felt him edge his knees behind hers until they were pressed together from ankle to chin.

How very dearly she loved him! And what a great relief it had been to finally show him.

He had never complained to her, but she thought it might be odd for him, to be at Cressington, surrounded by reminders of her first husband and his great and powerful family. He would likely prefer to be at Pemberley, but he stayed because he wanted to be near her. He knew the children felt most comfortable at home and he was kindly allowing them to become accustomed to his presence in a familiar place.

He was a good man. And he would be her husband. She couldn't help the self-satisfied smile that took over her face. How could a country girl from Hertfordshire be so lucky?



At breakfast, Elizabeth slathered butter on her bread with a satisfied smile.

“What are you so happy about this morning, Lizzy?” asked Jane as she took a seat near her sister.

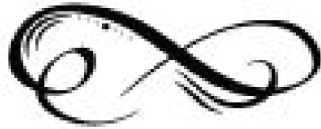
She sighed. “You were right, Jane. It feels so very good to love again.”

Elizabeth's smile was positively post-coital and Jane flushed in embarrassment.

“Lizzy!” she reprimanded weakly. Then, quietly so the servants couldn’t hear her, “It’s about time you listened to me.”

Elizabeth smiled wickedly. “Had I known your advice was so good I should have followed it sooner.”

CHAPTER 22



Though she knew the day would come, Elizabeth was not happy when Darcy told her he must return to Pemberley. The wedding was in a fortnight and he had some estate business to see to before the ceremony. When she pouted prettily over missing him, he tweaked her nose and told her that if she wanted his undivided attention after they were wed, he must accomplish some things before their wedding.

After discussing a somewhat complicated plan for the next few months, it was decided that Elizabeth and the children would go to Pemberley for a visit before the wedding. The children could see the new nursery and Elizabeth could order any changes she wished done before the children moved in. They would return to Cressington for the ceremony, and the next day she and Darcy would leave for their wedding trip to The Lakes. The children, Georgiana, and Lydia would travel to Hatfield Hall with the Bingleys. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy would join them there after their trip, in time for Jane's lying in.

If all went according to plan, they would move the children into Pemberley after Jane was recovered. They would likely

bring Charlie and possibly young Jenny with them to allow Jane and Charles uninterrupted time with their newest son or daughter. They had yet to decide when they would return to Cressington.

The day before Darcy was due to leave, he and Elizabeth took a walk in the garden.

“I was wondering,” he said hesitantly.

“Yes?”

“What do you think of my taking Robert John with me tomorrow?”

She looked at him with a blank expression.

“You will follow in three days with Bennet and Violet. He would not be parted from you for long.”

She continued to stare at him with wide eyes.

“It would give us an opportunity to get to know one another better. He is already comfortable with my presence. His nurse could come as well.” He looked at her hopefully and began to tug on his cuffs when she did not immediately respond.

“You wish to take Robbie with you?” she finally said.

“Yes.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

She took a deep breath and walked ahead a few paces. He wanted to take her child with him. Without her. There was a part of her, in the back of her mind, that knew her hesitation

was ridiculous. But the greater part of her was anxiously considering the details. What if Robbie missed her? What if he became upset in a new place without his mama? What if he cried and Darcy did not know what to do with him?

“Elizabeth,” said Darcy behind her. He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her to face him. “We are soon to be a family. The children will occasionally be with me when you are not there. We must become accustomed to it eventually,” he said reasonably.

She sighed and nodded. “I will ask Robbie if he wishes to go.”



To Elizabeth’s surprise and Darcy’s pleasure, Robbie did want to go. He was thrilled with the idea of going somewhere on his own, without his brother or sister, and seeing Pemberley before even his mother saw it. Mr. Darcy had told him much about it and he could not wait to see it for himself.

Elizabeth supervised the packing of his things and insisted Molly, the nurse who had been with them since Robbie’s birth, accompany them. Robbie was given strict instructions to be a good boy and not run in the house and to listen to Mr. Darcy and Molly the entire time he would be gone. She told him no fewer than four times that she would be there in three days and not to worry for her.

Robbie was not concerned.

She accompanied her son and betrothed to the carriage early in the morning and kissed them both goodby, pretending she was happy about her son driving farther and farther away from her. When the carriage disappeared over the hill, she pushed down the pain in her heart and went to meet with Mrs. Hobbs. What she needed was a good distraction.



Darcy felt so many emotions he didn't know which to focus on first. He was excited for what he considered his first venture into fatherhood. He was also nervous about the same. What if he made some horrible mistake? He had never spent more than a few minutes with a boy Robbie's age, and he was sure Georgiana, the only small child he had spent considerable time with, was an entirely different creature. She was docile and sweet and shy. Robbie was garrulous and adventurous.

Thankfully, before Darcy had to think of a conversation appropriate to have with a young boy while a nurse and valet listened in, Robbie fell asleep in the carriage. His head fell against Darcy, as if he had slept next to him his entire life, and Darcy felt unexpectedly touched.

When they finally arrived at Pemberley, Robbie had a million questions for Darcy. How large was the house? Who had built it? Had it been there a very long time? Were there any halls he was allowed to run in? Mama had said his pony was being brought to Pemberley along with her mare. When would they arrive? Was he allowed to ride around the lake?

Did they have plenty of apples for his pony? His pony preferred apples to carrots, though carrots would do if no apples could be had.

The questions went on and on until Darcy's head was spinning. He wondered why he had ever worried over what they would discuss.



The first morning, Darcy gave his charge a tour of the house. He let him run in the Long Gallery if Robbie promised to tell no one and only run there when Darcy was with him. Robbie agreed, of course, and nearly an hour was spent happily running back and forth, waving at the severe expressions on the faces of Darcy ancestors that adorned the walls. Darcy was vastly entertained.

Robbie was confused when the servants called him my lord. Everyone at home called him Robbie or Master Robert. Darcy told him that if he did not like it, he would tell the servants to refer to him as Master Robert. Robbie said that would be better, because he liked his name. Darcy just smiled at his reasoning and said he would inform the butler immediately.

The second day of Robbie's visit, Darcy took him on a tour of the estate. Robbie was especially enamored of the sheep in the north pasture. He tried to name them all, but gave up when the sheep continued to move about and he ended up with three separate sheep named Gertrude. He was then introduced to the animals in the farmyard and after asking very nicely, he was

permitted to help feed the chickens and some goats he found particularly amusing. They had goats at Cressington, but their goats were white and these were black, something the five-year-old found endlessly fascinating. Who knew goats came in more than one color?

The third day Darcy took him fishing. They took tackle and a hamper filled with food and rode to a stream on the far east side of the estate. They planned to be home well before dinner because Elizabeth, Violet, and Bennet were arriving that afternoon.

They spent the day lounging on the banks of the stream, occasionally chatting, but mostly sitting quietly.

“Uncle Darcy?” asked Robert.

“Yes, Robbie?”

“How did you become my uncle?”

Darcy blinked. “Uh, well, I, uh, I am not your uncle, not truly.”

“You are not?”

“No.”

“Then why do I call you Uncle Darcy?” asked Robbie, looking perplexed.

“Your cousin Charlie calls me Uncle Darcy. I imagine you got it from him, though I am not truly his uncle either.” At Robbie’s confused expression, he explained further. “Your Uncle Charles is my very good friend. He is your uncle

because he is married to your Aunt Jane, who is your mother's sister." Robbie nodded, as if this were common information. "I am Charlie's godfather and I spend a great deal of time with Bingley, your Uncle Charles, so his children call me uncle."

"But you are not their uncle?"

"No, I haven't been. But I will be their uncle when I marry your mother, who is their aunt."

"If you marry mama, how you can be my uncle? Uncles and mothers are not married to each other."

Darcy could not fault the boy's logic and stared at his fishing line for several minutes without answering.

"Would you like to call me something else?" he asked softly.

"What would I call you?" asked Robbie.

Darcy thought for a moment. Fitzwilliam was rather a mouthful for such a small child, and whatever Robbie called him, Violet and Bennet would likely call him the same. He couldn't imagine two-year-old Bennet being able to say such a word. They could call him Fitz, but he had always hated it. Darcy was what most of his friends called him, but it seemed odd for a child to call their stepfather by his surname. Perhaps uncle wasn't such a bad idea?

"I will be your stepfather in little more than a week," he said awkwardly, his eyes on the stream.

"Shall I call you stepfather?" asked Robbie. His distaste for the name was obvious.

“Or you could call me papa, if you would like,” Darcy said quietly.

“Papa,” said Robbie, testing out the word. “I should like to have a papa,” he said simply.

Darcy looked towards the boy who was smiling at him widely, his toffee-colored eyes bright and gleaming.

“Very well, I will be your papa,” he said thickly.



Elizabeth sat forward in the carriage, anxiously watching out the window. The house would appear any moment now, she was sure of it. Bennet and Violet were just waking up from their travel-induced nap and they began pointing out the windows and exclaiming about what they saw.

Finally, they pulled up in front of a beautiful stone home and Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief. She had been prepared to like his home for Darcy’s sake, but she was happy she would not have to convince herself of its merits. The butler and housekeeper were outside to greet them, and footmen poured onto the drive to unload their trunks.

Elizabeth looked left and right, and up the steps leading to the main door. There was no sign of her betrothed or her son.

“Pardon me, my lady. The master has not returned from his excursion with the young lord,” said the butler.

Elizabeth thanked him for the information and said, “You must be Greaves. Mr. Darcy has told me much about you.”

The butler bowed and Elizbaeth silently told herself that she would take it as a personal challenge to make the stiff man smile.

She turned to the housekeeper, who again apologized that no one was there to greet her. She was a cheery looking woman called Mrs. Reynolds and Elizabeth immediately liked her. Elizabeth smiled and told her it was of no great concern; she was sure Mr. Darcy and her son would arrive soon enough. If she could just be shown to the nursery so she could begin settling in the children, she would be appreciative. The housekeeper looked relieved and began to lead her inside.

Before she got halfway up the wide stone steps, Bennet and Violet began giggling behind her. She followed their gazes and saw a dripping wet Mr. Darcy and Robbie walking toward them. Robbie was smiling ear to ear; Darcy was scowling. Elizabeth brought her hand to her mouth to stifle her laugh.

“Have you two gentlemen gone swimming?” she asked playfully.

“Master Robert saw a frog in the stream and tried to catch it,” said Darcy flatly.

“Let me guess. He was unsuccessful and you had to wade in and retrieve him?”

“No. He was successful. But his hands were occupied holding the frog, so he couldn’t get himself out.”

Elizabeth laughed. “And he refused to put her down?”

Darcy nodded grimly and tapped his wet hat on his leg.

“Mama! Look! I named her Georgie!” Robbie had produced a frog from behind his back and was happily showing it to his sister and brother.

“I’m sure Georgiana will appreciate having a namesake. Come inside, dear. Let’s get you dry.”

Darcy followed her in and she stopped herself from saying she had been talking to her son. Her smile, however, was impossible to stifle.



Pemberley was lovely. The paths were long and winding; the gardens were natural but not overgrown. The house was elegant without being ostentatious, and the neighbors were friendly without being obsequious. The local parson was very kind and the servants were efficient.

Elizabeth was exceedingly pleased with her new home.

They spent their days exploring the grounds and attending the children, and their nights sneaking between the master’s chambers and her room in the guest wing.

The wedding was only three days away now and they were preparing to return to Cressington for the ceremony.

“How long does it take to ride to Cressington?” Elizabeth asked one evening.

“From here?” replied Darcy.

“Yes.”

“Depending on the rider and mount, half a day, perhaps less. Why do you ask? Are you planning a ride, my love?” he teased.

She smiled and replied, “Would you be upset if we didn’t leave?”

“What do you mean?”

“Could we have the wedding here? You have a special license, do you not?”

“Yes, I do,” he said, curious.

“Then we may wed from anywhere. Your Darcy relations, and Kitty, are only half a day’s drive. They are nearer to here than Cressington.”

“True.”

“Everyone of my family who plans to attend is already at Cressington. It wouldn’t be difficult for them to come here. I’m sure my mother would love to see it, and obviously Georgiana would be coming home.”

He began to look interested as he said, “We could send a rider at first light. He would arrive shortly after breakfast.”

She looked at him with excitement in her eyes. “I’ll write the letter now.”

Elizabeth was halfway through her letter to her family, asking them to travel to Pemberley, when she realized there was a problem. A nearly eight-months pregnant problem.

“Jane,” she said despondently.

He looked at her with confusion until he recalled how close his sister-to-be was to her confinement.

“I cannot ask her to make another journey so close to her lying in. She would be utterly miserable, and all for a whim of mine. She has already stayed longer than she planned. *And* she has agreed to take the children while we go to The Lakes. I cannot ask it of her. It would be too selfish of me.”

“Perhaps it is best if we keep to our original plan,” he said delicately.

“Yes, of course. It would be difficult for your staff as well, to suddenly ready the house for more than a dozen visitors and prepare a wedding breakfast. I don’t know what I was thinking,” she said lightly, trying to cover her embarrassment at making such a foolish suggestion.

She tried to smile, but he could see the disappointment in her features. He moved to sit beside her. “Dearest, it pleases me greatly that you would want to marry at Pemberley.”

“It does?” she said in a small voice.

“It does. You wouldn’t suggest it if you didn’t feel at home here.”

Her mouth opened in surprise. After a few minutes of looking at him, she said, “I suppose I do. Sometimes, I think you know me better than I know myself, Fitzwilliam.”



The return trip to Cressington was easily accomplished and before she knew it, Elizabeth was putting on her wedding gown and walking to Cressington's small chapel. The chapel was rarely used, but she had thought the small stone structure with its stained-glass windows would be perfect for their ceremony. And of course it had the added inducement of not having her first husband buried outside it.

She wouldn't remember the oft-heard words or the slightly wheezy voice of the vicar. But she knew she would never forget the look on Fitzwilliam's face when she said her vows, or how his voice sounded deep and rich and sure when he slid the ring on her finger, or the satisfied smile that overtook his face when the vicar pronounced them man and wife.

The breakfast was just as forgettable, though she knew it was elegantly prepared. Her mother went on and on about the quality of the food and the expensive wine. Elizabeth noticed none of it. But she distinctly remembered when Fitzwilliam met her eyes across the room and made his way to her, bending to whisper in her ear that they would need to leave soon if they wanted to arrive before nightfall.

She changed into her traveling clothes, kissed her family goodbye, and was assured by Charles that he would watch over her children as if they were his own. Georgiana and Lydia were given strict instructions to assist Jane in any way they could and to keep the children occupied when they wanted someone beyond their nurses. Fitzwilliam generously promised the two Talbot family nurses a sizeable gift for keeping the children as far from Jane as possible. Elizabeth

laughed at his methods, then told the nurses something similar after he had walked away. She would rest easier knowing her children were well looked after and her sister was not unduly inconvenienced.

Finally, after a tearful goodbye with Violet and a long hug from Bennet—she refused to allow him to be peeled from her, she insisted he would let go when he was ready—the Darcys boarded the carriage and settled in for the drive to Pemberley.

It felt right somehow, for them to spend their wedding night in their new home. No other place would be as perfect, as momentous.

Elizabeth reached out for Darcy's hand and squeezed it in hers. "Take me home, husband."

EPILOGUE



*O*ctober 1820

“I think it will be a boy,” said Bennet.

“Papa says it will be a girl,” said Violet.

“I want a brother!” cried Henry.

“You have three brothers!” retorted Violet.

“I want another brother! Richard wants a brother, too,” declared Henry.

“Richard does not. Do you Richard?” She looked at her youngest brother and he looked back at her with wide green eyes, clutching a toy dog to his chest. “See, he does not want a brother,” said Violet in her best big-sister voice.

“He did not say that!” cried Bennet indignantly.

“Who did not say what?” came a deep voice from the doorway.

“Papa!” cried Henry. He quickly scrambled up from the floor and wrapped his arms around Darcy’s legs.

“Papa,” said Violet, looking very put upon, “Bennet says the babe will be a boy, but I told him you said it would be a girl.”

Darcy looked alarmed for a moment as four pairs of eyes watched him steadily. “We do not know what the babe will be. But boy or girl, you will be kind to your new brother or sister,” he said authoritatively. The children nodded and he reached down to pick up two-year-old Richard. “Would you like to walk around the lake with mama?” he asked.

Richard nodded silently and burrowed his head into his father’s neck. Darcy smiled and corralled the children out the door and downstairs to meet their mother.

“I can’t believe we will have six children!” she said as they ambled around the lake, the children running ahead with their nurse.

“How are you feeling today?” he asked. She had been especially tired of late, more so than she had been with her last two pregnancies, and he wondered if her body was tiring of bearing a child every two years.

“I am tired, but I always am these days.” She smiled wanly and put a hand to her protruding belly. “Just a few more weeks now. And Robbie will be home tomorrow. I cannot wait to see him.”

“Neither can I,” said her husband.

Darcy put a hand to her belly for a moment and felt his babe kick against his palm. He smiled. He would never tire of that sensation. But he was worried for Elizabeth. She looked pale

and swollen, and she did not seem to be carrying this babe as easily as she had the others. He would be sure to plan a trip to the seaside after she was churched. Or perhaps they could return to The Lakes. She always loved visiting there.



“Fitzwilliam! Where is he? I need him!”

“He will be here soon, Lizzy. He is on the way,” soothed Jane.

“Keep breathing, sister,” soothed Kitty.

Elizabeth moaned and clutched the bedpost, waiting for her pains to pass. The midwife took her arm and encouraged her to walk. Kitty took her other arm and between the two of them, they led her around the room twice before she was once again panting and nearly doubled over.

“Where is he?” she cried again, tears streaming down her face.

“I am here, my love,” came a deep voice from the doorway.

“Fitzwilliam!”

He quickly removed his jacket and waistcoat and passed them to the maid, then moved to stand behind Elizabeth, linking his arms beneath hers and supporting her weight. “There now, my love, I wouldn’t miss my daughter’s birth.”

She squeezed her eyes shut as another pain gripped her. When it had passed, she said, “You are so sure it is not a boy.

Just because the last two were sons, does not mean,” pant, “this one shall be a daughter.”

He brushed her hair from her forehead and walked with her a few steps as the midwife directed. “Poor Violet is outnumbered four to one. She needs a sister.”

Elizabeth was breathing more heavily now, her pains coming one after another with little reprieve. He looked to Jane with a quizzical expression, and quietly asked if all was well. Was the babe not early? Jane looked at him solemnly and said he should prepare himself. Darcy paled and swallowed, then nodded and returned his attention to his wife.

“It is nearly time,” said the midwife soothingly. “That’s it, Mrs. Darcy. You’re nearly there. Just a little while longer.”

Elizabeth released a high-pitched whine that tapered off into a whimper. Suddenly, she looked up to the midwife with wide eyes.

“Quickly, get her to the birthing chair,” commanded the midwife.

Darcy swiftly got her into the chair and stood beside her, his hand grasping Elizabeth’s tightly. The midwife began barking orders and before he knew it, Elizabeth was bearing down, red-faced and sweating.

“One more time,” said the midwife.

Darcy watched it all anxiously. Even though he had been through this twice before with Elizabeth, nothing quite prepared him for seeing his wife through this ordeal or for

meeting his child for the first time. And judging by the grave faces of all around him, he wasn't the only one worried this time.

Elizabeth made a final grunt and slumped back in the chair. The midwife began congratulating her, telling her what a fine job she had done and what a beautiful girl she had delivered. Darcy stared at the baby in awe as the midwife cleaned her with a cloth and wrapped her in a blanket. She passed the babe to a relieved Jane and he watched his daughter go to her aunt, his eyes glued to the newest member of their family.

His attention was brought back to Elizabeth when she cried out.

“It is the afterbirth,” said Kitty.

The midwife's hands were on her abdomen, pressing as he remembered her doing after the other births. He watched in horror as Elizabeth's face crumpled in pain and the midwife began to look worried. She pressed his wife's abdomen again, and Elizabeth leaned forward until she was nearly doubled over.

“That's it, Mrs. Darcy. Go on and push,” said the midwife soothingly.

Jane, sensing something was wrong, passed the baby to Watson and hurried to Elizabeth's other side.

“Is it?” she asked.

“It is,” said the midwife grimly.

She felt Elizabeth's stomach again, and pressed down while turning her hands clockwise. Elizabeth cried out and Darcy took a step forward, though he didn't know what he could do to protect her.

"Wait a moment. Don't push. Just breathe. I must turn her," said the midwife sternly.

Darcy looked around confused. Jane was holding Elizabeth's hand so tightly her knuckles were white. Kitty was watching her sister with wide eyes, her lips forming a silent prayer over and over again.

"What is going on? What do you mean, turn her?" he cried, not wishing to believe what his eyes were telling him was true.

"There is a second babe," said the midwife in clipped tones.

Elizabeth cried out again, panting quickly to prevent herself from pushing. The midwife continued the turning motion with her hands and finally said they needed to get her to her feet.

Darcy snapped into action, shaking off his fear and forcing all his focus onto his wife's care. He stood in front of Elizabeth and hooked his arms beneath hers, raising her to her feet. The midwife said soothing words to Elizabeth and asked her to move this way and that, insensible to his wife's exhaustion.

"Elizabeth," he said quietly.

She looked up with imploring eyes and he gathered his resolve. He could worry later. Right now, his wife needed him to be strong enough for both of them. "You can do this, my

heart. You are not alone. I am here with you.” She squeezed his hand, unable to speak for panting. “You are the strongest woman I know. If anyone can deliver two babes, it is you,” he said confidently.

She nodded weakly but he saw determination in her eyes.

Finally, after several agonizing minutes, Elizabeth was able to whisper that she was desperate to push. Could she please bear down now?

“Now, Mrs. Darcy! Bear down!” cried the midwife.

Elizabeth instantly responded and before anyone knew what happened, there was a great gush and Elizabeth slumped back, Darcy’s arms wrapped around her the only thing that kept her from falling to the floor.

“Is she all right?” asked Elizabeth weakly.

The babe had been whisked away to the far side of the room where the midwife was rubbing her with a soft cloth. Jane handed Elizabeth the first baby and she brought her to her breast, cooing at her new daughter.

“Oh! Look at her!” she whispered in exhausted wonder.

“She is beautiful, Lizzy,” said Jane. “You did very well.”

“You were right,” said Elizabeth softly to her husband. “She is a girl.”

Suddenly, there was a weak cry from the other side of the room and Elizabeth looked up tearfully. “Is she?” she couldn’t finish the question, tears choking her voice.

“Your son is just fine, Mrs. Darcy, though a trifle unhappy at being born,” said the midwife.

“My son?”

“A son?” cried Darcy.

“Aye,” said the midwife. “‘Tis rare. I’ve only seen it once before myself.”

Darcy looked on in shock as she handed him the wrapped bundle and he brought the crying babe to his chest and held him tightly.

“You were right, Elizabeth. He is a boy,” he said.

Elizabeth laughed and reached out a hand for her husband.



“What shall we call these two?” Elizabeth asked sleepily. She lay in bed, propped up on pillows and in a fresh nightgown, her babies sleeping peacefully next to her.

“I do not know about him, but this young lady should be called after her mother,” said Fitzwilliam.

“You want to name her Elizabeth?” she asked, her voice slightly choked.

“Yes. I do.”

She smiled and a tear escaped down her cheek. “Very well, she will be Elizabeth. I would like to ask Kitty to be godmother. She was a great help during the birth.”

“Elizabeth Catherine,” he said.

“Elizabeth Catherine Anne,” she added.

He looked at her in surprise. “For my mother?”

She nodded. “It is only fitting, don’t you think?”

He gave her a gentle smile and agreed.

“And what about our son?” she asked after a few minutes of quiet.

“We are running out of male relatives to Christen him for.”

She chuckled, then pressed a hand to her abdomen and winced.

“I’m sorry, love. I forgot you shouldn’t laugh just yet,” he said apologetically.

She smiled wanly and took his hand. “I want to name him Fitzwilliam.”

“What? Why?”

She almost laughed again but stopped herself. “Because you are his father. And it is quite natural to name a boy after his father.” She shook her head in fond amusement.

“But they will call him Fitz. You know they will,” he said seriously.

“Then we will call him William before they start. What say you?”

“Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth. The names do go well together,” he said with a charming smile.

“Very well together,” she said softly.



June 1831

“I don’t like it,” said Darcy as he paced in his study.

“Why not?” asked Elizabeth impatiently.

“She is too young.”

“I was two years younger when I wed.”

He shot her a glare that she chose to ignore.

“She is not yet twenty!” he cried, moving to lean on the edge of the desk.

“She will be twenty before the wedding.” Elizabeth came closer and placed her hand on his arm. “She is determined. And you know how Violet can be. Once she has set her mind to something, there is no stopping her.”

He sighed. “But do you really think he is worthy of her?”

“He is your cousin!”

“And I was never fond of his father. I do not like the idea of Violet living under his roof.”

Elizabeth sighed. “That will hardly be necessary. We can allow them to stay with us whenever they like. Or she can live at Cressington. You know Robbie will deny her nothing. And do not forget she has her own estate. It is small, but very comfortable.”

“What about when they are in town?”

She threw up her hands in exasperation. “They may stay with us at Darcy House. Or at Asheland House. I can allow them the run of Talbot House if they want it. It has been vacant for months now.”

He looked down at the carpet. “This is an awful summer.”

“I know,” she said gently. “I do not like it either. Robbie will be one and twenty! I can hardly believe it.” She looked out the window and blinked rapidly. “Do you think he is ready for all that is about to land on his shoulders?”

Darcy put a hand on her back. “He is ready. Do not worry for him. He knows he may call on me or Charles or John if he needs any assistance.”

She nodded, swallowing thickly. “And Violet will be well. Do not worry for her. Lord Cross is terribly in love with her. She shall manage him without any trouble. After all, she has been practicing on her brothers all these years.”

Darcy snorted. “I know you are right,” he finally said. Then, very quietly, “I shall miss her.”

Elizabeth rubbed his back and rested her head on his shoulder. “As will I.” After some moments, she said lightly, “Lizzy is only ten. And if she is to be believed, she will never marry and leave us.”

“Good. She should stay forever,” he said gruffly.

Elizabeth laughed. “If you continue to spoil her so, she just may.”



Violent reined in her gelding when she reached the church and dismounted. She made her way through the churchyard and looked up at the towering oak stretching toward the spire and smiled in the sunlight.

“Hello, father,” she said. She placed the wildflowers she had gathered on Robert’s grave and touched the cold stone with an open palm. “Sorry I missed your birthday. Robbie promised me that he placed a flower for me.”

She sat on the soft grass beside the stone and ran her fingers through the tuft. “I am to be married,” she said. “Can you believe that? I will be the next Lady Matlock.” She laughed nervously. “Mama says I will do well, but I am a little anxious about it. Lord Matlock is a... difficult man. I can’t believe he and papa are cousins! But Cross isn’t like his father. Uncle Fitzwilliam assures me that he takes after his mother. I think Uncle’s approval has been a relief to papa. He tried not to show how worried he was, but he has never been good at dissembling.”

She leaned back against the stone and stretched her legs out in front of her. “Alexander, that is Lord Cross’s Christian name, has suggested we travel to the continent for a wedding tour. Mama thinks it would be lovely to go but she worries for my safety, of course. I think papa is terrified but he thinks I will stubbornly insist upon going if he says anything about it.” She sighed. “I don’t think they realize I’ve truly grown up.”

She looked up through the oak's branches and closed her eyes, letting the sunlight dance across her skin as the leaves rustled in the breeze.

“I will marry from home—from Cressington. Pemberley is also home, of course, but Lizzy will marry from there one day. Robert has moved here permanently now. We are all here helping him to settle in. Mama insists he will always have a room at Pemberley, of course, but he thought he should live in his own home. Papa agreed and has helped him learn estate management. I imagine Robert will be good at it—you know how clever he is.”

She plucked a blade of grass and tore tiny strips from it. “Poor Mama. I am marrying, Robert has moved, and Bennet is going to Cambridge. Henry and Richard are at Eton. It is only William and Lizzy home now. William ought to go to Eton, but he cannot bear to leave Lizzy. They have always been so close,” she said thoughtfully. “I wonder what they will do when they are grown and she marries. Surely he cannot mean to follow her to her new home. Though I would not be terribly surprised if he did such a thing. He is a devoted boy. Mama says he takes after papa in that way.” She smiled.

“Don't worry, mama has not forgotten you. I'm sure you've noticed her birthday visits. She says she visits then instead of the anniversary of your death because she would rather remember your life than that awful day.”

She sighed, wishing she could remember her father better. All she truly remembered was a warm voice reading her

stories. It was a comforting memory so she assumed it was her father, but she wasn't entirely sure. She couldn't even picture his face in her mind—she only knew the portraits painted of him.

“Uncle Alfred insists on telling stories of your childhood adventures nearly every time we see him. He is getting old now, but he promised he will be at my wedding in September. I plan to ask Jenny to stand up with me. I think it sweet that Aunt Jane stood up with mama and her daughter will stand up with me, though Robert says I am being overly sentimental.” She huffed and looked heavenward.

“All his friends call him Asheland now. He didn't like it at first, but now he doesn't seem to mind. All *my* friends flirt terribly with him but he doesn't notice. Mama says he is like you in that way. You would laugh heartily to see it. Maria Rippen—Aunt Charlotte's daughter—is half in love with him. It is embarrassing! When he enters the room, she blushes and giggles and acts like a different person altogether. Robert doesn't notice, of course. Mama says men are not as astute about these matters as ladies are.”

She heard an approaching rider and looked up. Seeing her brother, she stood and dusted off her skirt.

“I didn't know you were coming, Ben.”

“I don't mean to disturb you if you aren't finished,” he said hesitantly.

Violet smiled at her younger brother and shook her head. “I'm finished. I was just babbling at the end.”

He smiled in that way that made him look like their mother as he approached her. Violet returned his smile, thinking it funny how he wasn't Mr. Darcy's natural son, but of her five brothers, Bennet acted the most like him.

She squeezed his hand. "I'll see you at the house," she said, and left him alone in the churchyard.



September 1836

"Why must we go all the way to Yorkshire?" whined Lizzy.

"Uncle Alfred is turning seventy years old! You can hardly expect him to travel to us!" cried Violet. She held up a hat. "Are you sure you want to take this?"

Lizzy snatched the hat from her older sister and placed it in the hatbox out of reach. Though she was nine years younger, Lizzy was nearly three inches taller than her sister, a fact she enjoyed reminding Violet of.

"Girls!" came a familiar voice from the sitting room. They cringed and Elizabeth entered with a dress in her arms. "It is like listening to Kitty and Lydia when they were fighting over ribbons," she said. "I will remind you that you will be sixteen next month, Little Lizzy, and you have two children, Violet!"

"Yes, mama," they chorused with eyes on the carpet.

"Now, we must finish packing before we dress for dinner. Your father insists we leave at first light and you know how he gets if everyone isn't ready when it's time to depart."

Violet shared a sly smile with her sister that Elizabeth pretended not to notice. She shook her head at them and went to check in with her sons.

Henry was completely packed and mortified that his mother would even ask him. He would be twenty in November. He didn't need his mother to ensure he packed properly. She asked him if he had remembered to pack Alfred's gift, and when he admitted he had not (while trying to look proud and failing horribly), she gave him a knowing smile and told him that when he stopped forgetting things, she would stop asking him if he had everything ready.

He reluctantly joined her in a laugh and then decided to accompany her to his younger brothers' rooms. He shouldn't be the only one caught out by their mother.

Richard had, unsurprisingly, forgotten several things, even though his valet was doing most of the packing.

"I thought having a valet would make you more organized, not less," teased Henry.

"It might make me more so if he didn't pack away everything I needed while I still need it. I can't find what I am looking for and I have to dig it out of the trunk and it is all a hopeless mess."

Elizabeth smiled at their conversation. Richard was a perfect combination of herself and Darcy, in looks and personality. He was as fastidious as his father, but impulsive like his mother, and the combination led to some interesting debacles.

She shook her head and entered William's room. Her youngest son was sitting calmly in a chair, reading a book.

"Are you ready, dear?" she asked.

"Yes, mama. My trunks are packed and the stables will have Roman ready in the morning."

She nodded.

Henry came in behind her and exclaimed, "How is it that you are the youngest and yet you are ready first?"

"I am just more clever than you," said William nonchalantly.

Henry smirked and moved toward his brother. William had not yet reached his full height and was terribly thin. His brother Henry was easily five inches taller and a few stones heavier.

William scrambled from his chair and toward the door, preparing to run.

"Boys!" called Elizabeth. "Do I need to call your father?"

"No, mama," they said, hands twitching behind their backs.

She smiled and said she would leave them to their preparations and that she expected to see them on time for dinner that evening and ready to depart at first light the next day.



Alfred's birthday celebration was held at his family seat in Yorkshire. The Downing, Talbot, and Stanfield families were there en masse, and a few Cavendishes had made the journey. The Darcy family had become friendly with the Downings over the years and Kitty's husband's parents made the journey, as did Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Bennet was still alive, but he did not think a drive the length of England would be beneficial to a man so old that he had quit counting his age. He did, however, make his grandsons promise to come visit him soon.

Elizabeth was delighted to see everyone. The last time they had gathered like this had been for Violet's wedding five years ago. Now Violet had a three-year-old son and a lovely baby girl. Where had the time gone?

She moved through the drawing room, greeting family and friends, but not seeing the faces she most desired to see. Where were they? They had told her they would leave early and it was not so far that they shouldn't have arrived.

"Are you looking for Robert and Bennet?" asked Jane.

"Yes, you know me too well."

"They are with Charlie at the stables. Lord John has a new stallion they wanted to see."

Elizabeth squeezed her hand. "Thank you, Jane."

She made her way outside and found her sons, Bennet and Robert John, walking up the slope to the house with their cousin Charlie between them. Her heart gave a little lurch and she smiled at how handsome and healthy they looked. She

knew it was right that Robert John was at Cressington, and right that he should invite Bennet to stay with him, but she missed her boys mightily.

“Mama!” said Bennet happily. He hurried up the slope and stopped in front of her, giving her a very correct bow and kissing her cheek.

“Come here, you darling boy,” she cried as she pulled him to her. “Do not stand on ceremony with me.”

He laughed and hugged his mother so tightly her feet came off the ground. She pulled back and held his face in her hands. “Are you well, love? Truly?”

“I am well, mama.” He placed a hand over hers and looked into her eyes, assuring her he was truly healthy and in good spirits.

In Bennet’s second year at Cambridge, he had contracted a horrible fever at the beginning of the holiday. He hadn’t noticed how ill he truly was until the carriage was halfway to Pemberley. When he arrived, he was so sick he couldn’t walk under his own power. A terrified Darcy and Robert had carried him into the house and Elizabeth had stayed by his bedside, praying and weeping and doing everything in her power to bring his fever down.

The physician had told her to prepare herself for the worst, the apothecary had said there was nothing he could do. Finally, after an eternity of poultices and tinctures and cool cloths applied to burning brows, his fever broke and he came back to

her. Darcy later said that Bennet survived through his mother's will alone. She simply would not let him die.

She knew she had been a little anxious for him ever since, but a mother does not easily forget such a thing.

"I will stop fussing now," she said with a smile. "Charlie, you are looking very well!"

"Thank you, Aunt," he said with a sweet smile.

"Do I not look well, mother?" cried Robert playfully.

She swatted his arm. "You look like a rascal."

He wrapped his arms around her in a crushing embrace, and just when she thought he would set her down, he spun her in a circle and quickly dropped her on her feet, an enormous smile on his face.

"Robert John Thomas Talbot!"

He laughed in response, as did his brother and cousin. Elizabeth finally joined them and asked the boys to escort her to the house.



The next morning, Robert and Darcy were riding, talking of estate matters and their family, when Robert became serious.

"Papa, may I ask you something?"

"Of course, son. You may ask me anything."

"How did you know you loved mama?"

Darcy looked at him with wide eyes. Robert looked back expectantly.

“I cannot fix on the time or the place. I was in the middle before I knew I had begun.” He turned to see his son still looking keenly at him. “I had admired your mother as a friend; she was a good wife and mother, and had a lively mind. I had been friends with the earl and greatly respected him.

“When Elizabeth returned to Town after her mourning, we became friends. I had long thought she was the model of what I should look for in a woman, but I had found no one like her.” He chuckled to himself. “I was quite foolish when I was younger.”

“So you were friends that fell in love?” asked Robert skeptically.

“No. I was her friend and very much enamored of her, but she did not look as kindly on me. And she let me know it!” He laughed at the memory.

“But you won her over?”

“Eventually, yes, though I don’t know if that is exactly how it happened. One day, I simply knew that I couldn’t live without her. No woman would ever be as precious to me as she was. I was quite besotted,” he said with a self-deprecating smile.

Robert grinned. “How long did you court her?”

“Oh, about six months, I think, perhaps a little less. But I had known her for years before that. Remember that I have

been friends with Bingley since we were in Cambridge. I had known her through their family since the year eleven.”

They rode on in silence, Robert wearing an uncharacteristically pensive expression.

“Is there someone you are thinking of courting?” Darcy asked delicately.

“Perhaps. But,” Robert hesitated, “I want to be sure. I would not want to hurt her, or raise her expectations, if it is not right in the end.”

“That is honorable.”

“But how shall I know it is right if I do not spend time with her? But how can I spend time with her without raising expectations?” He was clearly frustrated.

“That is a valid point. What you need is a mediator.”

“A mediator?”

“Yes. Someone who can create situations where you may see each other but where it is not obvious you are courting so you can get to know one another without expectations.”

Robert looked thoughtful.

“The Gardiners did it for your parents, and Elizabeth did it for your Aunt Kitty and my cousin Michael.”

Robert was mentally categorizing his family members in his mind, deciding who would be most helpful in such a delicate situation. He could not ask Violet. She would think the whole thing hilarious and never let him hear the end of it. He had

done the same to her when she was being courted, but he chose not to remember that at the moment.

“May I ask who the lady is?” Darcy asked.

Robert sighed and decided it would be best to be honest. His parents would figure it out soon enough.

“It is Isabel Stanhope.”

“Georgie’s daughter?” Darcy exclaimed in surprise.

“Do you think it a very bad idea?”

Darcy searched for words for a moment. “I think she is very sweet girl. But I am far from objective—she is my niece.”

“Yes, I know. But I have never really thought of her as a cousin. Not because we are not truly related, but she was only a baby when I went away to school, and I rarely saw her when I came home.”

“Yes, we often went to Cressington on your school holidays,” Darcy said thoughtfully. “I can see why you wouldn’t think of her as a cousin, but many cousins do marry.”

Robert shuddered. “I could never marry Jenny or Arabella or Elinor. They are like sisters to me.”

“Yes, well, they were often in the same house with you. You have grown up together. Especially Jane’s daughters. We see the Bingleys more than anyone else.”

“Even Amelia Goulding is too familiar, though we see them less. She smiles just like mama. That would be odd in certain... situations.”

Darcy covered a laugh with a cough and said, “Yes, I certainly see why you wouldn’t want that. I wouldn’t be able to marry a cousin either. Lady Catherine wished me to marry Anne, but I could never do it. Not for your reasons, but I could never look at her as a man should look at his wife.”

“Exactly!” cried Robert. “But I do not know about Isabel. We spent a great deal of time together in Town last Season, and I enjoyed her company, but...”

“You are not sure if you love her or wish to spend your life with her.”

“Yes. Thank you for understanding. I know it must be awkward for you.”

“Not at all. I am pleased you would come to me with such questions. It is better than going to your Uncle John.”

Robert laughed. “I don’t even want to imagine what he would say!”

“Perhaps your mother can invite Isabel to spend a month with us. It would not be unusual for my niece to be in my home, and you could visit as well. It would give you an opportunity to become better acquainted with each other. I would not like to see either of you do anything hasty.”

Robert nodded. “That sounds a good plan. Thank you, papa.”



Darcy told Elizabeth about his conversation with Robert, and she quickly invited her niece Isabel, who had arrived that afternoon with her parents, to come home with them after the party. She could stay at Pemberley for a month if Georgiana could spare her.

Isabel accepted the invitation and went to her mother, who then went to Elizabeth. Georgiana told Elizabeth she believed Isabel had developed romantic feelings for Robert, and if he was not interested in her, it would be best for her not to go to Pemberley only to have her hopes dashed. Elizabeth was able to allay her sister's fears and convince her to give the young couple some time, away from the prying eyes of society, to get to know one another better.

What was strange about a niece visiting her uncle and aunt in her mother's childhood home? And what could be more natural than Elizabeth's son visiting her at that same home? There was nothing indecorous and no suspicions would be raised unless the couple was very indiscreet. And, well, then the issue would be decided, wouldn't it?

Georgiana agreed with Elizabeth's logic and prepared to send her daughter to Pemberley.



“Lizzy, are you matchmaking?” asked Lydia with a sly smile when she heard of the impending visit.

“I am doing no such thing!” retorted Elizabeth. “I am merely giving them an opportunity to get to know one

another.”

Lydia nodded. “Of course you are. How magnanimous of you.” She took a sip of tea and said, “Just be mindful of my goddaughter. She is a sweet girl. If he throws her over, she might never recover.”

“I think you are exaggerating at least a little. She is not a wilting flower.”

“No, she is not. But she is young.”

“Yes, she is,” agreed Elizabeth. “That is part of why I want to give them this time. I would hate for her to make a rash decision in her youth and regret it in a few years.”

Lydia made a noise of agreement and took another cake from the plate.

To everyone’s surprise, Lydia had married Alfred’s younger son, Lord George Downing. She had managed to wait to become engaged until she was nearly four and twenty and her dowry was more than twenty-three thousand pounds. She was very proud of that fact, and that she was the oldest of her sisters to wed.

George had inherited one of his father’s smaller estates only thirty miles from Cressingdon; the distance made it easy to see her family whenever they were in Nottinghamshire. She confessed to her sisters on the eve of her wedding that she had always had a fondness for the name George. Elizabeth told her that she hoped her choice of husband was based on more substantial characteristics than his name. An agreeable name

would be cold comfort in an unhappy union. Lydia had assured her that she was deliriously happy and could not wait to be wed.

“Perhaps we will come to Pemberley as well,” said Lydia with a mischievous smile.

“No, you will not. They need peace and privacy. We will not treat them like a performance on a stage.”

“Really, Lizzy, you are becoming tiresome in your old age.”

Elizabeth glared at her and Lydia smirked and took another sip of her tea. She squealed in surprise when a small biscuit landed in her cup and splashed tea over her dress. She looked up at her sister with pursed lips.

Elizabeth looked back with an innocent expression.



A month later, when they were all settled in at Pemberley, Elizabeth went to find Darcy in his study.

“What brings you to see me, my dear?” he asked with a smile.

She sat on the chair by the fireplace and he came to join her.

“I think Robert is in love,” she said quietly, her eyes on the dancing flames.

“Truly?”

“Yes. I have never seen him like this before. He is enamored of your shy, sweet, blue-eyed niece,” she said with a sad smile.

“Do you approve of the match?”

“Of course. They are perfect for each other.”

Darcy nodded. “The Stanhopes are a good family. Robert is friendly with her brothers. I see no reason to worry.”

“He is my son. I shall always worry,” she replied.

He laughed. “Come here, Elizabeth.” He pulled her arm until she was sitting in his lap, her head leaning against his. “All will be well, my love.”

“How do you know?”

“He is a good man and she is a kind woman. But beyond that, they have had excellent examples of loving, respectful unions to follow.”

“Is that how you would describe us? As loving and respectful?” she asked playfully.

“Yes. Wouldn’t you?”

“I would also say passionate. And devoted. And utterly perfect for each other in every way.”

“We are certainly that,” he said in hushed tones as he began to nibble on her neck.

“Yes, we certainly are,” she breathed.

The End

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Elizabeth Adams is a book-loving, tango-dancing, Austen enthusiast. She loves old houses and thinks birthdays should be celebrated with trips—as should most occasions. She can often be found by a sunny window with a cup of hot tea and a book in her hand. She writes romantic comedy and comedic tragedy. You can find more information, short stories, and outtakes at www.EAdamsWrites.com

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