



THE HUSBANDS OF  
*Elizabeth Bennet*

VOLUME ONE



CHRISTINE COMBE

the Husbands of  
Elizabeth Bennet

Volume One

-...-

Christine Combe

Published by Bonnet Books





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Volume One

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Early praise for  
**The Husbands of Elizabeth  
Bennet**

*The following reviews were written by readers at  
FanFiction.net:*

“Wonderful story. I never thought that I would enjoy a story where Elizabeth did not marry Darcy, but I did! Thank you for sharing your talent with us.” ~ readabout

“Oh boy! As good as an Agatha Christie mystery!” ~ Colleen S

“You are an AMAZING writer. I have been thoroughly engaged and entertained with this story. Thank you so much for all your hard work and unrelenting effort... I loved every bit of this story and am filled with happiness seeing Henry and Elizabeth get their happy ending...for a short time. Lol I eagerly await part two!” ~ My Veggie Burger

“Oh, how delightful. It is over and NOW we can concentrate on the love arc for ODC. I agree completely that the stories should be split. That works perfectly. Blessings on the success of the launch. I’ll grab it when it hits KU. I will read it again.”  
~ J. W. Garrett

“I’ve loved every word of this story, and have been cheering Henry on since his arrival in Elizabeth’s life. For once I was content to let poor Darcy lose the contest for Lizzie. I have spent a fabulous evening rereading right from the beginning, congratulations on writing a great tale.” ~ Mimsy2021

“So so beautiful. I’m sad it’s over, but excited to see what you’ll do for the second half.” ~ Hamptonator365

“It is all your fault...I am sooo far behind schedule this morning since I was entirely unable to do anything until I read all five of these final chapters of Volume 1. As much as I love the classic Darcy and Elizabeth pairing, I really do love Henry and Elizabeth’s relationship! I’m glad you provided some insight into her new life as a high-ranking member of the ton and showed some of the interactions (both accepting and not).”

~ DW.618

# Table of Contents

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)



[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Christine Combe](#)

[Austen-esque Must-Reads](#)

# Acknowledgements

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A big thanks to audiobook narrator Harry Frost for helping me work out the blurb wording. Thanks also go to fellow author Clarissa Joy Thomas and FFN reader DSLeo, who helped me with figuring out a method of delivering poison to a character, as well as what poison the poor soul would ingest.

Never will I forget to thank Miss Jane Austen, whose brilliant mind conjured the story which inspired my own. Without her, this tale would not exist.

# Dedication

For Nimbus, Pippin, and Oakley — my boys.

Despite your many, many attempts to distract me from my  
work, this book is now finished.



# Chapter One

A **pleasant** walk in the country—Elizabeth Bennet had taken many simply to enjoy the beauty of nature.

This one, she had taken to escape her home.

A small part of her felt guilty at leaving her sister Jane to suffer the continuous lamentations of their mother without her support, for Mrs. Bennet had bemoaned the departure of Netherfield's current leaseholder each day of the fortnight since Charles Bingley, his family, and his friend Mr. Darcy had gone to London. Constant was her chatter on the subject, wondering why Bingley had gone, why he hadn't come back, what had Jane done to drive him away...

Elizabeth was sensitive to her sister's feelings on the subject—she knew Jane had cared for Mr. Bingley very much—but when their mother wasn't decrying the young man for his fickleness, Jane was crying on her shoulder because she missed seeing him. Because she wished he hadn't gone away. She cried over her fear that Caroline Bingley—Mr. Bingley's unmarried younger sister—was right and that Mr. Bingley had not cared for her at all because his heart was already set on another.

*Considering Georgiana Darcy is the same age as Lydia, I would have thought her brother of the mind that she is far too young to marry,* Elizabeth mused as she walked.

With a sigh, she dismissed all thoughts of Mr. Bingley and Jane's disappointment, and through her nose she drew a deep, fortifying breath—she'd stepped out on this unusually warm December morning to avoid the drama going on at home and clear her head, not bring it along with her. Elizabeth walked a steady, slow pace along the road that would take her to Oakham Mount, her favorite spot to think, read, or just enjoy the beauty of God's creation.

As she approached a section of the road which was lined on both sides by a small wood, where the trees closest to it created something of a canopy through the spring and summer months, Elizabeth's eyes widened at the sight of a horse with what looked to be a carriage harness attached to it, or at least part of such a contraption. The chestnut beast lifted its head when it took notice of her, then turned and started toward her. They met halfway between their positions, and it was with a hesitant hand that Elizabeth reached for the horse's bridle.

"Dear creature, where did you come from?" said she in a gentle voice as she stroked the horse's velvety nose with her free hand. "What's happened to the rest of your carriage, and your master, hmm?"

The horse lifted its head and gave a short neigh, then it turned toward the wooded part of the road. Elizabeth went along, a mixture of curiosity and trepidation filling her. She began to pray that the creature beside her was leading her to nothing, but she sensed it would bring her onto a scene most dreadful.

She was not wrong. Soon after their reaching the edge of the wood, Elizabeth gasped at the sight of an overturned carriage several feet away. Her companion's partner was still hitched to the vehicle and prancing anxiously in place. She saw a man dressed in livery lying eerily still on the ground by the back of the carriage, a large red stain coloring the dirt road beneath him.

"Oh, dear God," Elizabeth cried softly as her eyes darted about. Were the culprits still here? Where was the driver, and the occupants of the carriage? Could the latter still be inside?

As much as she wished it otherwise in that moment, she knew it was her Christian duty to see if there was any hope of saving the man on the ground, and to lend aid to any other person who might have survived the accident. She let go the bridle of the horse that had brought her to the horrible scene and approached cautiously. Bile rose in her throat as she noted that the man on the ground was unmistakably dead, for he had what she assumed was a gunshot wound to his temple.

This was no simple carriage accident.

Elizabeth looked around again. She neither saw nor heard anyone but that did not mean she was alone. Her eyes fell to the ground again, and she looked about for anything that might be used as a weapon to defend herself; her heart sunk when she saw nothing but thin twigs.

Again, she drew a fortifying breath, and stepping around the body, she approached the carriage. The curtain about the back window was askew, so she stepped as close as she could to peek inside it. There was a single person—a man—inside, but she was certain that he was deceased also, for his neck was bent at an odd angle, his eyes were open wide, and he did not move. Elizabeth's own eyes began to sting with tears for the loss of the two men. The carriage had clearly been attacked by highwaymen, and her sense of fear was heightened at the thought, as such a thing was almost unheard of this close to Meryton.

A sharp neigh from the horse at the front of the carriage caused Elizabeth to emit a short screech of fear. She then heard what sounded like a moan—and knowing it could not possibly be the gentleman behind her or the one inside the carriage, she moved around the vehicle and noted another liveried man on the ground a few feet from the carriage. A second weak moan told her he was most definitely alive, and she hurried over, her own fear temporarily forgotten.

Elizabeth knelt beside him as she took in his appearance; he had brown hair shot with gray around the temples, though there were no age lines about his face, and he seemed quite fit. His left leg was bent at an odd angle below the knee, suggesting a bad break, and there were multiple wounds to his chest and abdomen that still bled.

“Sir? Sir, can you hear me? Talk to me, tell me your name,” said she as she picked up his hand and patted it.

The man turned his head toward her, his eyes fluttering as they opened. “H-help me...” he muttered so softly she nearly did not hear him speak.

Elizabeth nodded vigorously. "I will, sir. You must hang on; I will go and get help!"

The man's hand tightened ever so slightly around hers. "No... stay..."

"But sir, I cannot help you if I stay!" Elizabeth cried softly. "I must fetch help—men to carry you, the apothecary —"

The sound of approaching horses drew a gasp from Elizabeth, her attention drawn sharply in the direction from which she'd come. Two men on horseback approached—slowly, at first, but then their pace picked up as they took note of the overturned carriage. The man in front seemed familiar, but she could not place him until he called out:

"Hello there, is there anyone alive?"

*Mr. Bingley!* Elizabeth's mind cried out in relief. She looked down at the carriage driver as tears of relief spilled from her eyes. "Help is come, sir! Help is come to us!"

His only reply was to moan again. Elizabeth patted his hand again, then she set it down gently and stood. "Mr. Bingley, over here!" she cried out, waving her arms that he would see her.

"Miss Elizabeth?" Bingley called out. "Good God, what happened here?"

He hopped down from his horse as he spoke, looking around at the wreck in astonishment. When he stopped before her, he took off his top hat and examined her from head to toe. "You're not injured, I hope."

"No, sir," said she as she shook her head. "I was not involved in the incident; I only came upon it while walking—that horse there had wandered out of the wood and led me here. The footman is dead and the gentleman inside the carriage I believe to be dead also, but the driver yet lives."

Elizabeth turned and led him over to where the driver still lay. Bingley knelt and examined him. "Poor sod," he muttered. "Highwaymen, no doubt about it. But this close to Meryton?"



“I thought the same—we almost never hear of attacks like this so near our town,” Elizabeth said.

A moment later, Mr. Bingley’s companion—his valet, Elizabeth realized—approached them. “Sir, the footman and the passenger are dead. The footman was shot, and the passenger appears to have suffered a broken neck when the carriage overturned.”

He glanced over as Elizabeth was grimacing at the news. “Begging your pardon, miss.”

Elizabeth sniffled. “’Tis no matter, Mr. Lewis. I already surmised as much about their condition. But this fellow is still alive, and we must help him. Mr. Bingley, what can we do?”

She had never seen him presented with such a challenge without Mr. Darcy nearby to consult; the part of her that had been thinking him too weak to make his own decisions was interested in seeing how he handled this crisis.

Mr. Bingley stood and looked around them. He drew a breath, then said, “I think... I think we have little choice but to right the carriage. We must try and re-hitch the loose horse that it may be pulled.”

The valet nodded. “Agreed, sir. It won’t be comfortable for the driver, but it’ll be easier to transport him.”

“What of... what of the passenger?” Elizabeth asked.

Bingley swallowed. “We’ll have to remove him. We...we can place him and the footman to the side of the road, or... Lewis, perhaps we could put them over our horses, and you and I could sit the box as we go into the village.”

Elizabeth nodded along with Bingley’s man. “I will go in the carriage with the driver and tend to his wounds as best I can. We can take him to Longbourn; we’re closer to my father’s house than Netherfield or anywhere else.”

“I am not so sure that would be proper, Miss Elizabeth,” said Bingley.

“Forgive me, sir, but we hardly have time to argue over propriety! This man could die at any moment—we waste

precious time if we stand here and debate what is proper or not.”

Lewis cleared his throat. “Forgive me, Mr. Bingley, but I must agree with the young lady. The faster we act, the better chance we have of saving this man.”

Again, Bingley drew a deep breath; this one he expelled in a whoosh as he nodded. “Very well, let us get going, then.”

Relief coursed through Elizabeth as she knelt once again next to the carriage driver and Bingley and his man set about their own work. Thankful she had chosen only a plain shawl to wrap around her pelisse, she fought to tear it into pieces that she could use to stop the blood still trickling from the driver’s wounds.

“I am so sorry this happened to you,” she said softly.

The man’s hand came to rest atop one of hers. “Thank you,” he said breathily.

“It is my pleasure to be of service to you,” Elizabeth said, offering a small smile. “My friend and his man will right the coach and we’ll bring along the others. I... I am sorry that your employer and the footman did not survive the attack.”

The driver closed his eyes, and the hand that was atop hers gave the slightest squeeze. Elizabeth had known Mr. Jones, Meryton’s apothecary, long enough to know that now he was conscious, it was best she keep him so. For a moment she was distracted as she heard the sound of Mr. Bingley and his man struggling to right the carriage, then the heavy thud as the vehicle was set upright once more. She turned her gaze back to her patient as the two opened the carriage door to remove the passenger.

“Sir? Sir, talk to me,” she said to the driver. “Tell me your name.”

His eyes fluttered open. “H-Henry.”

“Hello, Henry. My name is Elizabeth Bennet. My father is Mr. Thomas Bennet of Longbourn. We will be taking you to his house as soon as we can set the carriage to rights. I

promise you, the apothecary will be fetched, and a surgeon shall be sent for from Hatfield also.”

“At...least...pretty...nurse,” said Henry.

Elizabeth was surprised by the compliment. Though she smiled at his words, she could not help saying, “You are delirious with pain, sir. Just wait until you are introduced to my sister Jane—you will surely never think of me again.”

Bingley stepped up to her side then. “We’ve, uh, we’ve got the others onto the horses and have tied our mounts to the back of the carriage. Lewis is now looking to see if the other carriage horse can be re-hitched to the post there.”

Elizabeth glanced up to observe Lewis working for a moment to try and bind the straps hanging from the horse’s harness to the remnants on the rig. She then glanced up at Mr. Bingley and nodded. “Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Bingley—I was at such a loss as to what I could do, besides leaving poor Henry here all alone while I ran for help.”

“Henry?” Bingley queried with one eyebrow raised.

In spite of the morbid scene around them, Elizabeth felt her cheeks heating. “The driver has been in and out of consciousness since I arrived. I managed to get his name out of him, but nothing more.”

“Not...true,” said Henry. When Elizabeth looked down at him, she noted he now wore a weak smile. “Forgot...pretty.”

She could not meet Mr. Bingley’s gaze again, and was glad for the interruption by Lewis, who announced he had finally fixed the second carriage horse back into place.

“Don’t know how long it will last, so we’d best not go more than a trot, I’d say, sir.”

Elizabeth pushed to her feet as Mr. Bingley nodded. “Very good, Lewis. Let us get this man into the carriage then. Given the condition of that leg, I think we have no choice but to sit him up so it can rest on the bench.”

Lewis nodded. “Aye, sounds right, sir.”

Both men muttered an apology to Henry as they bent to lift him. He groaned in pain but remained conscious; Elizabeth was thankful that his wounds did not begin to bleed any worse. She surmised the attack had been swift and he'd been left to die, as there were but three to his chest and abdomen; they appeared to have been caused by a knife of some kind. She saw no trunks, so assumed they had been taken—but then why did the bandits not take the horses also?

Elizabeth shook her head in an attempt to dismiss the mystery from her mind. What had happened was for the magistrate to determine once Henry was well enough to give a statement.

“All right, Miss Elizabeth,” said Bingley then. “It’s time we were going.”

With a nod, Elizabeth stepped up to him and allowed herself to be assisted into the carriage. Her attention was immediately on Henry, who now appeared to be perspiring. *Probably from the exertion of being moved*, she thought as the carriage door was shut. *I do hope he’s not got an infection!*

She nearly fell to her knees as the carriage lurched on starting off, and poor Henry almost rolled off the seat across from her. Elizabeth reached out and pushed him back into a sitting position—and prayed that they could reach Longbourn without further injuring the man.



# Chapter Two

**Mild chaos** erupted at Longbourn almost from the moment that the carriage arrived.

Hill, the housekeeper, screeched in surprise when she opened the door. Elizabeth cried out for her father as soon as Lewis opened the carriage door to hand her down. Mr. Bennet and Mr. Hill—the housekeeper’s husband, Longbourn’s butler, and valet to his master—appeared together a moment later, the former expressing his surprise at seeing Mr. Bingley and then questioning Elizabeth as to what was going on in rapid succession.

She explained as quickly as she could. A footman was ordered into Meryton to fetch Mr. Jones—he was to stop first at Longbourn Church for the vicar—and another instructed to take a horse and ride to Hatfield for a surgeon. Mr. Hill assisted Bingley’s valet with carrying Henry into the house, and two other footman were given the task of taking the dead men around to the stables, where they would be put into a cart to await the arrival of the clergyman.

Hill, when she had got over her initial shock, took charge of Henry’s immediate needs: she directed Lewis and Mr. Hill to the guest room on the family floor, called out for water to be boiled and cloths to be fetched. Once Henry was in a bed, Longbourn’s housekeeper ordered her husband to fetch one of his dressing gowns, as the man would need to be stripped of his dirty and blood-stained clothing.

While this was going on, Mrs. Bennet and Elizabeth’s four sisters—Jane, who was older than she, as well as Mary, Kitty, and Lydia, who were younger—all burst forth from various rooms to learn what the fuss was about. Mr. Bennet ordered the younger girls back to their pursuits, that they would be out of the way of the servants moving about. This

suiting Mrs. Bennet just fine, as she was “So very happy to see you again, Mr. Bingley.”

“Mr. Bingley will come and visit with you in a moment, wife,” said Mr. Bennet sternly. “I first require an account of the events prior to his arrival from him.”

“Oh, Mr. Bennet! He can tell us all at once what has happened, for you know our dear girls will be wanting to hear,” Mrs. Bennet replied.

Elizabeth took a moment to glance at Jane, whose countenance was full of color at the sight of Mr. Bingley. She stared at him and he at her, until he heard his name spoken and was forced to pay attention to the master of the house.

“I will speak to Mr. Bingley and Elizabeth in my room, then you may visit with him if he wishes it.”

Her father’s tone was such that even Mrs. Bennet knew that arguing would be fruitless. It did not stop her complaining as her husband gestured to those he wished to speak to and led the way into his study. There, he asked again for an explanation, which Elizabeth was able to give in a clearer, less excited voice than she had done before. Mr. Bingley supplemented her tale with his own: he had been on his way back to Netherfield to speak to the steward on a matter that apparently required his personal attention and had come upon Elizabeth at the scene.

Mr. Bennet sighed and looked once more to his daughter. “It was reckless of you, Elizabeth, to venture forward on your own.”

She nodded. “I know it was, Papa, and I pray you will forgive me. But I could only think that if there was someone still alive, they might need help. I had no thought of bandits or highwaymen until I saw what had become of the footman.”

Her father shook his head and glanced toward the window as he settled his hands on his hips. “That there was such an attack this close to Meryton—to Longbourn—disturbs me,” said he. “We’ve not had such a thing occur here in... I cannot say, except that it has been many years. Did this driver give

you anything other than his name, Lizzy? Anything about his employer—where they were going or coming from? This would be good information to pass along to the magistrate when he returns from Devonshire.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I’m afraid not, Papa. I think he must have been very weak, as he could hardly speak a word. He only said that his name was Henry and that...” She felt her cheeks warm again. “And that he was glad to have a pretty nurse. I told him he would never think of me again if he were introduced to Jane.”

Beside her, Bingley shuffled his feet. Out of the corner of her eye, Elizabeth noted that he had colored. She could not help but wonder if his blush was due to his feelings for Jane or the fact that he’d abandoned her and was now but one room away from the former object of his affection.

“Um, speaking of Miss Bennet—a-and the rest of your family, of course,” Mr. Bingley added quickly, “I should not mind paying a call, now I am here. I-I certainly would have done anyway, while I am in the area.”

Mr. Bennet lifted an eyebrow. “Of course,” said he, his expression becoming amused at his visitor’s discomfiture. After a moment longer he gestured toward the study door, effectively dismissing them both. Elizabeth went with Mr. Bingley to the drawing room, where he was subjected to a rapid succession of questions from Mrs. Bennet, Kitty, and Lydia. Jane was silent, her cheeks blooming as numerous allusions were made to the match Mrs. Bennet had expected to be made between her eldest daughter and her visitor.

Though she felt for both of them, and was mortified at her mother’s behavior, Elizabeth found herself evermore curious as to what was going on above stairs. She wondered how Mrs. Hill and the others got on with Henry, she wondered if he were doing better or worse. She wondered when the vicar would come for the dead men, when the apothecary would come to see to Henry, when she might be allowed to visit their unexpected guest.

“Lizzy!”



Mrs. Bennet's sharp tone startled Elizabeth from her reverie. "Yes, Mamma?" she asked, surprised to see a deep frown on her mother's face.

"Go and wash your hands, child! I cannot believe you came into my drawing room with that man's blood all over them. Don't touch anything, just go and wash yourself! And change your clothes as well, in case you have his blood anywhere else. Oh! And make sure your father asks when he might be taken away, for we cannot have some unknown servant in a house where five unmarried young women reside."

Biting back what she wished to say, Elizabeth rose and said only, "Yes, Mamma," before quitting the room. She would go and clean herself up—truthfully, that she had blood on her hands had entirely escaped her notice—and then she would look in on their guest, who was not likely to be leaving their house anytime soon.

When her hands were clean and she had put on a fresh morning gown, Elizabeth tidied her blowsy hair and went round to the single guest room that was on the first floor of the house. She considered that it might have been more proper for Henry to be taken up to the footmen's dormitory on the second floor, but given his condition, she was thankful Hill had not thought it necessary to subject him to the strain, for being moved at all had surely exacerbated the poor man's injuries enough.

On approaching the doorway to the guest room, she noted that Henry's broken leg was propped up on pillows; his lower half was covered by a blanket and his torso was bare. Lewis was then wiping blood from the man's chest.

"My pretty nurse," came Henry's voice, still softly spoken, but not as strained as before. Elizabeth surmised Hill had given him something for his pain already.

"Miss Elizabeth!" cried Hill softly; she moved from the dressing table, where she had been organizing strips of cloth, to stand between Elizabeth and the man in the bed.

“You should not be here, Miss, seeing the gentleman in such a state,” the housekeeper scolded her softly.

Elizabeth felt her neck and cheeks flush. “Pray forgive me, Mrs. Hill; I only wished to see how our guest fared.”

Hill remained where she was and crossed her arms under her heavy bosom as she said, “He does all right, Miss, for what he’s been through. I’ve given him a very small dose of laudanum, as he was in pain. Didn’t want to give him too much until Mr. Jones has been.”

Elizabeth offered the lady a smile. “I am sure you know what is best, given all the years you have cared for our family, madam. I am certain Mr. Jones will be here very soon.”

“Pray, madam.”

Hill turned around to face the patient. “Yes?”

“May I...have a word...with the young lady?” Henry asked.

Hill drew a breath. It was clear she did not wish to breach propriety or risk incurring her master’s wrath, and Elizabeth certainly did not want to do either. But she did wish to reassure herself that Henry was well with her own eyes, as she knew she would not be at ease until she had.

They were saved from deciding between them when Mr. Bennet led Mr. Jones up the stairs. Elizabeth knew that it would be some time indeed before she would have a chance to hear whatever Henry had to say and stepped away from the door.

Mr. Jones paused before following her father into the room. “I understand from your father that you found the gentleman?”

She nodded. “Yes, sir. I did apply some pressure to try and stop the bleeding from the wounds to his chest and abdomen, for they still bled a little when I came upon him. I am sorry that I could not say how long he had been there. Must have been some time, however, as I heard nothing as I approached that part of the road; I was on my way to Oakham Mount.”

The apothecary smiled. "As you are at least twice a week, I recall," he said kindly, before proceeding into the room to see his patient.

Elizabeth went back to her room, where she picked up the book she had been reading the night before. But she could not concentrate on it; after reading the same paragraph at least three times, a groan of frustration escaped her before she snapped the book shut and tossed it back onto the window seat. Her thoughts remained firmly fixed on the man down the hall. She wondered who he was, who his employer had been. She wondered about the highwaymen who had attacked his carriage and wondered if they were still in the area, planning to attack other travelers. The mystery intrigued her, and Elizabeth knew she would continue to wonder until she had some answers.

A good half hour had passed before Hill came to her door and informed her that Mr. Jones had done his work and gone, and that their guest had been dressed up well enough to have a visitor.

"Mr. Jones did say not to stay too long, as Mr. Faulkner needs his rest," the housekeeper added. When they reached the guest room, she stopped and turned to the side and gestured for Elizabeth to go in. "I'll leave the door open, Miss."

Elizabeth smiled at her. "I would expect nothing less, Mrs. Hill."

She then entered the bedroom and saw that the patient was alone. He lay on the bed with his eyes closed, one hand over his stomach, the other beside him on the bed. He was dressed in a man's nightshirt, from what she could see above the brown blanket that covered him from mid-torso down. A chair had been placed next to the bed on his left side, and she lowered herself into it quietly, so as not to disturb him.

His eyes opened languidly even as she was sitting. "So, you've come at last," he drawled softly. "I began to think I should never see you."

Elizabeth grinned. "Now sir, you know very well there are rules about a young, unmarried lady of genteel birth being

alone with a gentleman, especially in his bedroom.”

Henry—Mr. Faulkner—returned her grin. “But this is not my bedroom.”

“It may as well be,” retorted Elizabeth.

His grin widened. “In any case, it pleases me you are unmarried. I should be loath to think I had been fantasizing about another man’s wife.”

“In that case, you might well be a singular fellow,” said Elizabeth, “as even a country squire’s sheltered daughter has heard that the taking of a mistress or two is common among the *ton*. But then you are not of that lot, are you? I found you wearing livery.”

She paused when his smile fell. “I should like to say again how very sorry I am about the footman and your employer.”

“Thank you, Miss Bennet. See? I have remembered your name.”

“And I now have your full name—Mrs. Hill called you Mr. Faulkner.”

Mr. Faulkner nodded. “Aye, my name is Henry Faulkner. Your father and the apothecary wished to know my full name, so I told them.”

He sighed then, and cocked his head slightly as he regarded her. “You *are* very pretty, you know, if you will forgive the observation of a stranger.”

“I thank you for the compliment, sir. But seeing as we have been introduced, we are no longer strangers,” said Elizabeth with a smile. Then Mr. Darcy’s comment at the Meryton assembly, where they had first met, flashed across her consciousness, and she could not stop herself asking, “Tell me, Mr. Faulkner, if you will... Were you to see me across a crowded assembly hall, would you think me not only tolerable, but handsome enough to dance with?”

“More than that, Miss Bennet—that smile, and those eyes, would make me want to know more about you the moment I laid eyes on you,” said Mr. Faulkner, before he frowned and

added, "Don't tell me some foolish young pup was so abominably rude as to say the opposite within your hearing?"

Elizabeth chuckled. "Unfortunately, yes, though I am certain I was not meant to hear it," said she. "From what I have since learned of the gentleman in question, he was not in a good humor that evening and spoke only to stop his friend pestering him about dancing. He apparently does not care to dance unless he is intimately acquainted with his partner."

"And how is a gentleman to get to know a lady unless he allows himself to be introduced to her? Foolish boy. In any case, it was ungentlemanly of him to say the words aloud, especially when there was even the remotest chance you might have heard," said Mr. Faulkner. "You jest about it now, Miss Bennet, but I cannot imagine you were entirely unwounded."

It was Elizabeth's turn to sigh. "I own that I was not. However, I am over it, and can laugh about it now."

She noted in that moment that he appeared to be struggling to stay awake. Rising to her feet, she offered him a smile. "I should go and let you rest. Per Mr. Jones' orders, I was not to stay long."

"I wish you could stay longer—a man likes to wake up to a pretty face whenever possible," said Mr. Faulkner. "The way my day's going, I'll wake to some ruddy-faced old man wanting to take my leg off."

"I do not believe the surgeon is old, though I cannot recollect his complexion," said Elizabeth with a grin. "He will treat you well and save your leg if he can."

"Oh, very well," said Mr. Faulkner as he tried in vain to stifle a yawn. "If you must go, be gone. But pray, come see me again this evening, if your father permits it. I should not like to overstep his hospitality by tarnishing the reputation of his most charming daughter."

"You flatter me too much, sir," said Elizabeth. "Rest now. I will look in on you later if I am able."

"Thank you, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I should like to see you again," Mr. Faulkner replied, before at last giving up the

struggle to keep his eyes open.

Elizabeth departed his room, drawing the door closed behind her. She was amazed that he had stayed awake so long, given the severity of his injuries.

“Upon my word, Miss Elizabeth,” said Hill, her voice startling Elizabeth. Whirling, she saw that the housekeeper was sitting in a chair just a few feet from the guest room.

“Hill! You gave me a fright. Have you been there all this time?”

“Of course, Miss. Couldn’t leave you entirely unchaperoned, could I?” Hill replied.

Elizabeth chuckled softly. “I suppose not. Thank you for looking after me.”

“And a good thing I were, too,” said the housekeeper. “For I do believe that man in there was flirting with you.”



# Chapter Three

**As her** walk that morning had been interrupted, upon leaving Mr. Faulkner to sleep Elizabeth took herself out for another, though this time she kept to the garden behind the house.

She was soon after joined by Jane, whose audible sighs were clear indicators that she wanted her sister to ask questions. Elizabeth decided to oblige.

“So... How was your visit with Mr. Bingley? Did he stay long?”

“It was...awkward, at first. He seemed not to know what to say aside from recounting how the two of you helped that man,” said Jane. “He stayed a quarter of an hour—Mamma, of course, tried to get him to stay longer, but he said he had business with Netherfield’s steward that he was already late for. However, Mamma did manage to get him to agree to return for tea this afternoon.”

She stopped walking and turned to Elizabeth. “You know, Lizzy, it struck me that had he not encountered you on the road, we would never have known he’d come back—he would have paid his visit to Netherfield and gone back to town again without calling on any of our neighbours.”

*Or us*, Elizabeth thought. “Perhaps. But then, if that were true, why bother bringing his valet along?”

Jane smiled briefly and they started walking again. “A fair point, Lizzy. It gives me hope.”

“So, you still care for him?”

Her sister nodded. “Of course, I do—he has been absent only a fortnight, after all,” said she. “And I have been thinking, Lizzy... if Mr. Bingley does decide to disappoint his sisters’ wishes and stay at Netherfield, then I must do more to secure him.”



“Do more?” queried Elizabeth. “Such as? Jane, you didn’t do anything wrong before—you know that.”

“But Lizzy, I have thought a great deal on the subject—going over and over our interactions in my mind during Mr. Bingley’s absence—and I begin to realize that while I may not have done anything *wrong*, I also did not do *enough*.”

“Oh Jane...” Elizabeth said softly.

“Miss Darcy, I understand, is Lydia’s age,” Jane went on. “She is still a child! She’s not even out in society—how can Mr. Bingley seriously be considering such a person for his wife?”

“On that point I can agree with you,” said Elizabeth. “It does seem rather odd he should desire so young and untrained a creature for his bride. You may not have her wealth and accomplishments, but as you are nearly seven years her senior, you have that many more years’ experience in the world. If Mamma has taught us nothing else, you and I at least know how to manage a household.”

“Precisely! For all her praise of Miss Darcy’s accomplishments, Miss Bingley did not list among them anything pertaining to managing a household. If I am not mistaken, Mr. Darcy sent his sister away to school after their father died, so she’s had no real instruction on being a gentleman’s hostess or manager of his household servants.”

“Indeed,” said Elizabeth.

Jane drew a breath. “However true all this may be, Miss Bingley believes her brother will offer for Mr. Darcy’s sister. Therefore, I must seize this opportunity make Mr. Bingley see that a more mature woman is a far better choice for his bride. And Netherfield is such a fine house—I should dearly love to be its mistress.”

Elizabeth linked her arm with her sister’s. “And a fine mistress of Netherfield you shall make. But pray, do not do anything foolish to draw Mr. Bingley’s attentions to you—again. I should not like for anyone to gossip about you.”

“Lizzy, you astonish me!” cried Jane as color filled her cheeks. “You know I would never risk my reputation in such a way. I take my duty as the eldest daughter very seriously.”

“Dearest Jane, do not think I question your integrity!” Elizabeth said. “I only wish to ensure you do not do something you will later regret.”

Jane laughed as they turned in their walk and started back toward the house. “Silly Lizzy... Mr. Bingley is handsome and rich, and I adore him. I could never regret doing anything that was necessary to secure him.”

After they’d returned to the house, Elizabeth sought out her father to discover what he knew of their visitor’s condition from Mr. Jones.

“He’s an exceptionally fortunate fellow, Lizzy,” Mr. Bennet told her. “Mr. Faulkner’s leg was broken in the fall when the carriage overturned, and whoever it was that attacked him with that knife clearly didn’t know what he was doing. Mr. Jones is certain that though the wounds are very serious, they are not likely to be fatal. Unless, of course, he develops an infection, which is a very real possibility given we do not know how long he lay in the dirt before you found him.”

Elizabeth began to fear for the poor carriage driver, and though she tried to distract herself from her concern by sitting with her mother and sisters in the drawing room with needlework, she made very little progress. Her thoughts constantly returned to Mr. Faulkner. She wondered who his employer had been and if anyone was missing that gentleman. She wondered if Mr. Faulkner or the footman were missed by anyone.

Mr. Jones returned to Longbourn at near the same moment the surgeon from Hatfield arrived—and behind him was Mr. Bingley, arriving promptly for tea. Elizabeth—knowing how much her mother would fawn over Mr. Bingley and chastise him about going away so suddenly—wished she could follow her father and the two medical practitioners up to see Mr.

Faulkner, but like a good daughter, she followed her mother's command to return to the drawing room with her sisters.

Her eyes widened when she caught sight of Jane. Her sister had departed a few minutes before but had returned wearing a different gown—one with a neckline much lower than was her usual modest preference. Plenty of Jane's décolletage was on display, and nary a strip of lace or fichu was in sight.

Elizabeth was, of course, not the only one to take notice. Mrs. Bennet smiled approvingly, Kitty and Lydia whispered and giggled to each other, and Mr. Bingley stared openly, color rising in his cheeks. Jane, for her part, colored a little, though she smiled and behaved as if nothing were amiss. When Mary was ordered to ring for tea, Mrs. Bennet not so subtly gestured for Jane to take her sister's chair, which was next to Bingley. Jane complied and moved...

...and further surprised Elizabeth by leaning slightly toward their guest, thereby giving him a better view of her assets.

Mortification flooded Elizabeth's veins, and it was all she could do to keep her seat. She could hardly believe the creature before her was her mild, modest sister. Why, she seemed almost to have taken Lydia's example, save for the wildness with which their youngest sister usually behaved.

"Oh Mr. Bingley, do say you will stay, and come to dinner tomorrow," Jane was saying in a tone of voice that gave even Kitty and Lydia pause. It was coquettish—almost sultry—and totally unlike Jane.

"I, um..." Bingley hedged, and he was saved for a moment from responding by the arrival of Hill with the tea. "I am afraid I have no staff at Netherfield at present. My man and I were only to stay the night."

"But then where would you have taken your meals if you have no one there to cook for you?" Mrs. Bennet pressed.

"At the inn in Meryton, I daresay," Bingley replied simply.

Mrs. Bennet's astonishment was expressed in a gasp, and Jane's hurt was about the only thing in her present conduct Elizabeth could say was genuine. A pout came over her countenance, and as she leaned forward again to give Mr. Bingley another glance at her exposed skin, she reached over with one hand to lay it gently atop his forearm.

"Oh Mr. Bingley, we cannot have this! You must send for your servants to have them come and reopen Netherfield—surely it can be done by express," said Jane as she batted her eyes at him.

*Good gracious, she is batting her eyes!* Elizabeth thought morosely, even as Bingley had to all but force his tea down his throat. If he didn't fall for her sister now, she knew not what would attract him.

Jane had always been of the belief that the gentleman should make his interest known first, but though Bingley had clearly favored her, he had not outright declared he wished to court or marry her. Elizabeth understood what her sister had meant by not having done enough...and found herself fearing that Jane was now doing too much.

*Surely that's what Mr. Darcy would think,* she mused bitterly.

"I... uh... Caroline may not wish to return to the country," Bingley said then. "I am sure you will recall she has a preference for town."

"Miss Bingley need not return to Netherfield, Mr. Bingley, if she does not wish it," said Mrs. Bennet casually. "I am sure she would be much happier in town with Mr. and Mrs. Hurst."

Lydia giggled over her teacup. "If you need a hostess for Netherfield, Mr. Bingley, I am sure Jane would be more than happy to take on the role."

"She would indeed," added Kitty.

"Now sisters, you know perfectly well that it would be improper for Mr. Bingley to ask Jane to serve as his hostess when she is not a relation or his wife," admonished Mary.

Mrs. Bennet twittered a laugh. “Well now, my dears, we know how Mr. Bingley could remedy *that* conundrum—though I certainly do not wish to put any undue pressure on you, my boy,” said she. “But, um, my Jane *is* in very fine looks today, is she not? And I can assure you she knows very well how to manage a household. I should think any sensible young man would be very proud to have such a beautiful and well-mannered lady as mistress of so fine an estate as Netherfield.”

Elizabeth nearly choked on her tea. “Mamma!” she cried.

“If I may say so, Mr. Bingley, I would so like you to stay at Netherfield,” said Jane. “We... I... have missed your company very much.”

*If she had not made her feelings plain before, she certainly has now,* thought Elizabeth as mortification consumed her a second time.

Mr. Bingley abruptly set his teacup on the tray, causing it to clatter, and pushed to his feet. “I-I-I am so very sorry, but I must cut this visit short, I am afraid,” said he, before he looked down at Jane and smiled. “After all, I have a great deal to do if I am to reopen Netherfield and perchance bring a mistress to it soon.”

Kitty and Lydia burst into a fit of giggles, Mary shook her head and sipped her tea, and Elizabeth shuddered from the shame of her mother and sisters’ blatantly forward conduct while Jane smiled triumphantly...and Mrs. Bennet preened. Both of the latter ladies stood to walk Mr. Bingley to the door, with Jane taking the arm Mr. Bingley offered.

“Upon my word!” said Lydia after they had gone out of the room. “Can you believe *that* was our dull, modest, paragon-of-virtue Jane? I have never seen her be so very flirtatious—what a good joke!”

“It *was* rather forward of her to dress and behave so, was it not?” mused Kitty. “I have never seen her act in such a manner. But then, Mr. Bingley *did* quit Netherfield without even taking leave, so Jane must be showing him just what it is he walked away from!”

The two youngest Bennets burst into laughter again. “Oh hush, the pair of you,” snapped Elizabeth. “Mr. Bingley likes Jane already, and you well know it. She does not need to act in the same shamefully flirtatious manner as the two of you are foolishly allowed to do in order to secure him. Or any other man.”

Disgusted with her family in a way she had never been before, Elizabeth quickly finished her tea and retreated once more to the solitude of her bedchamber. A small part of her did understand why Jane felt the need to act out of character, but the rational part of her mind that knew she should not have to railed against it. She was reminded then of Charlotte’s having said Jane might want to “do more to help him on” if she was to secure Bingley, which Jane herself had apparently concluded as well.

*If Mr. Bingley could not see Jane’s heart through her shy and modest demeanor, then he does not deserve her,* Elizabeth thought sourly as she sat herself upon the window seat and picked up the book she had left there.

She had finished the chapter that earlier she had been unable to concentrate on when Jane came into her room.

“Lydia told me what you had to say when Mamma and I walked Mr. Bingley to the door,” said Jane as she moved to sit beside her on the window seat.

Elizabeth sighed. “Of course, she did. Mamma has trained her gossiping protégé well, as Lydia cannot keep anything to herself.”

“I do appreciate your feelings on this matter, Lizzy, as for the most part I do agree with you,” Jane went on. “I should not have to behave in a way that feels uncomfortable to me just to secure a husband, but sister, when you hear what he said to me —”

Sitting up straighter, Elizabeth set her book aside. “What did Mr. Bingley say?”

Jane sighed. “Mamma, in an obvious effort to give us some measure of privacy, went back into the house almost as

soon as we'd gone out the door to wait for Mr. Bingley's horse to be brought around. I was glad for it, because all this playacting enabled me to be bold enough to ask him why he did not come back in a few days, as his sister's note said he had intended. He hesitated to answer at first, but then confessed that Mr. Darcy and his sisters had convinced him that I was indifferent to him."

Indignation swept through Elizabeth. "You cannot be serious! How could they possibly think you indifferent? Just because you are shy and modest does not mean you do not feel deeply."

"Yes, I did—I do—feel deeply for Mr. Bingley. I love him. But he did not know it because he could not see it. He said that by the night of the ball, he had believed my regard for him sincere, if not equal to his own, and that Mr. Darcy was of the firm belief that though I received his attentions with pleasure, I did not invite them by any participation of sentiment. He said his friend did not scruple to assert that the serenity of my countenance was such as might have given the most acute observer a conviction that, however amiable my temper, my heart was not likely to be easily touched."

"Oh, that is ridiculous!" Elizabeth nearly shouted as she jumped to her feet in agitation, her innermost thoughts cursing the day Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy had ever set foot in Meryton. "Not every woman must wear her heart on her sleeve for all the world to see. No doubt he at one time thought you smiled too much—but then to say you did not display your emotions enough? How absurd!"

"But that is precisely the point, Lizzy!" Jane cried, standing also. "It may well *be* absurd, and their judgment of my sentiments in error, but they came to that conclusion because I did not make plain my affection for Mr. Bingley."

"And if you had, you'd have no doubt been labeled a fortune hunter," Elizabeth said. "The real truth is, Jane, as I said before: Miss Bingley is desperate to get her brother to fall in love with Miss Darcy because she wants Mr. Darcy for herself. She thinks that one union of the two families will bring on another. And both she and Mr. High-and-Mighty

Darcy probably disdain our lack of fortune and connexions, not that the Bingleys have any of the latter of which they can boast.”

She returned to the window seat and sat with a sigh. “No doubt the total want of propriety displayed by our mother and younger sisters also played a part in their determination to separate you and Mr. Bingley. That is why I fear for this new attitude of yours, Jane. I would not give those wretched creatures any further reason to disparage you.”

Jane sat down again. “I understand you, Lizzy. I do. And I will be careful not to be *too* forward—perhaps no more putting myself so directly in Mr. Bingley’s face,” said she with a laugh. “Then again, knowing that his eyes were on me, seeing in them that he desired me... Lizzy, it’s the most incredible feeling to have such power over a man.”

Elizabeth bit back the retort that came to mind, and said instead, “So, Mr. Bingley is truly coming back to Netherfield then?”

A smile burst forth on Jane’s countenance. “He promised me, Lizzy!” she cried softly. “He does have at least one engagement this week that he said it would be too impolite to back out of last minute, but that he fully intended to send an express notification to his staff to come and ready the house! Can you imagine, Lizzy? By Christmas I may be Mr. Bingley’s intended!”

Leaning over to embrace her sister warmly, Elizabeth said, “I hope that you are. Perhaps them Mamma will give up haranguing me about Mr. Collins marrying Charlotte and stop moaning about starving in the hedgerows.”

“And what of you?” asked Jane suddenly.

“Whatever do you mean?” Elizabeth retorted.

“As I was coming up to see you, I overheard Hill telling Mr. Hill that our unexpected guest was flirting with you,” teased her sister.

Elizabeth laughed. “Hill is surely imagining things. Yes, Mr. Faulkner called me pretty, but Jane, the man was more



than likely a little delirious. He had ingested who knew what pain relievers Mr. Jones gave to him—not to mention a dose of laudanum—and was merely thankful to have survived a traumatic attack in which he lost a friend and his employer. And really, he must be near in age to Papa! Well, I assume so given the grey I noted at his temples. But I suppose that otherwise, he does look quite fit.”

Jane’s smile grew. “So, you noticed he was fit, did you?”

“Do not be ridiculous, Jane,” said Elizabeth, playfully swatting at her sister’s shoulder. “Mr. Faulkner cannot possibly be thinking seriously of a girl he only just met. Besides, he is the carriage driver of no one knows who. Young or old, Papa would never allow me to ally myself to a servant—I do not think he would be that indulgent even for me.”



# Chapter Four

**Mr. Faulkner** developed a fever overnight. Mr. Jones was sent for, and after examining the patient again, it was determined that infection had indeed set in.

Elizabeth learned of the change in their guest's condition upon emerging from her room the next morning. Mrs. Hill was at the same moment stepping out of Mr. Faulkner's room, her hands full of soiled bandages. She kindly informed Elizabeth of the circumstances, adding that Mr. Jones had ordered the bandages on the patient's chest be changed every four hours and a fresh poultice applied to the wounds to help fight the infection.

"Oh, the poor soul!" said Elizabeth with a gasp. "Do you think I might see him?"

The housekeeper appeared to be contemplating the propriety of doing so, at last emitting a small huff and opening the door to the sick chamber. Elizabeth nodded her thanks and stepped inside, her heart increasing its pace upon seeing how different Mr. Faulkner looked from the last time she had seen him. Mr. Bennet had granted his permission for her to sit with him again for a quarter of an hour after dinner the night before, which Elizabeth had spent reading to their guest while a maid sat quietly in the corner working on mending a garment.

It pained her to see his countenance so flushed, with perspiration beading on his forehead. Noting a bowl of water on the table, which smelled strongly of vinegar, Elizabeth took up the cloth that lay beside it and put it into the bowl to soak. She then wrung most of the water out before patting the sweat from Mr. Faulkner's brow and cheeks. When she had done, she re-soaked the cloth, wrung it, and then folded it before laying it across his brow.

“You get better now, so we can get you home,” Elizabeth whispered before turning round and quitting the room.

Her concern for Mr. Faulkner and curiosity about the attack which led to his injuries plagued Elizabeth all through her morning walk in the garden—she had been forbidden from leaving the estate for her rambles by her father, until he was certain it was safe—and continued to distract her while she attempted to write letters to friends and her Aunt Gardiner. To the latter she expressed her concern for Longbourn’s guest, her curiosity over what had brought him hither, and her amazement at her own fascination with the man.

*I cannot fathom the reason he so often occupies my thoughts, Aunt, save perhaps that the monotony of life has been so spectacularly disturbed by his arrival.*

After attending to her correspondence, Elizabeth joined her sisters in the drawing room and did her best to concentrate on a piece of embroidery she hoped to make into a reticule—if she ever finished it. Sewing was one of her least favorite activities in spite of the knowledge that she could produce pretty things if she tried hard enough. When the family later ate breakfast together, Mrs. Bennet speculated on how soon Mr. Bingley would make his offer to Jane.

“For certainly he will not put it off much longer!” she declared.

Bingley made both Mrs. Bennet and Jane happy when he appeared for dinner that evening and cheerfully informed his host and hostess—though he smiled at Jane as he spoke—that though he had mistakenly sent his letter to Mrs. Nicholls with the regular post the evening before instead of by express, she and the rest of the Netherfield staff had responded by showing up shortly after noon without sending word ahead.

“The staff are rather pleased to be back in the country, I think,” said he.

“I shouldn’t wonder, Mr. Bingley,” replied Mrs. Bennet. “For the country is a much pleasanter place to live, whatever that friend of yours might say. It is a much healthier environment for bringing up children, that is for certain.”

Jane colored at these words, as did Bingley, and Elizabeth felt for them both. Her mother might have said she did not intend to pressure Mr. Bingley, but she appeared to have no qualms about doing just that.

Mr. Bingley then cleared his throat and looked toward Mr. Bennet. "Sir, I was wondering how your guest fares?"

Elizabeth looked up as her father replied that Mr. Faulkner was not doing very well at all, having developed a fever from infection.

"Gracious, that is unfortunate," said Bingley. "Do you think it would be of benefit for a physician to come from London to see him? I must go there tomorrow to fulfill my obligations, but I can call on my personal physician and see if he can make time for the poor fellow."

"Oh, Mr. Bingley, must you really go?" simpered Mrs. Bennet.

"I am afraid I must, as I am already engaged tomorrow evening and must settle some affairs in town before I can settle in here for the winter," Bingley replied.

Mrs. Bennet drew a breath, but Jane spoke before her mother could. "That you have promised to return is all the assurance your friends need to know we will see you again," said she, staving off whatever remark her mother had been about to make.

"Thank you, Mr. Bingley," said Mr. Bennet as his wife opened her mouth again to speak, "for the kindness of your offer. At present I do not think Mr. Faulkner in immediate danger of decease."

"Indeed, sir," spoke up Elizabeth. "For he is under the direct care of Mrs. Hill, who has always been most diligent in the care of the family when ill. And as you know from only a short time ago, Mr. Jones' draughts are most efficacious. Though we are concerned, I have confidence that Mr. Faulkner will recover."

She paused and glanced at her father. "However, if you leave your direction with my father, I am sure he will see that

Mr. Jones gets it, for I know our apothecary is not averse to sending for help if he thinks it is needed.”

Mr. Bennet inclined his head once, at which point Mrs. Bennet once again took command of the conversation, asking Mr. Bingley when he planned to return, “...for it will be your turn to host dinner,” she said with a sly look at both Jane and Bingley.

“Of-of course, Mrs. Bennet,” Bingley stammered. “I should be happy to have a dinner party at Netherfield in the next week or two when I am settled in again.”

“You must be sure to invite some militia officers to the party!” cried Lydia. “Kitty and I will be sure to entertain them for you.”

“Lydia, it is for Mr. Bingley to invite whomever he chooses to his party,” Jane admonished her softly.

“In any case,” said Bingley with a laugh, “I shall have to speak to Mrs. Nicholls about ordering enough supplies to feed everyone!”

Bingley was persuaded by Mrs. Bennet to stay for a few rounds of cards after dinner, but she could not needle him into staying for supper, as he cited a wish to get an early start. At the door, when saying his farewells, he took up Jane’s hand and pressed his lips to the back of it, causing her mother to grin broadly and her youngest sisters to twitter madly. Elizabeth wished she could smack the two of them for embarrassing Jane but settled for a light pinch to the arm of each. This, of course, elicited an indignant screech from both, but they were hushed by their father as he crossed over to his bookroom and disappeared inside.

Elizabeth decided to forego supper that evening and retired to her room. As she reached the first-floor landing, she turned toward Mr. Faulkner’s room and saw that the Hills were in the midst of changing the patient’s bandages again.

“Miss Lizzy, you shouldn’t be here while the gentleman’s not got his nightshirt on,” said the housekeeper as she finished applying the poultice to one of the stab wounds and laying a

strip of cloth over it. Her husband held the unconscious man up in a sitting position as she then wrapped a bandage all the way around his torso.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Hill,” said Elizabeth. “I only wished to check in on our guest. I was hoping to find him faring better.”

“The wounds don’t look bad, thank the Lord, but something’s got into the poor soul, as he’s still got quite the fever and hasn’t woken all day.”

Feeling her compassion stirred by this news, Elizabeth said softly, “Well then, as I am for bed, I shall be certain to say an extra prayer for him.”

She then turned away and started for her room, the words already silently falling from her lips.

-...-

Fitzwilliam Darcy tapped the knocker against the plate at Reginald Hurst’s Mayfair residence, his mind drifting to the note he had received from Bingley as he waited.

*Please come as soon as convenient. I need your advice.*

Why send a note when he could have just called at Darcy House?

The door to the home of Bingley’s sister and brother-in-law was soon opened, and he was escorted immediately to the drawing room. He found there only Louisa Hurst and her younger sister, Caroline Bingley.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Hurst. Miss Bingley,” he greeted them politely with a dip of his head. “May I ask where your brother is? He sent me a note asking to see me.”

The sisters looked to one another, then Miss Bingley took a step toward him. “Charles didn’t send the note, Mr. Darcy. We did. Louisa wrote it at my behest.”

A deep frown settled on his brow, at both the audacity and inappropriateness of what they’d done. Rather than chastise

them, Darcy said, “Why did you not simply write to me in your own hand, Mrs. Hurst, if you had need of my services? It would not have been taken amiss for a married lady to send a note to a friend.”

“To be perfectly candid, Mr. Darcy, I did not know that you would respond so quickly to a note from me,” said Mrs. Hurst. “And we are rather desperate.”

Miss Bingley all but rushed to him and just refrained from grabbing his arm. “It’s Charles we must speak to you about, Darcy!” said she. “I *knew* that going back to Netherfield in person was a bad idea—did I not say so, Louisa?”

“Indeed, you did,” her sister confirmed.

“Whatever are you talking of Miss Bingley?” Darcy asked.

Miss Bingley clasped her hands together in a pleading manner. “Charles received a letter from the Netherfield steward the other day, saying there were some issues with the tenants that he felt it was best were seen to in person by the master of the estate. We tried to talk him out of going, for surely his man of business could speak for him, but he said something or other about taking your advice and insisted on going himself. He and his valet spent two days there, and I just know he ran into those scheming Bennets, as Louisa and I feared he would, for yesterday he sent for the servants to open up the house again!”

*Oh dear*, mused Darcy. This was a spot of trouble, after all that he and Bingley’s sisters had done to convince him that Jane Bennet was indifferent to him. After all he had done to eliminate any reason for returning to Hertfordshire himself.

Just as he drew a breath to speak, it struck Darcy: What if they were wrong—what if Jane Bennet were simply overly modest and wont to keep her true feelings hidden? And—wrong or right—should not Bingley be allowed to make his own mistakes? He was near two years over his majority, after all. If he was ever to be taken seriously among the first circles in society, he must be allowed to make his own choices, for good or ill. If he had already sent for his servants to open up



Netherfield again—without consulting his closest friend—then Bingley had taken the first steps to becoming his own man.

Stifling a sigh, he said at last, “If your brother has met with the Bennets again and been convinced by them to return to Netherfield, or if he has done so of his own volition due to his affection for Jane Bennet, I daresay there is little we can do about it now.”

“But Darcy, they’re so vulgar!” cried Caroline.

“And have such low connexions!” added Louisa.

Darcy refrained from reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose, an unfortunate habit he had developed when he became frustrated. “Ladies, while the first matter is an unfortunate circumstance, the latter, I am loath to point out, is hardly any worse than your own connexions—your father and grandfather were tradesmen, were they not?”

This undesirous reminder of the origin of their family’s fortune was effective in silencing the sisters’ complaints, at least for the moment. Darcy then asked them, “Is your brother still at Netherfield?”

At the same moment he spoke, Bingley himself entered the room. “Darcy!” he cried cheerfully, though his expression showed some nervousness. “How good of you to call. I trust Miss Darcy is well?”

Darcy nodded. “She is well indeed. I left her practicing on her lyre.”

“Oh, how delightful!” said Miss Bingley. “I do adore that your dear sister is so very accomplished; playing three instruments is simply remarkable, do not you think so, Charles?”

It was an effort for Darcy not to roll his eyes, though Bingley had not the same scruple. “Yes, Caroline, indeed it is. If only *my* sisters applied themselves as Darcy’s does.”

*Bravo, Bingley,* Darcy thought.

“By the by, Darcy, I am glad you are come,” said Bingley. “I, uh, I have some news to share.”

“Your sisters have already shared the news that you are to return to Netherfield,” Darcy said.

Bingley looked at his sisters. “Allow me to guess: you are here because Louisa summoned you to help them talk me out of it.”

He would not lie to his friend, but in order to preserve peace in the family, Darcy decided he would not tell Bingley that the note had been forged in his hand. “She did, yes,” said he simply.

Bingley drew a breath. “Well, I shall tell you as I told them: You were wrong about Jane, and I have heard those very words from her own lips. She has not yet said that she loves me, but then neither have I confessed my love to her. And I *do* love her—I mean soon to ask her to be my wife. I am sorry if it pains you, Darcy, but remember that the connexions and sisters are mine to deal with and not yours.”

“On the contrary, Bingley,” said Darcy, having already resigned himself to the fact that Bingley was now likely to marry Jane Bennet. If he was opening up Netherfield again, his mind was already made up. “I congratulate you on making a firm decision on what *you* feel is best for your future felicity.”

Bingley sighed in obvious relief. “Thank you, Darcy. At least *someone* has decided to support my choice in spite of their objections,” said he with a sidelong glance at his sisters. Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst looked thoroughly wretched, which Darcy could not help but find amusing.

“I am back in town because of that dinner we have at Hiddleston’s this evening, or I’d be in Meryton still,” Bingley was saying. “But besides my returning to Netherfield, I have quite the story to tell you!”

It was quite the story indeed, Darcy mused, when Bingley had finished telling him of finding the attacked carriage on the road. He expressed astonishment that such a thing would happen so close to the idyllic village of Longbourn and the market town of Meryton, wondered aloud what had become of the bandits and why they didn’t take the carriage horses, and

kept to himself his relief that Elizabeth Bennet had not come to harm. It was like her, he thought, to wish to care for the injured man.

Then something Bingley said struck him like a horse's kick. "Wait, Bingley—what did you say the survivor's name was again?"

"Henry Faulkner. Why? Do you know his employer well enough to notify the family?" Bingley asked.

"Oh, I know them well enough, all right," said Darcy as alarm ran through him. "Do give my apologies to Hiddleston—and Theodore's as well. We'll not be joining you for dinner, I fear."

Bingley's countenance now showed concern as Miss Bingley sputtered, "Mr. Darcy, you cannot abandon us this evening! Mr. Hiddleston's card party is said to be one of *the* social events of the late season. The number of ladies to gentlemen will be uneven!"

Darcy frowned as he turned his gaze toward her. "Be that as it may, madam, if the gentleman your brother and Miss Elizabeth saved is who I believe him to be, Hiddleston will excuse our absence."

"Who do you think him to work for, Darcy?" Bingley asked.

"I'd rather not say, given the carriage was attacked," said Darcy. "I must take my leave of you; I have an urgent errand in regard to the attack."

Bingley nodded and went to a bellpull, and Darcy's horse was ordered. His friend accompanied him outside when it was brought around from the mews.

"Darcy, can you tell me who you suspect the man to be? I thought the name a fairly common one, but you paled as though you knew him personally."

"I suspect, Bingley, that the man you found was not truly the driver but the employer of the two dead men, in disguise," Darcy said. "The Henry Faulkner with whom I am acquainted

has been known to do so, as threats against his person have been made more than once in years past.”

“But what has he to do with Colonel Fitzwilliam?” Bingley asked. “Why must you both miss the dinner tonight?”

“Theo must go to positively identify the survivor, and I must go to introduce him to the Bennets, that he may enter their house,” Darcy explained.

“I thought you said you were acquainted with Mr. Faulkner?”

Darcy suppressed a sigh of annoyance; Bingley could not help being confused, given he was being so vague.

“If I tell you who I think him to be, will you give me your word that you will speak of it to no one? Not your sisters, not Hurst—*no one*,” said Darcy.

Bingley drew himself up to his full height and nodded solemnly. Darcy leaned closer to whisper his suspicion to his friend, at which Bingley gasped.

“Give my regrets to Hiddleston,” Darcy said again. “Tell him that an urgent family matter required both my cousin and myself to miss the much looked forward to party this evening.”

Bingley nodded. “I shall, but give me a few moments—I will write a note for Mrs. Nicholls, that you may stay at Netherfield if need be.”

Darcy nodded his agreement and Bingley turned for the stairs. “Bingley, be quick about it—but do try to make your note legible.”

Bingley looked over his shoulder with a laugh before entering the house. He was out again in about five minutes, handing a folded piece of paper to Darcy. “Go ahead and open it, I know you want to.”

Darcy did so in silence and nodded his head at the greater legibility of Bingley’s hasty scrawl. “Thank you for this, Bingley. We may need it,” said he as he refolded it and tucked it into his pocket.

“Good luck to you. And do not fear for the gentleman’s condition, for Miss Elizabeth assured me last evening that though he was feverish, Mrs. Hill was a diligent nurse.”

With a silent nod of acknowledgement, Darcy mounted his horse at last and set off for Cavendish Square.



# Chapter Five

**Darcy felt** his anxiety rising as he ascended the steps before his uncle's London home—this would not be a pleasant visit.

When the butler opened the door, he inquired, “Is Colonel Fitzwilliam at home?”

The butler nodded. “He is sir. The colonel is with His Lordship in the study.”

He had hoped to speak to his cousin alone, that the rest of the family need not be alarmed if he were wrong—especially his aunt—but reasoned it was just as well that the earl be told. He might have some idea what to do if he were right.

The study door was open, but Darcy still rapped his knuckles lightly against the aged wood to attract the attention of the two men at the desk. Richard Fitzwilliam, the Earl of Disley, and Colonel Theodore Fitzwilliam, his younger son, looked up at his knock. Both men smiled and then the earl bid him enter.

“This is an unexpected pleasure, Darcy,” said his uncle. “To what do we owe it?”

Darcy closed the door behind him and approached the desk before speaking. “Uncle, I have some possibly grave news, for which I require the assistance of your son to confirm its veracity.”

Father and son glanced at one another. “Of course, I should be glad to help,” said Fitzwilliam. “What's happened?”

Darcy explained about Bingley and Elizabeth finding the attacked carriage on the road to Oakham Mount. He spoke of their saving the driver, who was at present under the care of the Meryton apothecary and the Longbourn housekeeper.

“That’s...interesting, Darcy, but why do you tell us of it?” asked Lord Disley.

“Uncle, the survivor of the attack gave his name as Henry Faulkner,” said Darcy.

His uncle and cousin reacted as expected, with gasps and expressions of alarm. The earl rose and came around his desk to stand beside his son. “You are certain of this, Darcy?” he asked.

Darcy nodded. “Bingley was quite clear about the name.”

Fitzwilliam turned so that he faced them both. “Father,” he said to the earl, “it could be him. You know how Uncle Henry sometimes disguises himself as one of his own servants when he travels, especially after the last attempt on his life.”

Lord Disley raised a hand to his chin and nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I know,” said he. “Do these Bennets know they host a marquess in their home?”

“Unless he has revealed his full identity to them, I do not believe so,” Darcy replied with a shake of his head. “Bingley did not know until I told him.”

“I assume his discretion can be trusted?” asked the earl. “For if it is indeed my wife’s brother, his whereabouts must be kept secret. I’ll have to write to the dean at Cambridge—I believe he was to give a speech there in a couple of days. I’ll tell him Henry is ill and will send word himself as soon as he is well.”

He looked to his son then. “We cannot tell your mother about this. Not until the man’s identity is confirmed.”

Fitzwilliam nodded. “Of course, Father. I would not unnecessarily alarm Mamma for all the world.”

He turned to Darcy. “When do you wish to leave?”

“As soon as may be,” Darcy replied. “Have your man pack a trunk for at least a week’s stay. I’ll return for you in an hour with my carriage.”

“I’ll be ready,” Fitzwilliam replied.



Precisely an hour later, Darcy and his cousin were on the road to Meryton. After several minutes, Fitzwilliam asked him, “Darcy, why am I really going? You know Henry well—surely you could identify him yourself.”

Darcy considered briefly telling him the truth—that he wanted a buffer between himself and Miss Elizabeth Bennet—but he could not. He had thought that in departing Meryton he would be safe from her charms, but he had been often plagued by thoughts of her the whole of the last fortnight. He’d unintentionally found himself comparing every woman he met to her and found them all wanting. Oh, it was dangerous to place himself in her sphere again, where her fine eyes and pert opinions had chance to sway him from his duty.

“Theo, the Marquess of Stashwick is *your* uncle,” he replied. “You see him more often than I do, therefore you are more familiar with his appearance than I am.”

“True enough,” Fitzwilliam conceded. “I wonder what really happened—random highwaymen or assassination attempt? Uncle’s reform propositions aren’t loved by many, and as I said, attempts have been made on his life before.”

Darcy nodded. “I am aware. That is why I made Bingley swear to tell no one.”

His cousin rolled his eyes. “Especially those gossip-loving sisters of his.”

Darcy snorted softly. “Indeed.”

Fortune favored the pair as Darcy’s carriage headed out of London. The weather was fair and the road in surprisingly good condition, and he surmised that they would arrive during or shortly after dinner. He hoped that the Bennets would be in—he hoped it would be just the family, and not a dinner party, if they were. Mr. Bennet they could not avoid telling the truth to, and likely Miss Elizabeth would need to be told as well. She was an observant sort and would sense that something was amiss the moment he crossed the threshold.

A glance at his watch showed that it was just past six in the evening when Darcy’s carriage turned on the lane to

Longbourn. Both passengers sat up straight, and Fitzwilliam's anxiety clearly showed in his expression.

"Is it unchristian of me to want you to be wrong?" he said suddenly.

Darcy shook his head. "I shouldn't think so," he replied. "But it is best we know, and perhaps—if I am in error—we might learn the identity of the man's employer. He could be someone we know."

"But you don't think so?"

"I do not. My instincts tell me it is the marquess—did not your father say he was to give an address at Cambridge?" said Darcy. "He would certainly take that road on the way there."

The carriage came to a stop before Longbourn's door at last. Darcy alighted first and looked around—was it really only two weeks since he had been here?

Fitzwilliam came up to his side and they started for the door together. Darcy rapped the knocker, and the door was opened almost instantly; he recognized Mrs. Hill, the housekeeper.

"Good evening, ma'am," said Darcy politely. "I beg pardon for calling so late, but I must speak with Mr. Bennet at once, if he is available. Is your master in?"

"The family are at table, sir," the lady replied.

"I feared that would be the case, but I am afraid this business cannot wait," said Darcy. "Would you be so kind as to give our apologies to Mr. Bennet and ask him to meet with us?"

Mrs. Hill nodded and stood back, opening the door further to invite them into the entry hall. "Wait here a moment, sirs," said she as she was closing the front door. She then turned toward the dining room doors and stepped through them. A moment later, Mrs. Bennet's voice came through clearly—the woman did not seem capable of regulating her volume—asking "What the devil is *he* doing here?"

Mr. Bennet's reply was muffled, though as chairs began to scrape on the floor he was more clearly heard to say, "Stay right where you are," before he emerged only a minute later.

"Mr. Darcy," he greeted him with a nod. "To what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Darcy inclined his head in return, then gestured to Fitzwilliam. "My cousin, sir, Colonel Theodore Fitzwilliam. Cousin, Mr. Thomas Bennet."

After the two gentlemen had bowed to one another, Fitzwilliam said, "To answer your question, sir, Darcy's friend Mr. Bingley told him about your invalid guest and...well, we think he might be my uncle."

Mr. Bennet's brows rose toward his hairline, and he looked at Darcy. "Whatever gave you that notion, Mr. Darcy?"

"His name," Darcy replied.

"My mother's maiden name was Faulkner, sir," said Fitzwilliam, "and her eldest brother's name is Henry. He is the Marquess of Stashwick."

Mr. Bennet crossed his arms. "Why would a marquess be wearing the livery of a servant?" he asked.

"My uncle unfortunately has enemies, Mr. Bennet," said the colonel. "He's a very outspoken man and while one of the most influential peers in the House of Lords, he is also one of the least liked. His ideas for progressive reforms in many areas, including the rights of women, are not looked upon with favor by the old guard. Attempts have been made on his life in the past—"

"Attempts on his life?" queried Mr. Bennet with a frown, his arms dropping to his sides. "Is my family in danger?"

"I do not believe so," Darcy was quick to assure him. "Please, allow Colonel Fitzwilliam to see him before we speak further, that we may determine if the Henry Faulkner you have in your guest room is indeed the Countess of Disley's brother."

Mr. Bennet nodded. "Indeed, let us be certain of that before we jump to conclusions."

He turned around and crossed to a door on the right of the massive fireplace that would heat the spacious hall well in the winter. The door opened to a stairwell, and Darcy and Fitzwilliam followed Mr. Bennet up its narrow treads to the first floor. There he turned at the landing and walked to the first door on the wall; he opened it and stepped aside, that they could enter before him.

Darcy allowed Fitzwilliam to enter first, and the gasp that issued from his cousin told them all they needed to know before he even uttered the words, “Heaven be merciful. It is my uncle Henry.”

Lord Stashwick, Darcy noted, lay sleeping beneath a thin counterpane, his right leg in a splint and raised up on pillows. A folded cloth lay across his brow, and the room smelled faintly of vinegar.

“I ask you again, is my family in danger?” asked Mr. Bennet.

Darcy looked at him. “Sir, I can honestly tell you that at present, I do not believe so. We do not even know if the attack on His Lordship’s carriage was the work of assassins or random highwaymen.”

Fitzwilliam looked up from staring at his uncle’s face and turned to Mr. Bennet. “Sir, if by chance this crime was the work of assassins, then it is absolutely vital we keep his presence here a secret—for his safety, and that of your family. No one other than yourself must know he is a marquess.”

Mr. Bennet nodded. “I will be happy to keep that secret if doing so protects my wife and daughters,” said he. “However, I may have to share it with my daughter Elizabeth. She is the one who first found your uncle, and I think it only right she be allowed to know the true circumstances of the man she helped save.”

“Agreed,” said Darcy as his cousin drew a breath to speak. “Theodore, I know Miss Elizabeth fairly well, and I am certain she is trustworthy. Besides which, once your uncle is recovered, he may wish to reward her, and Bingley, for their efforts on his behalf. She would certainly find out then.”

Fitzwilliam's nod was reluctant. "Very well, but no more. It is best for all parties concerned that the household staff and the rest of the family—for that matter, the whole of the neighbourhood—know him only as Mr. Faulkner. When he wakes and I am able to speak with him, I will make sure he understands it is the proper course to take."

"T-Teddy?" came a weak voice from the direction of the bed. "Is that you, Teddy?"

Fitzwilliam whirled around and eased a hip onto the edge of the bed as he took up his uncle's hand. "Yes, Uncle. It's me, Theodore."

Henry Faulkner's eyes opened languidly. "I see you've brought Darcy with you," he said weakly. "You two always did stick together like peas in a pod."

"How are you feeling, Uncle?" Fitzwilliam asked then.

"Like I broke my leg in a fall and was stabbed three times," the marquess deadpanned. "I'm weak, feverish... By the by, where is that girl? The pretty one that found me?"

Darcy just stopped himself flinching in surprise at the description of Elizabeth. It wasn't untrue, of course—he was simply surprised to hear the marquess bluntly describe her so, especially before her father.

"Elizabeth is downstairs, sir," said Mr. Bennet, "eating dinner with the rest of the family, as I should be."

"Then go and be with your family, though I should like to ask you if she may visit me at her convenience. Your housekeeper and her husband have tended my body; allow her to tend my spirit, if you will."

Mr. Bennet snorted softly. "I suppose I can hardly deny the request of a marquess, now, can I?"

"Certainly, you can—she's your daughter and this is your house. I am merely an unexpected and inconvenient guest," Stashwick replied.

"Come now, Uncle. Are Darcy and I not enough entertainment?" jested Fitzwilliam.

“No.”

To Darcy’s surprise, Mr. Bennet chuckled. “I will pass on your request to my daughter. If Lizzy chooses to visit you—with a chaperone—I won’t stand in her way.”

He turned around and quit the room then, leaving Darcy and Fitzwilliam alone with the latter’s wounded uncle.

“What happened to you, Uncle Henry?” the colonel queried.

“Weren’t you listening a moment ago, boy? I fell off the overturning carriage—which led to a broken leg—and was set upon by one of the bandits, who stabbed me three times,” Lord Stashwick replied.

“Have you any idea, my lord, if the bandits were random highwaymen or were they targeting you specifically?” Darcy asked.

“I haven’t the faintest, Darcy,” the patient replied, “though if the latter, whoever hired those men failed to give a proper description of me, not to mention whoever it was that attacked me when I was already laid upon the ground with a broken leg apparently did not have a notion of where to put the knife.”

Fitzwilliam shook his head. “You speak of being attacked too casually, sir.”

Lord Stashwick chuckled. “You are squeamish for a soldier.”

A snort escaped the colonel before he replied, “Soldiers do not discuss the atrocities of war with so casual an attitude, Uncle.”

“Then let us cease for the time being,” Stashwick replied. “How did you know where to find me? Does your mother know about this?”

“My friend Charles Bingley assisted Miss Elizabeth Bennet in coming to your aid, sir,” said Darcy. “He told me of their service to you when I called on him earlier today in Grosvenor Street.”

“And Mother knows nothing, though my father is aware,” added Fitzwilliam. “We decided not to tell her in case Darcy was wrong about who you were.”

“You mean if it turned out I was just some random Henry Faulkner?” retorted the marquess. “I was rather enjoying my anonymity.”

“And the beauty of the local young ladies—or at least, one in particular,” Fitzwilliam teased.

Darcy tensed, not wishing to hear another man’s admiration of Elizabeth Bennet’s beauty. He did not like the feeling it stirred in him, for it was too much akin to jealousy.

A soft knock sounded on the door and Darcy opened it to find the object of his thoughts on the other side. She was accompanied by the housekeeper.

“Good evening, Mr. Darcy. I was told by my father that our guest asked if I might visit him,” she said, then lifted the book she held. “As he is supposed to be resting, I thought I might read to him again.”

“What a splendid idea,” said the patient. “As it so happens, I am feeling rather fatigued. I shouldn’t mind falling back asleep to the sound of your voice.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Well, sir, I should hope that my voice is not so monotonously dull as to lull you to sleep *too* quickly.”

Fitzwilliam had stood upon Darcy’s opening the door; he then nudged him and cleared his throat pointedly.

“Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. This is my cousin, Colonel Theodore Fitzwilliam. Theo, Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” Darcy said. “Bingley told me about your guest, and I was certain he was a maternal uncle of my cousin.”

“Yes, my father told me,” Elizabeth replied, with a pointed look at the man in the bed.

“So, you have found me out,” said he. “I am sorry, my dear. It was never my intention to deceive, just not to share

everything. Given what happened, I am sure you can understand why.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I do. Now, while I am very pleased to see you conscious, sir, you *are* supposed to be resting. No more talk for you.”

“We should go,” said Darcy stiffly. Being this close to her was painfully trying on his self-control, especially as he could detect the flowery scent of whatever perfume or soap she used. *What an intoxicating smell*, he mused.

“Aye, we should,” Fitzwilliam agreed. “We must still go on to Netherfield and I must send word express to my father.”

“Tell your father that if he feels it necessary to inform my sister, my daughters, or my brother, he is to give explicit instruction for them *not* to come here,” said his uncle. “I will not have my generous hosts’ peace disturbed any more than is necessary.”

“I will tell him, Uncle,” said Fitzwilliam, who then looked to Elizabeth and winked as he added, “I fact, I shall make a point of telling him that you are receiving the best of care here.”

Elizabeth blushed at his words and looked away from them. Darcy, feeling the air in the room to be suddenly oppressive, gave a hasty bow to her and slipped past her into the hall. Fitzwilliam bid her a good evening and told his uncle he would call again on the morrow before he followed. Mrs. Hill informed them that her master was in his study, reminding Darcy that it was a necessary civility to take their leave of the master of the estate.

In the carriage afterward, as it started down Longbourn’s gravel drive, Fitzwilliam asked, “You were in an awful hurry to get out of there, Darcy. Something about that girl you don’t like?”

“Certainly not—Miss Elizabeth is a fine young lady,” Darcy replied, feigning nonchalance. “I simply felt it as time we took our leave, that His Lordship could rest.”



“Oh, he’ll get a lot of that, I’m sure,” mused Fitzwilliam. “A pretty little thing like that, willing to skirt the bounds of propriety and read to a man lying in sickbed? I shouldn’t be surprised if Uncle Henry becomes infatuated with her.”

*Good Lord, thought Darcy. I certainly hope not.*



# Chapter Six

**“I’m sorry.”**

“Whatever for, sir?” Elizabeth asked as she stepped further into the room and went to retrieve the chair she had sat in before.

“I did not tell you the whole truth,” Lord Stashwick replied as she placed the chair next to the bed. Hill came in and went to the other chair in the room, a basket of needlework in her hands that she got started on without a word as soon as she’d sat down.

Elizabeth looked to their patient, whose eyes were on her. “While I must admit that I should like to have known the truth from the beginning, I acknowledge that your reasons for not sharing everything are just. As I understand from my father, there is some...difficulty tied to your normal duties which warrant some measure of caution and secrecy. Do not make yourself uneasy sir, for there is nothing to forgive.”

“You are too generous,” Stashwick replied, before vainly attempting to stifle a yawn.

Elizabeth rose and set her book on the chair, then went to stand by the marquess’ head. She took the cloth from his brow, unfolded it and dipped it in the bowl of vinegar water that sat on the bedside table, then rung it out and refolded it. As she carefully placed it across his forehead again, she said,

“No more talking for you—I’m amazed you’re even awake now, as feverish as you’ve been. Take your rest, sir, and I will read to you for a while.”

“On your orders, madam,” Stashwick quipped with a smile.

Elizabeth took up her book and sat again, then opened the book to the first chapter and began to read. She’d got through

just a few lines when Lord Stashwick interrupted her.

“*The Mysteries of Udolpho*? Are you sure you’re not angry with me, my dear?”

Elizabeth’s brows rose. “You know this book?”

“Do you think a man in my position doesn’t read?”

She scoffed softly. “I daresay you read quite a lot, sir. I just did not think such a *noble* gentleman would read gothic novels.”

Stashwick grinned at the subtle emphasis in her speech. “I can assure you, my dear Miss Elizabeth, that even men in my place read for pleasure. I’ve even read that one more than once. Did you think I would not enjoy it and meant to torture me?”

Laughing, Elizabeth replied, “I never torture, only tease. If you should not wish to hear the story again, I can fetch another book.”

Lord Stashwick shifted his shoulders as if settling deeper into the bed. “On the contrary, my dear,” he said, yawning again. “I am quite at leisure to be lulled asleep by your dulcet tones reciting the horrid happenings of *Udolpho*.”

Elizabeth smiled, then began to read. She was just finishing the first chapter when she noted that the marquess’s eyes were closed, and his breathing was deep and even.

*A marquess!* she thought as she carefully closed the book and stood, then moved her chair back to its place. She had found a very highly ranked nobleman on the side of the road, one who had been attacked by highwaymen...or possibly by hired ruffians. Her father had mentioned in his brief speech that Lord Stashwick’s politics had made him more enemies than friends.

And he was a relation of Darcy’s—well, a relation of his cousin’s, she corrected herself as she left the patient’s room and walked to her own. Elizabeth could not help but wonder how closely Darcy and the marquess knew one another. Would the former tell the latter his opinions of the family in whose

home he rested? She could not imagine such a report would be pleasant or without prejudice.

How often would Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam call at Longbourn? Once a day at least, she was certain. The colonel certainly had cause, but she hoped Darcy did not always come with him. It was most uncomfortable to be in the presence of someone who thought his company so beneath him that he preferred to be unsociable and taciturn.

*And let us not forget his hand in separating Mr. Bingley from Jane, Elizabeth thought sourly as she settled herself at her dressing table. Who is he to determine in what manner his friend was to be happy? Is Bingley not his own man, capable of deciding for himself if the vulgar sisters and low connexions of the lady he loves are worth enduring?*

Well, apparently Bingley *had* decided for himself once he had been assured of Jane's feelings. It was unfortunate that he'd bowed under the pressure of his friend and his sisters to give up the woman he adored, and Elizabeth very much wished that he had simply spoken to Jane himself, as he'd have known her affection for him weeks ago if he had done. But it mattered little now, as Bingley was returning to Netherfield—he had given Jane his promise—and so Elizabeth decided she would endeavour to forgive him for her sister's sake.

The next day, shortly after breakfast, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Darcy appeared at Longbourn. Elizabeth escorted the two visitors to Lord Stashwick's room herself, informing them as they climbed the stairs that Mr. Jones had been to see the patient that morning and had declared him "surprisingly much improved."

"He told my father that Mr. Faulkner is still feverish, so is still being treated for infection and will have a cloth over his brow, but he was conscious and lucid during his examination," she added.

"I am relieved to hear that there is at least some improvement," said Colonel Fitzwilliam. "I have heard already

from my father, and my mother is quite concerned for her brother.”

They stopped at the marquess’s door, out of which was then coming Hill, carrying the gentleman’s breakfast tray.

“Pardon me, madam, but is my uncle eating well?” the colonel asked her.

Hill’s gaze flicked to Elizabeth, and she nodded; looking back to Fitzwilliam, the housekeeper replied, “As well as can be expected for a man’s been stabbed, poor soul. Mr. Jones prescribed only oatmeal, soup, and bread for his diet until he’s healed some, which Mr. Faulkner doesn’t care for so much. He didn’t finish the bowl, but I couldn’t rightly say if it’s because of his condition or as a means of protest.”

Fitzwilliam looked at Darcy and grinned. “Probably a bit of both, madam,” said he. “I should like to thank you for taking such good care of him. Is my uncle fit for company?”

“He’s fair weak still, sir, so I’d not stay too long, if I may say so,” replied Hill. “Mr. Jones and that doctor from Hatfield both said what’s best for him now is rest.”

“Then we’ll only stay a short while. Thank you, madam,” said Darcy.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hill,” added Elizabeth. Longbourn’s housekeeper nodded, curtsied, and then went off to take the tray in her hands to the kitchen. Elizabeth then went to the door of Lord Stashwick’s room and lightly knocked.

He turned his head to look at her as she pushed it open further. “I see you have brought me some company, Miss Elizabeth.”

She nodded as she stepped inside, then moved over so that his visitors could enter the room. “Yes, but remember not to overtax yourself, my lord. You are still feverish.”

“You take such excellent care of me, my dear,” said the marquess with a smile.

“Mrs. Hill tends you far more than I do, sir,” Elizabeth said, feeling a slight blush come to her cheeks.

Meanwhile, Fitzwilliam had gone for a chair and brought it over to his uncle's bedside. "I sent an express to Father last night after Darcy and I went to Netherfield. His reply came this morning."

"What did the earl have to say?" Stashwick asked.

"Your father is an earl?" said Elizabeth with some surprise, though she quickly followed with, "Well, of course he must be a peer, to have been so fortunate as to secure the hand of a marquess's daughter."

She looked at Darcy, and it was an effort not to scowl. "No wonder you thought us an unfit connexion for your friend, though he has not the same lofty connexions as you have. Excuse me, if you will, gentlemen."

Before any of the three could speak, Elizabeth brushed past Darcy and quit the room, lest she engage herself in an argument. No amount of explanation or excuses would pardon his actions—she already knew why he'd worked to separate his friend from her sister. But he'd been wrong to do so, and his efforts—and those of Bingley's social-climbing sisters—had caused heartbreak to Jane. She would never forgive their interference.

-...-

"My, my, Darcy," said Lord Stashwick. "Dare I ask what it was you did to put that angry fire in Miss Elizabeth's eyes?"

"Indeed, Will, what have you done?" seconded Fitzwilliam.

Darcy reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose; he suddenly felt a headache coming on. "In the simplest terms," he began, "I talked Bingley out of marrying Miss Elizabeth's elder sister by convincing him that she was indifferent to him. Given his sisters' agreement with my opinion, it wasn't hard to do."

“Why on Earth would you do a thing like that, old boy?” his cousin asked.

“I should like to know the answer to that myself,” said the marquess.

Darcy stifled a groan. “You do not know the family as I do—you have met what, two of them? The father and his second daughter? They have been cordial, as civility demands, and perhaps Miss Elizabeth has even been friendly to you, my lord, but the mother and three younger girls—especially the youngest of all—are all vulgar, empty-headed, and insipid. Their behavior is almost completely the opposite of what good society expects of a lady, and while Mr. Bennet is a gentleman, his wife’s connexions are a country attorney and a tradesman.”

Lord Stashwick sighed. “Son, while I can understand your concern for your friend, you had no right at all to interfere. It was not for you to decide in what manner he was to be happy—I daresay Mr. Bingley is as capable as any man of making his own choices, and if he genuinely cared for the eldest Miss Bennet, what concern was it of yours if he allied himself to an attorney and a tradesman? Did not I hear that Mr. Bingley’s fortune was earned from trade?”

Darcy sighed. “Yes, my lord.”

“And did you not just point out that Mr. Bennet is a gentleman? Do not you see that in marrying Miss Bennet, he would be elevating himself further?” Stashwick pressed.

“If I may defend myself, sir, I genuinely believed Miss Bennet indifferent to Bingley,” said Darcy. “Her expressions in his company were always pleasant but also very...placid.”

“Will,” began Fitzwilliam, “did you ever stop to think that perhaps Miss Bennet was simply being a good girl, and not putting herself too forward? Had she shown her own interest more, you’d have thought her a fortune hunter.”

“Her mother certainly is,” Darcy muttered.

“Every mother is a fortune hunter, Darcy,” Stashwick said then. “Are you not bombarded by mammas introducing their daughters to you on the rare occasion you make an appearance



at a ball? Even among our set, the mothers want more for their daughters than they had themselves.”

“And as I recall, cousin, when we dined at Hurst’s last week, did not Bingley’s sisters say that Mr. Bennet’s income is but two thousand a year, and the estate entailed on a cousin?” said Fitzwilliam. “I noted then that they were denigrating the family for their lack of wealth, but can you not see that with five daughters, no son, and her husband’s property entailed away from the female line, it is Mrs. Bennet’s life’s mission to see her daughters married as well as she possibly can? Will not they otherwise be rather poorly off when their father is gone?”

This time, Darcy allowed the groan to escape. “Theo, I get your point—both your points, truly—but when you have seen for yourself how the mother and younger sisters behave, you will undoubtedly agree that I did the right thing for Bingley. He will no doubt face a great deal of censure for the connexions.”

“Right to offer your opinion, perhaps,” said Lord Stashwick, “but not to outright talk him out of doing something he’d already determined to do, if I understand you correctly. And it has all come to naught, hasn’t it? Bingley is returning to the estate he has leased, and no doubt will offer for the girl soon enough.”

Darcy nodded defeatedly. “He will, yes. Bingley told me as much yesterday. He said that his sisters and I had judged Jane Bennet wrongly, and that he meant to marry her. As I had already done what I thought was right, I merely congratulated him on his choice and wished him well.”

“Well done then, my boy. We shall say no more about it,” said Lord Stashwick, before he turned his gaze once more to his nephew. “Now, Theodore, what did your father have to say?”

Fitzwilliam drew a breath. “Well, Mother is understandably concerned. She wishes to come and see you, but Father said he convinced her to do as you had asked and stay away. He says Mother called on Addy to tell her and he took the liberty of writing to your brother and eldest daughter,

but he cannot, of course, prevent Uncle Edward or my cousin from violating your wishes.”

Stashwick scoffed. “Nobody can prevent Edward from doing what he wants,” he said. “As to Henrietta and Adelaide... I feel confident in saying that Addy will do as I have asked—her governess will see to it—but Hetty may make an appearance, no doubt with Edward by her side, if not her husband. Hopefully Winterbourne exercises some control over her. She’s too much like my brother for her own good.”

Fitzwilliam snorted. “Don’t I know it.”

“Bingley should be returned to Hertfordshire by this afternoon,” said Darcy then. “Once he has done, I shall take my leave of you all.”

“Oh, why should you do that, Will?”

Darcy lifted an eyebrow. “Surely you know, Theo. I came only to ensure your introduction to the Bennets, and that duty has been performed. What other reason have I to remain?”

“You could stay to support your friend as he pursues his lady, Darcy,” suggested Lord Stashwick.

“Bingley hardly needs my assistance in that, sir,” Darcy replied in a droll tone. “Given how thoroughly you chastised my interference in his affairs only moments ago, I am surprised you should make such a suggestion.”

“I only suggested you support him, not help him on,” Stashwick countered. “Show him by the kindness that is buried under that austere mask you always wear that you do not resent his choosing the alliance you warned him against.”

“I would hardly resent a man following his own conscience, my lord.”

Fitzwilliam snorted again. “And Bingley is much too amiable to feel any ill will towards Darcy, now he knows his affections are returned. My uncle is right, though—you should stay, at least until the wedding. You know Bingley will ask you to witness for him.”

*And Jane Bennet will ask her sister Elizabeth to witness for her, Darcy thought as he offered a reluctant nod. I would seem my determination to avoid that little temptress was for naught.*



# Chapter Seven

**Bingley returned** to Netherfield that afternoon.

His carriage was not long followed by another, grander equipage with four horses, a postillion, a driver, and two footmen. Two men emerged when it had stopped before the front steps, one markedly older than the other, before the younger turned to hand down a fashionably dressed young woman with an austere look about her that rendered her pleasing features less so than normally they would be.

Fitzwilliam sighed when his peek out the window showed him who had arrived. “Uncle Henry was right, Will—both his brother *and* his eldest daughter have come,” he said as he turned back into the room. “At least Winterbourne is with them—perhaps he can keep Henrietta’s hysterics to a minimum.”

He looked to their host then, who was just standing as the knocker was rapped against the door. “I’m sorry for this intrusion, Bingley.”

“It’s quite all right, Colonel,” Bingley replied genially. “I don’t mind hosting your relatives.”

Fitzwilliam and Darcy exchanged a look; the former snorted as they heard the front door being opened by a servant. “You don’t know how demanding my cousin can be,” he said in a droll tone.

They had not time to debate the matter further, for it was then that Clemens, the butler, opened the door to the drawing room.

“Mr. Bingley, I present Lord Edward Faulkner and the Earl and Countess of Winterbourne.”

Darcy, Fitzwilliam, and Bingley bowed as the three nobles entered the room and the butler left it.

“Where is my father? I must see him at once,” Lady Winterbourne demanded.

“Hetty,” admonished Lord Winterbourne in a low voice.

“Cousin Henrietta, Uncle Edward, Lord Winterbourne,” said Fitzwilliam as he stepped forward. “Welcome to Netherfield Park. May I introduce our host, Mr. Charles Bingley.”

Bingley stepped forward and bowed again. Darcy watched as the two lords acknowledged his bow with a dip of their heads while Lady Winterbourne merely looked down her nose in disdain. He was reminded then how glad he was for her ambition—his uncle, Lord Disley, had suggested her as a suitable bride when she’d had her debut, but Lady Henrietta Faulkner would not have him. In spite of the massive Darcy fortune—in spite of the enviable splendor that was Pemberley—it wasn’t enough for her. She was determined to marry a title and had refused all offers until one that satisfied her came along.

Arthur Beckwith was still a viscount when they’d married and inherited the Earldom of Winterbourne just weeks following the wedding. His fortune and precedence were less than her father’s but greater than Darcy’s, and Henrietta’s hopes for rank and wealth were appeased.

Her desire for both was not what Darcy particularly disliked about her, as such was common among the *ton*. It was that she was haughty and mean-spirited—she could be downright nasty when thwarted—and much too full of her own self-importance; the complete opposite of what he wanted in a wife. Darcy wanted someone warm, compassionate, caring... Someone with fine, bright eyes and a smile that made him dizzy.

*Someone like Elizabeth Bennet*, he thought, then forcefully pushed *that* particular musing from his thoughts and turned his attention back to the matter at hand.

“...took him to Longbourn, the estate of the young lady’s father, as it was closer to where we were than here,” Bingley was saying.

“He’s doing rather better than when I wrote last evening,” Fitzwilliam said. “Darcy and I called there this morning—he’s a bit feverish and tires easily, but he was conscious and lucid when we saw him, both last evening and today.”

“Did my brother say anything about the villainous dogs who attacked him?” asked Lord Edward.

“No, my lord,” Bingley replied.

“He made no mention of them to us either, my lord,” added Darcy.

Fitzwilliam scoffed. “Except to say that the fellow who assaulted him obviously didn’t know what to do with the knife,” he said.

“Clearly, as Henry is still alive,” observed Lord Edward.

“I want to go and see him,” Lady Winterbourne pressed. “I don’t care what Papa’s message to Lord Disley said, I am certain he will wish to see me.”

“My dear,” began Lord Winterbourne, “do you not think it prudent that we beg pardon of Mr. Bingley for intruding upon him so unexpectedly? And would you not also care to refresh yourself before going to see your father?”

“You are most welcome to stay here at Netherfield for as long as you think necessary, of course,” Bingley offered immediately.

“You are very kind, Mr. Bingley,” said Lord Edward.

Bingley went to the bellpull and gave it a tug. “I shall have my housekeeper prepare rooms for you at once,” he said. “Have you any servants coming to tend you?”

“No, Mr. Bingley, we weren’t planning to—” Winterbourne began, though he was interrupted by his wife, who gave a light smack to his chest with her hand as she said,

“Of course, we do—I left instruction for them to set out with our trunks as soon as they’d finished packing them,” said his wife. “They should be here within the hour, I daresay.”

While Lord Edward smiled and kissed his niece on the cheek after thanking her for her forethought, Darcy got the distinct impression that Lord Winterbourne wanted nothing more than to roll his eyes. He clearly hadn't wanted to come, but likely thought it better for all concerned than staying behind. Darcy was as glad of his presence as Fitzwilliam, as he really was the only person in the world—besides Lord Edward—who could keep her demanding nature under some semblance of control.

“Four hours is quite a journey,” said he placatingly. “I am sure it would not be easy on you all to have made it twice in one day.”

“Indeed,” added Fitzwilliam. “At the very least, you must stay the night—you can depart early in the morning and be back in town by this time tomorrow.”

Winterbourne schooled a grimace. “A very reasonable presumption, gentlemen.”

Mrs. Nicholls stepped into the room then, and Bingley gave quick orders to have three guest rooms prepared. “And have the kitchen prepare some tea. I am certain our noble guests would like some refreshment after their tiring journey.”

The housekeeper acknowledged her instructions and quickly departed. Tea was very soon brought in and served, and it was only a half hour longer before a small, plain carriage arrived with the personal servants and trunks of Netherfield's unexpected guests. Half an hour more passed, and then they were all in fresh clothing and ready to make the three-mile trip to Longbourn. Darcy, Fitzwilliam, and Bingley led the way in Darcy's carriage.

It was not until their arrival that any of the latter three thought to mention to the others that Lord Stashwick had asked for his rank to remain a secret from the Bennet household except for those who had already been told. Lady Winterbourne was immediately incensed at the “absurdity” of the idea, saying,

“If they do not know he is a marquess, how can my father possibly be receiving the respect and care he is due?”



“Madam,” said Darcy, “Mr. Bennet and his second daughter—the young lady who initially came to your father’s aid before Bingley encountered them—*do* know who your father really is. As Bingley and I are intimate with the family, I can assure you that they are the only two who, at present, *need* to know.”

“Darcy is right, Hetty,” said Fitzwilliam. “It’s for his protection that your father’s identity must remain secret. For now, at least.”

“Theodore speaks true, dearest,” said Lord Edward. “Remember that your father has enemies who have threatened his life before. For all we know, they think him dead. And even should they have got word of his survival, anonymity will keep him safe, for then they shall not know where to find him.”

“May I help you?”

All heads turned in the direction of the voice—Elizabeth’s voice. She stood in the doorway of Longbourn with her hands clasped before her, a curious expression upon her countenance.

Darcy stepped forward. “Forgive us, Miss Elizabeth,” said he. “These people are relatives of Mr. Faulkner. May I present his daughter and son-in-law, the Earl and Countess of Winterbourne, and his brother, Lord Edward Faulkner.”

Elizabeth curtsied, and after a dip of his head in acknowledgement, Lord Edward said, “You may refer to us as Mr. Edward Faulkner and Mr. and Mrs. Beckwith. We will respect my brother’s request for anonymity within your home.”

The last he said with a stern look at his niece, who huffed and rolled her eyes.

“I am certain that Mr. Faulkner will appreciate your cooperation,” Elizabeth replied. “Please, do come in. I will take you to him.”

The six visitors followed her into Longbourn’s wide entry hall. Darcy noted that the rest of the family were curiously out of sight—not that he minded, overmuch. It would be far better

for the Winterbournes and Lord Edward to pay their call and be gone before Mrs. Bennet or the younger girls made their vulgarity known.

“Miss Elizabeth, pray tell me if Miss Bennet is at home,” Bingley said. “I should like to call on her while Mr. Faulkner’s relations visit with him.”

Elizabeth smiled. “She is, sir. Jane and Mary are in the drawing room working on items for a tenant of ours. Father is, of course, in his book room, and Mamma and the younger girls are in the village calling on my Aunt Phillips.”

Darcy could not help releasing a small sigh of relief. He hoped again that the visit would be over before Mrs. Bennet, Kitty, and Lydia returned.

Bingley thanked her and went off to find his lady. Elizabeth glanced over the remaining five visitors as she turned toward the front stairs.

“I beg your pardon, Miss...Elizabeth, was it?” said Lady Winterbourne. Elizabeth nodded in reply, and Henrietta continued with, “Should you not remind your father that it is proper etiquette to greet noble callers to his house?”

“I am sure he would agree, if you were paying your call to him,” Elizabeth said over her shoulder as she started up the stairs. “However, as you are come to Longbourn to see *your* father, I am certain mine is happy to leave the duty of escorting you to Mr. Faulkner’s room to me.”

She paused on the first landing and looked back with an impertinent smile that set Darcy’s heart to racing and his head to spinning. “Besides, as we established at the door, while you are here, you are not noble guests. My father will appreciate even more not having to leave the peace and quiet of his study to participate in the pomp and circumstance of greeting and deferring to callers of rank.”

Elizabeth turned away again and started up the next set of stairs which would take them all to the first floor. Behind her, Lady Winterbourne sputtered indignantly.

“Of all the rude, insolent ways to speak to one of your betters!” she cried, pausing to fist her hands on her hips.

Winterbourne took his wife by the arm and pulled her along with him as he ascended the stairs. “Come, my lady—and do keep your voice down,” said he.

“Oh, Winter, are you really going to allow this country no —”

Elizabeth and Lord Edward had reached the first-floor landing; the latter turned around and shot a stern glare at his niece, effectively halting her tirade. “Do not finish that sentence, Henrietta. Remember that we are guests in this house and Miss Elizabeth would have every right to request your removal should you speak aloud the words you were just thinking. The young lady did not say anything untoward, and we have more pressing matters to deal with than your injured sense of superiority.”

Darcy looked up at Fitzwilliam, who briefly glanced at him with an expression of combined embarrassment and amusement. Lord Winterbourne appeared both annoyed and mortified by his wife’s behavior, and on risking a glance at Elizabeth, Darcy noted that while her features were placid (though there was some touch of color in her cheeks), merriment danced in her eyes.

When she took notice of his staring, Elizabeth’s color deepened, and she curtly turned her head away.

“Miss Elizabeth,” said Edward, drawing her attention. “I beg you would forgive my niece’s outburst just now. She is understandably distracted by this horrific attack on her father and has forgotten her manners.”

Elizabeth smiled briefly. “I can understand her concern, as I love my own father dearly and would be wretched with worry should anything like this happen to him.”

Turning smartly, she led them the short distance to Lord Stashwick’s room.

“Come in,” came Stashwick’s voice in reply when she had knocked.

Elizabeth opened the door. “Mr. Faulkner, you have some visitors, sir,” said she, before she stepped aside and made room for his family and Darcy, who filed in behind her to surround the bed.

Lord Stashwick sighed. “Why am I not surprised that the two of you ignored my request not to come here?” he said.

“Now Henry,” began Lord Edward, though he was interrupted by Lady Winterbourne, who sat herself upon the edge of the bed and took up her father’s hand.

“Oh, Papa, how could you expect me to stay away when I heard such dreadful news?” she said.

“I had hoped you would obey the wishes of your father—your being here could draw attention to my location, Henrietta,” her father admonished her sternly. “If the men who attacked my carriage *were* hired assassins, which is sadly a very real possibility, then your sudden removal from town might well inform their employer that they didn’t finish the job. You—and you, Edward—might have just put myself and these good people with whom I reside in danger.”

“Now Henry,” said his brother again, “do not you think you are being just a bit melodramatic? We don’t even know if the attackers were hired specifically to target you.”

“The fact remains that it *is* a possibility,” Lord Stashwick snapped.

“If you are in danger, Papa, then let us take you away from here!” Lady Winterbourne said then. “Surely you would be much safer at Stashwick House—or even better, at Stashwick Castle.”

A soft gasp issued from Elizabeth, who colored again when more than one pair of eyes turned her way.

Lord Stashwick grinned. “Surprised, are you, my dear Miss Elizabeth, that your elderly patient lives in a castle?”

“A little, yes,” she replied.

“I’ll have to show it to you sometime, if you like drafty old stone buildings like that,” the marquess said nonchalantly.

“I give you fair warning, though: it’s haunted by a few of the old Faulkner ancestors—is it not, Edward?”

Lord Edward snorted. “I wish I could say you were jesting on that score, brother, but too many strange things have happened there.”

“As to my removing from Longbourn, Henrietta,” said Stashwick, returning his gaze to the countess, “that is at present inadvisable. Both the surgeon and the apothecary who have attended me have forbidden me from even leaving this bed for a full month.”

“But Papa! Would you not be in much better comfort in your own home?” cried his daughter.

“No doubt I would be—pray take no offense, Miss Elizabeth—”

“None taken, sir,” Elizabeth replied.

“—but my injuries, especially the broken leg, simply prevent my going anywhere for quite some time. Would you have me hinder my recovery just to be at home again?”

Lady Winterbourne’s initial response was a dramatic sigh. “Oh Father, of course not,” said she. “I just worry for you, you know that! Are you certain that you are receiving adequate care here? Do you trust this surgeon and apothecary?”

“I’m still alive, aren’t I?” Stashwick countered. “Yesterday at this hour, I believe I was unconscious with a fever. Today, though I am still a little warm, I am quite conscious and able to converse with you all.”

“As to conversing,” spoke up Elizabeth, “I shall take my leave of you that you may speak in private amongst yourselves. Mr. Faulkner, enjoy your visitors but do remember that you have been strongly advised not to overexert yourself.”

Lord Stashwick smiled at Elizabeth, a smile which—much to Darcy’s growing dismay—told him that, despite the great disparity in their ages, Fitzwilliam’s prediction regarding his uncle had already come true. A knot formed in his stomach as the older gentleman replied,

“I shall do as you ask, my dear.”

Her response was a smile and a soft blush. As she turned away, she glanced at Darcy, lifted her chin a fraction, and said, “I shall speak to my father, to ensure that he remembers to pay his respects to our guests.”

Darcy could only nod in reply. The interaction he had witnessed between her and Henry Faulkner—and his own response to what he had seen—had for the moment robbed him of the ability to speak.

It should be impossible, he thought, but something told him it was so: after only two days in her company, the Marquess of Stashwick was smitten with the charming and impertinent Elizabeth Bennet—the very woman he had himself quit Meryton to avoid falling for.

Not that he had been entirely successful in that endeavour. Her eyes and her smile haunted his dreams, and even that pert opinion of hers he had missed.

Darcy just stopped himself dropping his head into his hands as he realized he was in crisis. He wanted a woman who was an inappropriate match for himself, and for the first time in his life he was jealous because another man—who had even more reasons to avoid the connexion but did not at present seem to care—wanted her as well.

Dear God, what was he to do?



# Chapter Eight

**Mr. Bennet** was stepping out of his bookroom as Elizabeth reached the ground floor.

“So, Lizzy, tell me the identities of the latest illustrious visitors to our humble abode,” said he with a smirk.

Elizabeth chuckled softly as she glanced around to ensure there were no servants nearby. “Lord Stashwick’s younger brother, Lord Edward Faulkner, and his daughter Henrietta and her husband. The latter are the Earl and Countess of Winterbourne.”

Her father laughed. “Magnificent name for an earldom.”

“Indeed, Papa,” Elizabeth replied. “Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy are above stairs also, and Mr. Bingley is visiting with Jane and Mary.”

With a soft snort, Mr. Bennet flicked his gaze toward the stairwell from which she’d just emerged. “Well, forgive me for saying so, my dear Lizzy, but I do hope our newest resident’s callers depart before your mother and sisters return. It will be much more difficult for us to keep his secret should the two parties meet each other.”

Recalling Lady Winterbourne’s reaction to her reminder that the party could not be addressed by their titles, Elizabeth reluctantly agreed with him. “Pray, do be on alert for their departure, Papa. The lady was...displeased that the master of the house did not pay her due deference on arrival.” At this her father laughed again. “Please, sir. I think you know as well as I that it would be unwise to offend her further.”

Mr. Bennet sighed. “Very well, Lizzy, I shall bow to your wisdom and listen for the trod of their feet upon the stairs. Now, I advise *you* to go into the drawing room to save Mary from the saccharine sweetness of the two lovebirds.”



“Just wait until he actually proposes,” Elizabeth replied, before she turned to go in the direction of her sisters.

Jane and Bingley she found sitting together on a settee, their heads close to one another as they spoke in low voices. Mary was seated at the table across the room with her back to them, working on stitching together baby linens.

Bingley stood and bowed. “Miss Elizabeth, how fares the party above us?”

Elizabeth grinned. “Our patient is vexed that his wishes for solitude were not respected, and his daughter was adamant that he wished for her presence. She is a character, that one.”

Bingley chuckled. “I gathered as much on her arrival. Colonel Fitzwilliam says his cousin is very...demanding.”

“That is certainly one way to describe her,” agreed Elizabeth. “There are a few other words I should also use, but I do not wish to be unkind. Now, do not let me disturb your conversation further.”

Bingley smiled and nodded and returned to his seat beside Jane. Elizabeth moved to the table and sat next to Mary.

“How are the baby linens coming along?”

Mary looked up from her stitching to glance at the pile of finished pieces before her. “Jane and I have been working on them all morning, as you know. I believe the set is nearly completed.”

“Wonderful! I am sure Mrs. Cole will be very much surprised you have done so much for her,” said Elizabeth.

“She is always surprised by our kindness to her family,” observed Mary, “but how could we not be, with her husband gone away to war?”

Elizabeth nodded her agreement. “Indeed, Mary—and I am grateful she had a brother whose eyesight was too poor to qualify him for military service. It would have been impossible for her to manage the farm alone with one small child and another on the way.”

She picked up material, needle, and thread, and began to work herself, and the two sisters talked of Longbourn's tenants as they stitched away. Behind them, Bingley and Jane continued to converse in near whispers, broken intermittently by a laugh from one and a giggle from the other.

Leaning close to Mary, Elizabeth asked in a whisper of her own, "Now Mr. Bingley is returned to Netherfield, how long do you think it will be before he makes Jane an offer?"

Mary looked up again, appearing surprised she had asked her opinion. "I... Well, it would be most satisfying to Mamma if he should do so by the end of the week."

"It most certainly would—not to mention Jane would be most satisfied as well," replied Elizabeth with a grin. She then sighed and glanced for a moment over her shoulder at the couple. "I shall miss her—Longbourn will not be the same with Jane gone away."

"She will hardly be far from us, Lizzy. Netherfield is but three miles to the north, as you well know," Mary reminded her. "We will see her often, I am sure."

"I know, but... I have had this feeling the last few days that change is coming, and not just the probability that Jane will marry Mr. Bingley. I can't rightly explain it, but I feel like our entire lives are about to take a sudden turn, and I know not whether it shall be for better or worse."

Mary paused and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "If you are feeling uncertain, Lizzy, I would advise you to pray. God's grace will doubtless bring you peace."

Elizabeth reached up and patted her sister's hand, offering a smile before she said, "Thank you, Mary. I know you are right and shall follow your counsel."

Sudden noise in the hall alerted them that the visitors were soon to depart—moments later, Darcy stepped just inside the room to announce the same to Bingley. The latter gentleman stood, Jane's hand still in his; he lifted it as he bowed to touch his lips to the back.

“I shall take a moment to speak to your father,” he said, at which Jane blushed and smiled.

Bingley then joined Darcy at the door, where both bid the three sisters a good day. As soon as they had gone, Elizabeth rose and hurried over to the door to close it, before turning to Jane with a questioning gaze.

“Do Mr. Bingley’s parting words mean what I think they mean?” she asked.

Jane stood, clasping her hands together as she smiled the most brilliant smile Elizabeth had ever seen on her. “Oh yes, Lizzy! We are to be married! In only a month I shall be Mrs. Bingley!”

The two embraced each other heartily, laughing and crying with joy. Mary approached and offered a more subdued but no less happy congratulation to her sister.

“Elizabeth and I were just wondering when Mr. Bingley would make his offer,” said she with a smile.

“I own that I did not imagine it would be so very soon!” said Elizabeth.

“Nor I, I must confess,” said Jane. “But oh, I am so very happy that I do not know how I can bear so much happiness! Papa will surely give his consent, and we will arrange for the banns to be read this Sunday at church—”

“And Mamma will tell everyone she meets that her eldest and most beautiful daughter is to be mistress of Netherfield Park,” said Elizabeth with a grin. “She will not cease boasting of your good fortune for months.”

“Which will no doubt drive Lady Lucas to distraction,” observed Mary.

“Yes, she will be most put out that Jane’s success with Mr. Bingley will outshine her triumph over Mamma,” muttered Elizabeth.

“Lizzy, you shouldn’t say such things,” admonished Jane.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “Jane, you know as well as I that the ‘friendly competition’ between our mother and

Charlotte's is more about competition and less about friendship—I've little doubt that the moment Sir William informed her that our friend was to marry our cousin, Lady Lucas began to calculate how many more years that Papa might yet live. In marrying Mr. Collins, Charlotte's rank in society will be elevated, and lend even more distinction to a family whose meager fortune has its origin in trade. To have her daughter become mistress to a long-established family estate—"

"Will make her just as happy as Mamma will be to have me become mistress of Netherfield," said Jane.

"Ah, but your husband will have a much greater fortune than Charlotte's, and you will be covered in finer gowns and jewels than she," teased Elizabeth.

Though not vain by any means, Jane grinned at her words. What young lady wouldn't smile at the prospect of having many fine dresses and sparkling jewels?

"Mr. Bingley will certainly also take you to London—perhaps you will even see the infamous Pemberley one day," Elizabeth went on.

As Jane began to speculate about what life as Mrs. Charles Bingley would be like, Elizabeth's mind turned to what Lord Stashwick had said to her about his home—well, *one* of them. Stashwick Castle—the marquess lived in a castle! More than that, he had as much as offered to take her there. Not one of her romantic ideas of marriage had ever included the possibility of living in a castle.

*And they shouldn't now!* her inner voice cried. *Don't start believing the silliness of Hill and Jane that the marquess likes you, Elizabeth Bennet! He's Papa's age or older, for goodness' sake—not to mention he's a marquess! Such a man would never set eyes on the likes of you.*

The sound of the front door closing was heard then, and Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief that the marquess's relations were gone. Lady Winterbourne's manner was worse than Caroline Bingley's—and she had been difficult enough to withstand. Expectantly, she turned toward the drawing room

door and was not disappointed when her father walked through it.

“Congratulations, my dear Jane,” said he as he stepped up to his eldest daughter and kissed her brow.

“Thank you, Papa,” she replied.

“I am sure you will be very happy, dearest,” Mr. Bennet went on as he sat in his favorite chair by the fireplace. The girls moved to sit on the settee that faced him. “Mr. Bingley is so very amiable a fellow; I am glad he came to the point at last. Now, I should like to give you some advice if I may.”

Jane nodded. “Of course, Papa.”

“Mr. Bingley seems a reasonably intelligent fellow. He is of a mind to eventually purchase an estate—perhaps Netherfield, perhaps an estate in some other county,” Mr. Bennet began. “However, as he is so soon come into command of his inheritance—and is still rather a young man—he may tend toward being a spendthrift and make expensive purchases of things for which you have little or no need. Do not make my mistakes, Jane. I know that you have learned to be wise with your money, so be sure to...encourage your husband to follow your example. Do not allow him to leave you and your children destitute should anything happen to him.”

“But Papa, will not there be some provision for me and what children there may be in the marriage articles?” Jane asked.

Mr. Bennet nodded. “Indeed, there will be—I shall see to it. But that does not mean you cannot encourage him to put by a little more than agreed upon, so long as your accounts are paid, and your bellies are full.”

Jane smiled. “I shall do my best, Papa,” said she. “When do you think to speak to Mr. Miller about the banns?”

“As we shall see him in but two days for services, I will speak to him then,” said her father. “Mr. Bingley suggested a dinner party next week to celebrate your betrothal, to which I agreed. Now, we have only to receive your mother and sisters at home again to share the blessed news.”

Elizabeth chuckled. "I've no doubt that Mamma will want to go right back out again to spread the news about Meryton—and that her first stop will be Lucas Lodge."

Mr. Bennet snorted softly. "Aye, Lizzy, that she will. Given how fiercely competitive they are, your mother will absolutely crow over Lady Lucas how much grander her daughter's match is than Charlotte's before she even tells her own sister."

As it happened, their prediction only partially came true. Moments after their return, Mr. Bennet and Jane shared the news of her betrothal with Mrs. Bennet, Kitty, and Lydia. After screeching so loud that Elizabeth was sure the windowpanes would crack, Mrs. Bennet kissed both of Jane's cheeks and congratulated her on her "marvelous good fortune" while Kitty and Lydia cackled and danced about the room. Their mother joined them, dragging Jane into the impromptu celebration as she marveled over the jewels and carriages she would have.

After a quarter of an hour of this behavior, during which Mr. Bennet rolled his eyes before departing once more for his book room, Mrs. Bennet called for the carriage to be brought round again. She insisted that she and Jane must go around and accept the congratulations of their neighbours, and when they returned just in time to dress for dinner, Jane relayed that Mrs. Phillips had been calling on Lady Lucas when they arrived at Lucas Lodge, and the two ladies heard the news at the same time.

While Mrs. Bennet and Jane were gone, Mary returned to working on the baby linens for Mrs. Cole while Kitty and Lydia sat trimming bonnets. Elizabeth went to her chamber and picked up *Udolpho*, then rang for a maid, whom she instructed to find some work to bring with her to the room of their guest. When the maid returned, she led the way there.

Elizabeth opened the door and found herself unable to resist grinning when Lord Staswick's lips turned up in a smile.

"Why hello again, my dear Miss Elizabeth! To what do I owe the honor of this particular visit?" he asked her.

Elizabeth smiled and held up the book in her hand. “I have an engagement to keep, do not you remember? I am to read more of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.”

“Oh yes!” Stashwick cried softly. “I recall now, though our appointment was rather delayed by the arrival of my relations.”

“How did that go, sir?” Elizabeth asked as Sally brought a chair for her to sit on, then moved across the room to another chair to sit and observe discreetly while she worked.

Stashwick scoffed. “About as well as I expected. It took some time to convince Henrietta that I am cared for more than adequately here and that she should return to town tomorrow morning—I wonder that Edward and Arthur gave in to her demands to come. I suppose to see for themselves if the report from Disley’s note to them was true.”

He tilted his head as he regarded her. “Now, Miss Elizabeth, might I inquire as to what all the stuff and nonsense was about a short time ago? Such noise I have not heard since my daughters were children.”

Elizabeth did her best not to allow the mortification to overcome her—*of course* he had heard. How could he not have?

“That would be my mother and youngest sisters, sir,” she replied. “My sister Jane has just this afternoon accepted an offer of marriage from Mr. Bingley. Mamma was...quite overjoyed at the news.”

“So I gathered,” Stashwick drawled. “Do not make yourself uneasy, my dear. Have I not been in this house three days already? Do you imagine me entirely ignorant of the behavior of some few of your relations?”

Heat and color suffused Elizabeth’s cheeks. “I-I should not like to speak ill of my mother and younger sisters, but it can be...difficult to curtail their behavior at times. I regret to say that their manners too often leave much to be desired—perhaps you ought to have taken your daughter’s suggestion to

remove from Longbourn to heart. A gentleman of your standing cannot wish to subject himself to such low company.”

Lord Stashwick snorted. “My dear Miss Elizabeth, I think a man of my years and education can certainly choose for himself with whom he wishes to associate,” said he. “Your mother and sisters I will judge for myself when I have actually met them, and you, my pretty nurse, I already like quite well enough.”

The heat in her cheeks increased, and Elizabeth found it hard to hold his gaze. She had to admit that even while gravely ill, Lord Stashwick was a striking man. He would be tall when standing, and she suspected he cut a fine and imposing figure. He was a marquess, so had wealth enough to dress in the latest fashions and keep more than one carriage. His daughter was grown and married.

“How old are you?” she blurted suddenly. “How many children do you have?”

Stashwick smiled. “Ah, you wish to know about old Henry now, do you? Good, I should be glad to tell you. To answer your first question, I am five-and-forty years of age. To answer the second, I’ve had four children—though two are deceased. Henrietta, the eldest, is one-and-twenty. My firstborn son, Charles, died in infancy, and my son Edmund died two years ago at the age of fifteen, after a fall from his horse. My daughter Adelaide turned sixteen this spring. I have one granddaughter, who is just two years. Her name is Charlotte, after Arthur’s mother. And I have been a widower going on six years.”

“Goodness,” said Elizabeth. Two sons who had died, one daughter grown, and the other near so. He was a widower—he was a *grandfather*!

What on Earth had possessed her to—even for a moment—entertain the idea that he admired her?

“Elizabeth,” said Stashwick, drawing her from her reverie. “What is going on in that pretty head of yours, my dear?”



The warmth in her face and neck increased yet again—she began to wonder if she would soon burst into flame. “Sir, I do not think it wise to speak aloud my thoughts at present. And...”

Elizabeth cleared her throat softly, drew a breath, and forced herself to look him in the eye. Lord Stashwick’s gaze was steady and curious.

“And?” he prompted.

“And I do not think it appropriate that you speak to me in the manner that you do,” she managed at last.

“Perhaps my manner is rather forward, but I *do* think you are very pretty, and I enjoy your company a great deal,” he replied.

“Sir, you hardly know me,” Elizabeth retorted.

“I know enough to know that I very much wish to know you better,” Stashwick pressed. “I know that you came to the aid of a complete stranger in spite of the possible danger to yourself, offering him comfort in his wounded state until help arrived. You have seen to it that I am well looked-after. You were willing to entertain me by reading and conversing with me—and this *before* you learned who I really am.”

He tilted his head again. “Am I not charming enough? Not handsome enough?”

Elizabeth stifled the giggle that bubbled up in her chest. Had she not just been thinking that he was handsome? Perhaps not classically so, but there was no difficulty in looking at him—and he really was quite charming.

“Oh, I see now,” Stashwick went on. “You think me much too old—I am the same age as your father.”

She had to press her lips together this time, to keep the inexplicable urge to laugh at bay. “You are yet younger than my father. He is fifty years.”

Lord Stashwick sighed. “I am still old enough to be *your* father—you’ll never think of me now.”

Elizabeth gasped, as did the maid across the room. “Think of you? Sir, how can such a thing even come to mind? You have known me but three days!”

“Well, my dear Miss Elizabeth,” said the marquess, gesturing to his leg and the bed in which he lay. “It would appear we shall have plenty of time to remedy that.”



# Chapter Nine

**The following** day saw the departure of Lord Stashwick's relations from Meryton.

But not before they called again at Longbourn.

Lady Winterbourne was as supercilious as she had been the day before. She gave only the barest acknowledgement to Mr. Bennet and her expression was just shy of a sneer as she regarded Elizabeth.

*If she had any inclination of what has been on her father's mind...*

The conversation between Elizabeth and Lord Stashwick the afternoon before, spoken in low voices in attempt to prevent the chaperoning maid from overhearing, included the marquess's confession that he had been considering marrying again for some time. "My children were fairly well grown when their mother died," he'd said. "Henrietta was fifteen and nearly a woman herself; Edmund was eleven and Adelaide ten years, and both still under the care of a governess; thus, I saw no need to seek another wife when my year of mourning was done."

"Forgive me if I offend with this question but... did you love your wife?" Elizabeth had asked softly...because suddenly, it had mattered that he was capable of loving.

"When first we married, no. Our marriage was arranged by my father and hers, and Henrietta was so painfully shy that it was almost impossible to get more than a few words out of her. For a time, I thought my marriage would be a miserable one, until I came upon her playing the pianoforte one day—a very melancholy song—and it suddenly pained me deeply to think her unhappy. I realized that I could no longer focus only on my own feelings, so asked her what I could do to make her more comfortable. And for the first time, she looked me

directly in the eyes and smiled. We had the first real conversation we'd ever had—it lasted well over an hour. Henrietta and I agreed that we both needed to do better, and I'm pleased to say that both of us did make an effort.”

The marquess paused and drew a breath. “As the years passed, I came to realize that I loved her very much. She proved herself to be an incredible woman, and she was such an excellent mother to our children. Not only did I not think it necessary to marry again when she died, I simply had no desire to. It broke Henrietta's heart into pieces to lose Charles, as was mine, and those pieces broke when I lost her—I am relieved she was not made to suffer the loss of our second son, as I did, for it would certainly have broken her soul as it did mine.”

Shaking his head, ostensibly to dispel the melancholy that had overcome his features, Lord Stashwick had continued by saying that in the last year or so—and much to his surprise—his heart had begun to yearn for the companionship a wife provided. He missed the conversation of an intelligent person who was not trying to garner favor or whose beliefs were not so radically opposed to his own.

Elizabeth had been unable to resist grinning and replying, “Tired of social climbers and politics, I see. No wonder you are so willing to lower yourself to conversing with a provincial nobody like me, here among country folk with savage manners.”

“Do not speak so lowly of yourself,” Stashwick admonished. “You have already proven that you are brave, compassionate, and witty. You are intelligent and kind. These are all remarkable and admirable traits in a lady.”

Elizabeth had felt a blush warm her cheeks and smiled. “You are too kind, sir. But I have little doubt that Mr. Darcy will give you fair warning as to the merits of my family, which to his mind are few. Do you know that he tried to talk Mr. Bingley out of pursuing my sister? And he very nearly succeeded, him and those awful sisters of Mr. Bingley's.”

Lord Stashwick chuckled. “Darcy mentioned something of your family the other day. I believe your maternal uncles are an attorney and a tradesman?”

She nodded as both vexation and embarrassment that Darcy had already spoken badly of her family swept through her. “My uncle Phillips, who wed my mother’s sister, was a clerk for my grandfather, and took over his practice when Grandfather passed. Mamma’s own brother is in a respectable line of trade in London. Uncle Gardiner is a carriage maker and owns two warehouses now.”

“Gardiner? Is he, per chance, the proprietor of Gardiner’s Custom Carriages?”

“He is, yes.”

Stashwick laughed. “Why, I have met him! I have purchased more than one carriage from him—his business is so flourishing, that I feared he and his men might not have the carriage I commissioned for Adelaide’s sixteenth birthday finished on time. Did you know that your uncle presents every carriage to his customers himself?”

Pride now suffused Elizabeth and she beamed a wide smile. “I did know that. My uncle not only enjoys presenting the results of his and his employees’ labors, but he likes to show his wealthier clients that a man can be both a tradesman and a gentleman.”

“That he was—very knowledgeable and well-spoken, I thought him, and quite the man of fashion. I wondered if he’d had a gentleman’s education.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I believe he did attend Oxford.”

“It’s a fine institution, though I must insist that Cambridge is better. It is a Faulkner family tradition to send our sons there,” said Stashwick. “And you, naughty girl—you have put me off my purpose.”

“Good,” she replied. “You were, for a brief time, talking nonsense.”

“What nonsense? I like you and we get on very well. You are beauty and charm and wit all at once. That you were born

and bred in the country and have a few less than favorable relations is nothing to be ashamed of, my dear. Does not everyone have at least one such person in their family?"

"My lo—Mr. Faulkner," said Elizabeth, just catching herself before addressing him more formally before the maid, who might already have heard a great deal more than she ought, "of the four days you have been in residence here, one and a half you spent wholly unconscious. We have had enjoyable, though brief, conversations and I have come to read to you a few times. That you admire my features and impertinence is very flattering, but how anything more than polite regard could have ever entered your mind, I am at a loss to understand."

Lord Stashwick shrugged. "What can I say except that I do not like to waste time. I'm five-and-forty years old and I do not want to spend the years that remain to me all alone in the world."

"I have no connexions in society and my father can give you nothing in the way of a dowry."

He snorted. "I have more than enough of both connexions *and* money."

Elizabeth huffed—how could this be possible? She did not understand!

"If you are not mad to even think of me on so short an acquaintance, knowing what you do of my family, then you must surely be suffering from some other mental infirmity—you probably hit your head when you fell from the carriage. I know it is not unheard of for a man to become infatuated with a young lady who tends him through illness only to abandon her when he is well again."

"Are you trying to talk me out of a connexion between us or yourself?"

Shaking her head as her exasperation mounted, Elizabeth said, "Neither. Simply pointing out why it is impossible. You will be censured and slighted for even considering a woman so far beneath you."

“Elizabeth, I can guarantee you, my dear, that you are rather far above more than half the women in London,” Stashwick told her, then angled his head and lifted a brow as he regarded her. “Do you not like me at all? Do you think me too old for you?”

*No, I think it is madness to even be speaking of this,* she mused silently, before she sighed and said quietly, “Quite the opposite—I find you astonishingly charming. You intrigue me. Though I do not mind the disparity in our ages for myself—at least, I do not think I mind—I own to being quite surprised *you* would think of me in that way when I am more than twenty years your junior. In fact, I am only twenty years myself. I’d have thought you would see such a young woman as only a child. Will not society mock you for even looking at a woman who is a year younger than your eldest daughter?”

Stashwick laughed. “Hardly. It may no longer be exceedingly common for a man of my age to seek a young wife, but it is also not unheard of if he retains hope of an heir.”

Elizabeth felt her eyes widen. “You cannot be wishing for more children! Not when you have a granddaughter.”

The marquess laughed again. “It is not my primary motivation for seeking a second wife, but I certainly won’t deny that the possibility of more children exists should I choose a younger lady rather than say, one of the widows of the *ton*. But our Lord moves in mysterious ways, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and He has drawn me to you. I am certainly not proposing marriage to you after only four days, by no means! I might, perhaps, have kept my thoughts to myself for a time longer, but you are very astute an observer—you would certainly have caught me looking at you, wondering if you might think of me. I am truly sorry if I have made you in any way uncomfortable, my dear, but I believe in frankness. And I *like* you. I shall only ask that you be open to the possibility of something more.”

Elizabeth had sat and stared at Lord Stashwick for a long, silent moment, studying his face as she considered that he was essentially asking her to consider him as a suitor. Could she do that? Could she see herself as not only the wife of a man of an



age to be her father, but a nobleman? Could she move about in society well enough that he did not regret his choice?

Mr. Darcy would certainly think her entirely unsuited to his cousin's uncle. He already did not consider her family and connexions good enough for his friend, who was as below a marquess as herself.

Casting Darcy from her mind—she did not wish to even think of that insufferable man, let alone allow his ill opinion of her family to influence her judgment—Elizabeth drew a breath and released it slowly. “I will give your words very careful consideration, sir. It... You've given me a great deal to think about.”

Stashwick had smiled and nodded his head, then told her that she needn't read to him if she were no longer feeling up to it. Elizabeth considered leaving him then but had the thought that she would hardly be a woman he could admire if she ran away simply because he had so thoroughly astonished her.

“Oh no, Mr. Faulkner, you're not getting rid of me so easily,” she said as she lifted the book still in her hand and opened it to the place she had marked. “I have many more chapters of *Udolpho* to torture you with.”

Her patient had laughed and smiled, and she continued from where she'd left off, completing three entire chapters before Jane appeared in the open doorway and informed her it was time to dress for dinner. Elizabeth had then taken the opportunity to formally introduce Jane to their guest, watching both of them carefully as they greeted one another. Only the politest of remarks were exchanged, then Jane turned away and moved off in the direction of her room.

“She's a beauty, I grant, my dear,” said Stashwick as Elizabeth was moving her chair from the bedside to its original place. “But she could hardly make a man forget you.”

Elizabeth had blushed and smiled as she remembered her words to him after the first time he'd called her pretty. Suddenly feeling a little overwhelmed and at a loss for words, she curtsied silently and went to dress.

Now, as she once again led the party from Netherfield up the stairs—minus Bingley, who'd gone on to the drawing room to see Jane—Elizabeth could not help but wonder what Lady Winterbourne would say if she knew that her father was considering marrying again. That he was not against the idea of more children—that he was interested in *her*.

“Mr. Bennet, who are those people?” came her mother’s voice as she turned on the first landing. “Do they not know it is rude to call so very early?”

“They are relations of Mr. Faulkner, Mrs. Bennet,” her father replied. “Do not concern yourself—go and chaperone our daughter and her betrothed.”

“Oh, Mr. Bingley and Jane are fine with Mary to sit with them,” Mrs. Bennet replied. “Will these relations be taking Mr. Faulkner home soon?”

“The man cannot even get out of bed, my dear, so they can hardly take him anywhere,” was the last Elizabeth heard of the conversation.

When she had shown the visitors to the room of their relation, Elizabeth departed to give them privacy, though as she walked to her own room, she did overhear Lord Edward remark that they would not stay long as they were to return to London that day.

*Thank goodness*, she'd thought. Lord Winterbourne and Lord Edward seemed less obnoxious than the marquess's daughter, as they'd only ever been polite to her—but their sense of superiority seemed equal, though no less obvious, to hers. What a difference in attitude between Lord Stashwick and his family—he had somehow developed an admirable level of kindness and humility that she sensed the others lacked. He'd been willing to keep his rank unknown to them and forego the preferential treatment due a man of the peerage in order to keep himself and her family safe, while his family thought his every whim should be catered to.

Their rank and wealth, Elizabeth mused, had quite gone to their heads.

Only moments after she had sat at the small worktable with the embroidery that was to become a reticule—she'd made some little progress on it the last few days—there was a knock at her door, followed by her mother's bustling in without waiting for a reply.

“Lizzy, I must speak with you,” said Mrs. Bennet. “Your father will give me no information at all, and I simply *must* know who those people are! What coachman could have such relations? Did you see how they were dressed? Such finery was never seen in these parts, and no mistake. Well, Mr. Darcy was dressed quite as finely as the other gentlemen, I suppose. But what coachman would garner such attention even if he had wealthy relations?”

Elizabeth suppressed a sigh. What could she say without breaking her vow of secrecy?

“I imagine that they come to see him because they are concerned for him,” said she at last. “He was very gravely hurt, Mamma.”

“Well, yes, I suppose that is true,” Mrs. Bennet conceded. “Kitty and Lydia have said that because this dreadful business happened so close to Meryton, Colonel Forster was asked to provide some additional protection about town, and I have had confirmation of the report from my sister Phillips and Lady Lucas—he has ordered regular patrols of the road from Meryton to Netherfield. I think I shall tell him to have the soldiers come to Longbourn for tea on the way back to Meryton. Kitty and Lydia will enjoy their company.”

In a whirl of skirts, Mrs. Bennet turned around and swept from the room. Elizabeth only then realized that she had not once thought of Mr. Wickham, an officer of the militia quartered in Meryton for the winter, since the arrival of Lord Stashwick. Was it because the latter had so much more consequence? Oh, she certainly hoped she was not so shallow as that! After all, both men were so very amiable, though in vastly different ways. Mr. Wickham was all muted swagger and charm, and she very much enjoyed his company, but Lord Stashwick... He was charming in a different way. There was such an air of maturity and grace in his manner, even while

lying in sickbed. He was flirtatious, as was Wickham, but not in as practiced a manner.

Mr. Wickham was charming with every lady he met; the marquess was, thus far, fixed on her alone. It was very flattering to be the sole object of a man's attentions, and especially to be admired by a nobleman who could certainly have attached any woman in greater circumstances than her own. Elizabeth suddenly had a notion of what Jane had meant when she'd spoken of having "such power over a man".

Another knock was made on her door, and though Elizabeth expected one of her sisters to have come, it turned out to be her father.

"Lizzy, Mr. Holmes has come at last to speak to our guest about what happened on Monday," said Mr. Bennet. "He also wishes to speak to you and Mr. Bingley. Come down to my room in about twenty minutes, if you will."

Elizabeth nodded. "Of course, Papa."

*At last!* she thought. Meryton's magistrate, Mr. Holmes, had been across the country visiting his daughter and her husband, as the lady had recently borne her first child. It was a relief to know that he was home again and could properly investigate the attack on Lord Stashwick.

They would, of course, have to be entirely honest with him as to the man's true identity—there was no avoiding it as they had thus far managed to do with the others in the house.

When she had followed her father's instructions, Mr. Holmes was waiting with him in the former's study. After shutting the door behind her, Elizabeth moved to sit in the single chair before her father's desk.

"Elizabeth, you remember Mr. Holmes," said Mr. Bennet.

"Of course, Papa. How do you do, sir? I do hope your daughter and her child are well," Elizabeth said.

Mr. Holmes smiled broadly. "Oh, I am well enough, and Rebecca and the babe are doing splendidly—she had herself a stout, healthy boy, and my son-in-law is thrilled to have an heir."

His countenance then took on a sober expression. “As much as I wish this were a social call, I have had quite the surprise on my return home to learn not only that there was such a shocking incident so close to Meryton, but also that you have a marquess in your home!”

“Indeed, sir, we are all of us rather stunned by what happened,” said Elizabeth, “though I understand that Colonel Forster has been so kind as to have the road from Meryton patrolled by some of his men, at least as far as Netherfield. And our guest has asked that the truth of his full identity remain a secret, for his protection and ours.”

Mr. Holmes nodded. “Aye, I have spoken with him already, but should like to know what you saw or heard that day.”

Elizabeth told him about the loose carriage horse leading her to its master, how she had noted the sad circumstances of the other two men, and how she had looked about her when she realized what had happened.

“I saw no one but the three men and heard nothing but the usual sounds made by restless horses,” she continued. “At least until Mr. Bingley and his man appeared. Then he and Mr. Lewis righted the carriage, and the two deceased men were put atop their own horses to free the carriage for myself and Lord Stashwick. Then we came here. The vicar came for the two men who died and the surgeon from Hatfield to see Lord Stashwick, as did Mr. Jones.”

The magistrate looked to her father with his brows raised. “Were you not concerned, Mr. Bennet, by your daughter riding alone in the carriage with a strange man?”

Mr. Bennet snorted. “Why should I have been? What was Lizzy to do, walk while Bingley and his man took the carriage? She could not have properly rode one of their horses even had they thought to place both of the dead men on one and her on the other. Besides, as all involved have reported, His Lordship was barely conscious at the time and could hardly have done anything to ruin her.”

Oh dear, Elizabeth mused. Were people in Meryton speculating about her? Did they think her reputation besmirched simply because she had been alone in the carriage with Lord Stashwick? It was silly of them if they did, for there had been nothing untoward in her conduct or his. Really, she could hardly have done anything else but aid a man in need, and she unconsciously lifted her chin a fraction, for she felt no shame in her behavior.

“Do forgive me, Mr. Bennet, if I speak out of turn,” Mr. Holmes replied. “As a father myself, I cannot help expressing some concern for your daughter. She is such a good girl, and I should not like to see her fall victim to foolish gossip.”

Mr. Bennet inclined his head. “You are kind to be concerned, Mr. Holmes, as one father to another. But I see nothing wrong in Lizzy’s conduct—she was a good Christian girl coming to the aid of an injured man, and nothing more.”

“And I shall say as much if I hear any talk in the village or Meryton,” said Mr. Holmes.

He then looked to Elizabeth and said, “I think I have heard all I need to from you, Miss Elizabeth. If you would be so kind, do fetch Mr. Bingley and send him this way, that I may have his version of events.”

Elizabeth stood and assured him she would send Mr. Bingley in straight away. She did precisely that when she went into the drawing room, where—after Mr. Bingley had taken his leave—her mother demanded she sit and share everything that Mr. Holmes had said to her. Elizabeth recounted her brief meeting with the magistrate, which her mother declared to be “nothing at all” before she returned to discussing her idea of having the militia stop for tea during their patrols with Kitty and Lydia, who were naturally keen on the idea. Her sisters twittered and speculated which officers might be seen each day, each expressing a hope of seeing their favorites. Wickham’s name was mentioned, and it came as rather a surprise to Elizabeth that she cared not whether he came to tea or stayed away.

She then recalled what Bingley had told Jane of him at the Netherfield ball, and how Miss Bingley had claimed his behavior toward Mr. Darcy had been “infamous.” At the time she had dismissed their assertions as loyalty and bias, but what if they had actually been honest in their criticism? Had Jane been right to warn her against believing him so implicitly on so short an acquaintance?

Elizabeth put a hand to her brow as her head began to spin. Why was she suddenly questioning her belief in Mr. Wickham’s goodness?

*Because you have seen what a good man really is, Elizabeth Bennet.*

Somehow—though she knew not precisely what made her so certain—Elizabeth knew that her conscience was right. Lord Stashwick could be trusted...and Mr. Wickham could not. However, she knew that in order to erase any lingering doubt, she would have to go to the source of Mr. Wickham’s complaints:

She would have to speak to Mr. Darcy.





# Chapter Ten

**Darcy** was not looking forward to this evening's dinner.

For the briefest of moments, he gave serious consideration to claiming illness, but dismissed the notion as foolhardy and immature. What sort of man was he to think of foregoing a dinner party just because the young woman he happened have an unfortunate attraction to would be in attendance? He cursed the weakness that made him want her and yet made him wish to run at just the thought of being forced to spend hours in her company.

It was not that she was unpleasant—he would not be attracted to her if she were. On the contrary, Elizabeth's playful nature delighted him. She *was* pretty, as the Marquess of Stashwick had described her, with fine, dark eyes and a light, pleasing figure. She had a somewhat vexing tendency to debate every point whenever they conversed, and she often recited opinions which were not her own, but at the same time, he so thoroughly enjoyed the back and forth. No one challenged him as she did, and no one had *ever* made him look forward to an argument as she did.

*If only her mother and sisters were much better behaved, Darcy mused as his valet was tying his cravat. If only her connexions were more favorable...*

He did not care that she had no dowry—it would be nice, yes, if her father could have provided for his daughters as he ought—but the lack of fortune was not his greatest concern, for there were many good families who had lost their fortunes. It was the total want of propriety displayed by her mother, her younger sisters, and even, on occasion, her father. He could never introduce such persons into the society in which he moved when in London.

And if her family were unacceptable to him, Elizabeth would never marry him. It was a blow to Darcy to suddenly realize this, but he hoped his newfound insight would enable him to overcome his attachment. She had been flirtatious in their exchanges, or so he believed, but his instinct told him that he could never make her cast off her family. Elizabeth Bennet was the sort of person who, when she loved, would love fiercely and deeply. To her, family—even those who clearly embarrassed her—was everything.

It was, in truth, one of the things he admired most about her. And it was the very thing that made him absolutely certain he could never have her.

“Mr. Darcy, are you well?”

Darcy blinked, and realized he’d been wool-gathering before the long mirror in his dressing room. “Yes, Vincent, I am well,” said he. “Just thinking.”

The purpose of the evening’s gathering was to celebrate Bingley’s betrothal to Jane Bennet, and as such, it was to be a rather large party. Aside from the bride’s immediate family, her aunt and uncle Mr. and Mrs. Phillips were to come as were the tradesman uncle from London and his wife, as well as Sir William and Lady Lucas, Charlotte and Maria Lucas, Colonel Forster and his new wife, and four of the colonel’s soldiers—there would be an impressive four-and-twenty persons at table.

Bingley had been disappointed, though not much surprised, to receive a negative reply to his letter inviting his sisters and Hurst to the party. Mrs. Hurst had written that the three of them *...regrettably have a prior engagement which simply cannot be put off, I’m afraid. I am sure you understand, Charles.*

“It matters little,” Bingley had said as he folded the letter. “They must accept my decision eventually. I refuse to allow their foolish prejudice to affect my happiness. Jane is an angel, and they shan’t convince me otherwise.”

“Good for you, Bingley,” Fitzwilliam had declared. “I don’t know your sisters well, but surely they will come around.”

“Indeed, they will, if they know what’s good for them,” Bingley replied. “Besides, they must accept my marriage if they wish to retain the privilege of being invited to Pemberley!”

Darcy, not wishing to bring down Bingley’s mood further than the letter had done, kept to himself the thought that he wouldn’t mind at all his sisters never coming to Pemberley again. But, he reminded himself, he would continue to tolerate them for Bingley’s sake as he had done since their first becoming friends.

It was the gentlemanly thing to do.

The Bennets were, of course, the first guests to arrive, and Darcy knew he could delay going down no longer. Drawing a breath, he squared his shoulders and made his way to the ground floor. The Bennet ladies—all of them, if he were being entirely honest—were in very fine looks for this party, and could he have done, he would have argued with Bingley which of the elder two was the comeliest. Jane Bennet’s countenance was as serene as he had ever seen her, but there was an alteration in the expression of her eyes—they were shining with joy, especially when she looked at Bingley, or when he looked at or spoke to her.

Had they always done, and he’d just not noticed? Darcy wondered.

Elizabeth, however, looked positively radiant. Her eyes brimmed with happiness for her sister, her smile was wide, and her dinner gown—a satin frock the color of a cloudless summer sky—had somehow managed to enhance the color of her dark eyes. If Lord Stashwick was truly enamored of her, and Darcy had little doubt of that given the way the marquess smiled at her, he had no doubt as to why.

A thought occurred to him as he watched her conversing with her sister, Bingley, and Fitzwilliam that once again left him feeling as though he’d been kicked by a horse: Elizabeth would make an excellent marchioness. If Lord Stashwick’s infatuation went so far as to offer marriage, and if Elizabeth (and her father) were not put off by the difference in their

ages, she would move effortlessly among the *ton*. She always carried herself with confidence and grace, was always warm and welcoming to her friends, and she could be civil with those she did not like (he was aware that she cared for Bingley's sisters about as little as himself). Her beauty would have men wanting her and women wanting to be her—or at least wanting to copy her style.

Why had he *ever* thought she was not good enough for him? If a bloody marquess could have no scruples about her and her family, why couldn't he do the same?

And why, for the love of God, had he not realized sooner that he was in love with her? He could never compete with a peer.

“Mr. Darcy, are you well?”

For the second time in only half an hour's passage, Darcy had let his mind wander, and this time he had been caught by the father of the subject of his thoughts.

He was *mortified* but dared not let it show.

Mr. Bennet stood near, his raised brow clear indication that he was waiting for a reply to his query. “Forgive me, sir,” Darcy said. “I happen to have a great deal on my mind.”

“So I gathered,” replied Mr. Bennet in a droll tone.

“Was there something I could do for you, sir?” Darcy asked.

Mr. Bennet shook his head. “Not particularly. I simply needed a respite from the constant chatter about wedding clothes and wedding breakfasts and the like. I'd say we ought to rescue your friend Bingley, as he seems quite ready to escape the onslaught himself, but then it *is* entirely his fault.”

Darcy could not resist the urge to chuckle and was painfully reminded that Elizabeth had inherited the sardonic wit he'd come to adore from her father.

“Given there are to be *two* betrothed young ladies in attendance this evening—and their mothers—I think we must resign ourselves to the probability that the only peace we shall

have from those subjects is when we enjoy our after-dinner port,” Darcy mused as he watched Bingley fidget.

His companion chuckled. “No doubt you are right, my boy. No doubt you are right.”

Darcy turned to face Mr. Bennet more fully. “Sir, may I inquire as to the welfare of your guest? I regret that my own business has kept me from calling on him the last few days.” He had, in fact, been assisting Bingley with attending to the tenant dispute which had called him hither a week before, as well as several personal and business letters he’d put off replying to.

Mr. Bennet lifted his brow again. “Has not your cousin told you?”

“I am sure he has mentioned his uncle’s condition, but at present his report escapes my memory.”

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “You really must have a great deal on your mind,” said he. “I believe Mr. Faulkner is doing very well—as you might imagine, my company is far less desirable than my daughter’s, so I’ve not seen him since your arrival on Wednesday last. Mr. Jones gives me an update each day, however, and he reported this morning that Mr. Faulkner’s wounds were clear of infection. He has also been free of fever for the last two days.”

“That is excellent news,” Darcy said. “No doubt Colonel Fitzwilliam has already written to his mother to relieve her of her concern for her brother, as well as those relations that came on Thursday.”

“Believe it or not, Mr. Darcy, it bothered me to leave the poor man all alone in a strange house with strange servants,” Mr. Bennet said then. “Well, he is quite familiar with the Hills, of course, but he has no one to entertain him while we spend the next six hours eating too much food and playing cards.”

Darcy was saved from having to formulate a reply by the arrival of the next set of guests. The Lucases were quickly followed by the Phillipses and the Gardiners, and then at last

the militia party arrived. Dinner was served almost immediately thereupon.

The seating was formal for this occasion, with the ladies on both sides at the host's end of the great table and the gentlemen on both sides to the hostess's end—but as Bingley would not have a hostess for another three weeks and the number of gentlemen to ladies was uneven by one, Mr. Bennet had mirthfully accepted being seated in his daughter's future place, that everyone would fit “properly” around the table. This put Darcy between Fitzwilliam and Mrs. Bennet's brother, Mr. Gardiner.

He was somewhat startled to find that there was at least one other person in Elizabeth's family, besides herself and Jane, who could behave with proper decorum. Did he not already know that Mr. Gardiner was in trade, he'd have thought him a gentleman—he was amiable, well-spoken, his manners correct, and he and his wife were people of fashion. The elder Bennet daughters clearly took the Gardiners' example rather than that of their parents.

When the sexes separated after dinner, Bingley immediately bemoaned having selected a formal seating arrangement. “Never in my *life* have I had to endure so much talk of ladies' clothes!”

Mr. Bennet glanced at Darcy and laughed; Darcy could not resist grinning himself.

“You've brought it upon yourself, my boy,” said the former. “If you weren't so set on marrying my daughter, you could have avoided the punishment for a few more years.”

At this, Bingley laughed. “It's a hard duty, sir, but I shall be glad to endure it if I must, for I would not give up your angelic daughter for all the world.”

“I am glad to hear it, though I feel obliged to advise you to take care with her,” Mr. Bennet said. “She may not always put her feelings on display for all the world to see, but my Jane feels deeply, and she will suffer any slight in silence. I think it best you are always open and honest with her.”

“As a man should be with his wife, I daresay,” supplied Mr. Gardiner.

“I am very happy for you and your family, Thomas,” spoke up Sir William then. “Given my Charlotte will one day supplant Mrs. Bennet as mistress of Longbourn... Well, I have worried that the match between my daughter and your cousin would put a strain on our friendship.”

Mr. Bennet took a drink of his port and shrugged. “Why should it? The entail is not your fault, and I’ve no doubt Collins would have married eventually, so there would have been someone. Mrs. Bennet, of course, would have preferred he marry one of my daughters, but Jane was all but spoken for before Mr. Collins even set foot in Meryton and Elizabeth is far too intelligent for a man such as he. Mary might have done well for him, as devout as she is, but I suspect his pride was too wounded by Lizzy’s rejection to consider any of her younger sisters.”

Darcy fought not to let his surprise show—he’d heard since returning to Netherfield that Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins were to marry, but he’d had no idea that Collins had proposed to Elizabeth first. Thank goodness she had refused his offer! The Reverend William Collins was a pompous fool—he and Elizabeth were entirely unsuited. Not only was she possessed of greater intelligence than his Aunt Catherine’s parson, but her independent spirit could never have withstood his obsequiousness.

Or Lady Catherine’s domineering attitude.

Darcy was drawn from his reverie by a statement from his cousin in which his name was mentioned.

“I’m not myself, sir, but I imagine Bingley will be quite soon—and Darcy’s been considering having a chaise made for his sister’s sixteenth birthday in the spring, have you not?” Fitzwilliam said.

Darcy nodded. “I have—just a little two-seater that she and her companion can use,” he said.

“Well, sir, if I may be so bold as to ply my trade, I’d be most delighted to take on the commission,” said Mr. Gardiner.

Darcy’s brows drew together. “I’m afraid I do not understand.”

Fitzwilliam laughed. “Good grief, Darcy, do you not know? Mr. Gardiner is only the proprietor of the most sought-after carriages in the whole of England!”

It was an effort not to groan. *This must be an evening for blunders*, Darcy thought morosely. He had heard much of Gardiner’s Custom Carriages from his aunt, Lady Disley—who had, in fact, recommended the business when he’d mentioned his desire to present Georgiana with her own carriage.

How had he not made the connexion on being introduced to the man?

After clearing his throat, he said, “Forgive me not realizing you were the owner of that business, sir. Your services were recommended to me by my aunt, the Countess of Disley.”

Mr. Gardiner’s eyes widened a fraction. “Lady Disley is your aunt, sir?”

Darcy nodded. “And Colonel Fitzwilliam’s mother.”

The gentleman looked between them with surprise and delight. “Oh, that is capital! I have met the lady and her husband. Very generous and delightful people, your parents, Colonel.”

Fitzwilliam grinned. “And I am delighted to hear that you think so, but pray, may I ask how you met them?”

“It’s quite simple, sir: my name is on the business, so I insist on presenting each carriage that represents it personally,” Mr. Gardiner replied. “I take great pride in providing a product that suits my clients’ individual needs and desires, and I do believe my personal attention to each is very much appreciated—much of my business comes from word-of-mouth.”



“And do you have a large clientele among the *ton*, sir?” asked Fitzwilliam.

Mr. Gardiner chuckled. “Would it surprise you to learn that I do?” he retorted. “I can hardly be the ‘most sought-after’ carriage maker in England if I did not!”

Fitzwilliam returned his laugh and began to quiz him as to whether the various nobles with whom he was acquainted or related were clients—several of them were, including Lord Stashwick and Lord Winterbourne. *How surprised Mr. Gardiner would be, Darcy mused, should he learn that Lord Stashwick is but three miles away in his sister’s house.*

The gentlemen were nearly three-quarters of an hour enjoying port, smoking, and men’s talk before at last rejoining the ladies; they found the card tables already set and waiting. As unkind as the thought was, Darcy prayed he would not be seated at the same table as Lydia Bennet and Mrs. Forster, who had frequently partnered each other at card parties during his previous residence in the area and whose conversation was always much too vulgar for his sensibilities.

Elizabeth, he was surprised to note, was approaching him. He turned to give his full attention to her. “Mr. Darcy, you may or may not recall that I am not really one for cards...”

He chanced a smile. “Yes, I recall something about that. You prefer reading to almost anything.”

She grinned. “Reading and a good, long walk in the country—though I should prefer my next of the latter to be free of overturned carriages.”

“I shall hope the same for you.”

“Although I *do* play cards, on occasion, tonight as that other I have no wish to,” Elizabeth said next. “I was wondering if you might be interested in a game of chess or backgammon?”

That she was purposely seeking his company when for the last week she had been the essence of cool civility toward him told Darcy that she wanted to talk to him about something, though what he could not possibly imagine. Inclining his head,

he replied that he would be happy to partner her at backgammon, as he'd not played the game in some time.

She had the board already arranged on a small table to one side of the room, where they could be observed by all, but which was conveniently far enough from the others that any conversation would not be overheard unless someone walked by.

Gesturing to the cup and dice, he gallantly said, "Ladies first."

Elizabeth smirked and took her first turn. They had each taken two before she came at last to the point. "Mr. Darcy, you have no doubt discerned that I wished to speak with you privately—or as well as can be done amongst two-and-twenty other persons."

Darcy chuckled softly. "I have."

She drew a breath. "First, allow me to apologise for my coldness toward you this last week. You were good enough to alert Mr. Faulkner's relations based only on a name, even though you might have been wrong, simply because it was the right thing to do. And though he wished for his siblings and daughters to stay away, I do believe he is pleased by his nephew's daily visits."

A sigh escaped Darcy before he could contain it. After drawing breath again, he said, "You have *some* justification for your coldness, Miss Elizabeth. I interfered where I should not have."

Elizabeth was clearly surprised by his confession, but her posture afterward was a fraction more relaxed. "I thank you for admitting that," said she. "While *I* admit that my family does have its faults, it does not mean we are not good enough. Surely you know that my sisters and I must marry *someone*."

"Indeed," was all the reply Darcy could muster, his throat having tightened as he recalled his earlier thoughts.

His companion then shuddered dramatically and added, "I'm just glad none of us has to marry Mr. Collins. I disdain Charlotte's choice to marry for security—or rather, to marry

*him* for security—but I’ve been made to understand her fear of becoming a dependent spinster. The society in Meryton is, as you once said, unvarying. Everyone here knows everyone else, and Charlotte reached the age of seven-and-twenty without a single offer of marriage. How else are our young ladies to prosper if they don’t look outside our home for a husband?”

Darcy had to admit that she had a point. “It is no wonder, then, that Bingley’s coming caused such a stir.”

“And yours,” Elizabeth said teasingly, “although *you* cleverly managed to withstand the combined charms of the daughters of Meryton and Longbourn as well as you withstand Miss Bingley’s.”

Darcy laughed again. “It was not as easy as you might be thinking,” he said. “I confess that I simply have no thoughts of matrimony at present.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but he could hardly admit the real reason he had withstood the local daughters’ charms. He and Elizabeth had just made peace, and he had no wish to ruin it with the truth.

“Of course, I did not ask you to forego the pleasures of whist and cribbage to talk of the marriage prospects of the local young people,” she went on. “I rather wish to speak to you about Mr. Wickham.”

Darcy’s hand abruptly froze mid-shake; he felt the scowl that the mere mention of Wickham’s name always generated forming on his features. Drawing air through his nose, he continued his turn as he said, “You take an eager interest in that young man’s concerns.”

Elizabeth scoffed. “I would hardly call it an eager interest, Mr. Darcy. I do, however, wish to know the truth. I have heard his version of the events which led to the breach between you—now I should like to hear yours.”

Sitting back, Darcy regarded her with a curious gaze, and to her credit, Elizabeth held it. “May I ask what has prompted this inquiry?”

Elizabeth sat back as well and clasped her hands in her lap. She continued to hold his gaze for several silent seconds before she turned her head to glance out of the window. “Mr. Wickham is a very charming young man. Mr. Faulkner is a very charming mature man,” she began slowly. “I’m afraid I could not help comparing them to each other and...and noticing there is a difference, which I do not believe is due to age alone.”

She looked back, picked up the cup and dice, and took her next turn. “Mr. Wickham has claimed that you did him a great harm.”

Darcy scoffed. “That hardly surprises me. What else has he said of me?”

Elizabeth looked up and recited a very twisted version of the truth. Darcy snorted derisively and shook his head, before leaning forward to take his turn. “Mr. Wickham weaves an interesting web, one made of lies as well as truth,” he observed. “I should be glad to tell you my version of the events in question, and it will be for you to determine which is the genuine history.”

“I shall do my best to listen with an open mind, sir.”

He looked up to find her countenance bore a sober expression. Suppressing another sigh, he began with, “Mr. Wickham *was* a favorite of my father—he was his godson and named for him by my father’s steward. And while he was a good friend and playmate to me in our boyhood, as he grew older, Wickham began to resent the privileges which I had and he did not. I saw his true nature in unguarded moments which neither my father nor his ever witnessed, thus they always believed in his tales of doing no wrong.

“My father supported Wickham with a gentleman’s education at Cambridge and left him a legacy of one thousand pounds in his will. He also expressed his hope that Wickham would make the church his profession and had intended to provide for him in it. Father’s will further bid me to advance Wickham in his profession as well as I could, and recommended for him a valuable family living, as soon as it

might be vacant. But almost as soon as both our fathers had died, his surviving mine no more than a year, Wickham declared by letter that he had resolved against taking orders, and hoped I should not think it unreasonable for him to expect some more immediate pecuniary advantage, in lieu of the preferment, by which he could not be benefited.”

At this, Elizabeth frowned. “Do mean that he gave up the living? Of his own volition?”

Darcy nodded. “He claimed an intention of studying the law, and as I knew he ought not to be a clergyman—by writ of his vicious propensities, want of principle, his tendency to gamble and carouse—I rather hoped than believed his intent to be genuine. The business was soon settled; he resigned all claim to assistance in the church, were it possible that he could ever be in a situation to receive it, and accepted in return three thousand pounds.”

At this her eyes widened. “He received a total of *four thousand* pounds from you? Mr. Wickham never mentioned that!”

“Of course not. How could he make me look bad if he included the good I had done him?” Darcy countered. “I believed, at the time, that all connexion between us was dissolved. We did not see or speak to one another for some years, though I heard his life was one of idleness and dissipation. On the decease of the incumbent of the living which had been designed for him, he applied to me again by letter for the presentation. His circumstances, he assured me—and I had no difficulty in believing it—were exceedingly bad. He had found the law a most unprofitable study, and was now absolutely resolved on being ordained, if I would present him to the living in question—of which he trusted there could be little doubt, as he was well assured that I had no other person to provide for, and I could not have forgotten my revered father’s intentions.”

“Sounds rather audacious of him to expect it, when had had willingly resigned his claim,” Elizabeth observed.

“Indeed, madam,” said Darcy. “You will hardly blame me, I think, for refusing to comply with this entreaty, or for resisting every repetition of it. His resentment was in proportion to the distress of his circumstances—and he was doubtless as violent in his abuse of me to others as in his reproaches to myself.”

He paused and looked out the window into the night, as Elizabeth had done moments ago. “After this period, every appearance of acquaintance was dropped. How he lived, I know not.”

After a minute’s passing, Darcy looked back to Elizabeth to find that she stared with wide, questioning eyes. “That morning in Meryton—when Bingley and I encountered you and your sisters on the main street in the first moments of your own acquaintance with Mr. Wickham—was the first time I had seen him in several months.”

Again, Darcy refrained from telling the whole truth, and justified this restraint by telling himself that Elizabeth did not need to know his sister’s shame.



# Chapter Eleven

**Elizabeth noted** hesitation in Darcy's features—there was more to be said, but he did not know if he should say it.

“No,” he said at last with a shake of his head. “No, in order that you may have a full picture of Mr. Wickham's character, I must tell you everything.”

She gave a silent nod to encourage him to continue, and somehow—despite having heard Mr. Wickham described as a gambler with vicious propensities and want of principle—what Darcy then revealed shocked her even more.

A young gentlewoman of his intimate acquaintance, whose name he would not reveal for her protection, had been escorted to Ramsgate by her companion for a holiday. The lady, “in whose character the family was most unhappily deceived”, turned out to be an acquaintance of Wickham's, who also went thither.

“Undoubtedly by design,” Elizabeth muttered.

“Quite so, Miss Elizabeth,” agreed Darcy. “Wickham spent several days recommending himself to the young lady—who was but fifteen years old—and with her companion's assistance in the scheme, eventually persuaded her to believe herself in love. Further, she was persuaded to elope with him. Most fortunately, however, one of the young lady's guardians was able to join her in Ramsgate, arriving unexpectedly two days before the intended elopement. Unable to support the idea of grieving and offending this relation, whom she looked up to almost as a father, the young lady acknowledged the whole. Regard for her credit and feelings prevented any public exposure; the gentleman, understanding immediately that the girl's fortune was Wickham's goal, made haste in convincing him to leave the place, and her companion was, of course, removed from her charge.”



“I should hope so!” Elizabeth cried softly. “Good gracious... I could not have imagined Mr. Wickham to be so cruel. Yet I also cannot imagine you inventing such a history—you abhor deception, as I recall.”

“I do indeed,” Darcy conceded. He sat back again—the first round of their game was already over—and in his favor.

“Should you like to play again, Miss Elizabeth, or have I spoiled your evening with these sad tales?”

“If my evening is spoiled by what you have told me, it is my own doing, for it was I that asked you to speak on the matter,” she replied as she made to reset the pieces.

Speaking more to herself than her companion, Elizabeth continued, “His countenance, voice, and manner established him at once in the possession of every virtue. I perfectly remember everything that passed in conversation between Wickham and myself that first evening at Mr. Phillips’s. Many of his expressions are still fresh in my memory. I am *now* struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger and wonder that it escaped me before. I see the indelicacy of putting himself forward as he did, and the inconsistency of his professions with his conduct. He boasted of having no fear of seeing you—that *you* might leave the country, but that *he* should stand his ground; yet he avoided the Netherfield ball the very next week. I remember also that, till the Netherfield family had quitted the country, he told his story to no one but myself; yet since their removal, it has been everywhere discussed; that he has since had no reserves, no scruples in sinking your character, though he had assured me that respect for the father would always prevent his exposing the son.”

“That, I am afraid, is Wickham’s way,” said Darcy. “Nothing is ever his fault, he is always the victim. I am sure, if I were to investigate—or have Colonel Fitzwilliam do so, as I surmise everyone here believes me a villain—that I would find he has several accounts open in Meryton which he has yet to pay, debts of honor among his fellow militia men, and has spoiled more than one shopkeeper’s daughter.”

Elizabeth just contained the gasp that threatened; she could hardly be surprised by Darcy's frankness anymore after what he had already shared.

She then thought of her sisters—Kitty and Lydia were so easily swayed by a handsome face in a red coat that both were vulnerable to a predator like Wickham. Lydia especially, as she was the wildest and most unrestrained in her conduct.

Looking up, Elizabeth asked Darcy, "Is there nothing we can do to ... to prevent his doing any more harm?"

Darcy seemed to understand the direction of her thoughts. "There are a number of ways we can encourage him to leave Meryton."

"I don't just want him to leave," Elizabeth countered. "I want to prevent his having chance to hurt anyone else."

"I can take a somewhat more permanent action, if it would ease your concern for your sisters and neighbors," Darcy said slowly. "I have receipts for many of his debts and could collect more from his Meryton accounts."

Elizabeth looked up. "You have the means of sending him to a debtor's prison?" she asked. When Darcy nodded, she queried how long Wickham was likely to be in custody.

A smirk came over his countenance. "Years, I can assure you."

With a dip of her head, she agreed to the plan. "It frightens me how easily we were all of us deceived in him, myself especially," she said then. "I think now that I believed him as readily as I did because I was so eager to despise you."

Darcy lifted an eyebrow. "I would ask the source of your dislike of me, but I feel certain I already know. I *am* sorry, Miss Elizabeth, for insulting you before I even knew you. It was ungentlemanly of me ... and I absolutely do not feel that way. I daresay I never did."

Elizabeth felt a warmth rising up her neck and knew she blushed. "Thank you, Mr. Darcy. It is a relief to know that you do, in fact, find me tolerable."

He looked again as if he would say more, but this time he chose not to. She indicated that he could take the first turn and their gaming continued, with more pleasant conversation and a smattering of the banter they had exchanged one evening during Jane's illness. Elizabeth realized that, while a part of her would miss despising him, she much preferred to think of Mr. Darcy as a friend.

The next day began much as the last six had: Elizabeth rose at half past seven, dressed, and went for a walk in the garden. On her return to the house, she stopped in the kitchen to order a tray of tea, fruit, and toast before going up to pay a morning visit to Lord Stashwick.

"Good morning, my dear Miss Elizabeth!" he greeted her warmly.

She could not help blushing every time he called her "my dear". "Good morning, Mr. Faulkner. How are you feeling?"

"Rather well," said he. "I am glad the fever is gone at last. I am glad I am healing. I *wish* I could get out of this bed."

Elizabeth smiled. "But you cannot, and you must accept it."

"I mean to ask your father if he has a chair and a footrest I might borrow—it's been a whole week since I was attacked, and I should like to at least be able to sit up for a time."

"Can you not sit up in bed as you are doing now?" she asked teasingly.

"Do not be a minx," the marquess replied, though he smiled as he said it.

Hill soon appeared with the light repast Elizabeth had ordered; a basket also hung from one arm. After setting the tray she carried on the bedside table, she moved to sit across the room, where she pulled from her basket a gown that Elizabeth recognized as belonging to Lydia. Without saying a word, the housekeeper started to work mending a tear in the hem.

Elizabeth looked to Lord Stashwick with a smile; he returned it, both of them amused by the lady's continuous efforts to protect Elizabeth's reputation.

"By the by," said she as she poured tea for the patient. "I should tell you that my younger sisters shared some of the local gossip at dinner last evening that you might be interested in."

"Oh?" said Stashwick as he accepted a cup and saucer. "What have they heard?"

"Our neighbours are very, very curious about you," Elizabeth replied. "It took a few days, but word has spread that a carriage was attacked on the road outside of Meryton, and that the lone survivor is recovering here at Longbourn."

Lord Stashwick's expression froze. "What do they know? What has been said about me? Elizabeth, I do not wish your family to be endangered because some people do not care for my politics, nor do I wish any damage to your reputation. You did nothing wrong, but people will talk—and talk can do harm."

"I know, sir, but surprisingly no one is questioning the propriety of my assisting you," Elizabeth replied. "I imagine that is due in part to their not knowing we were alone in the carriage for the few minutes it took to bring you here—not even my sisters know of it. They and the townsfolk only know that I found you, and Mr. Bingley and his man drove the carriage. I assume they believe me to have walked back or rode one of the gentleman's horses."

"Good. Let us hope they continue to believe that slightly altered version of the truth—it will protect you. But what are they saying of me? Do they know my name? Anyone with a copy of Debrett's—"

"Why should you care if anyone owns a copy of the peerage listing?" Elizabeth said casually. "You're a carriage driver, Mr. Faulkner."

Across the room, Mrs. Hill scoffed. Elizabeth looked over her shoulder at the lady, alarmed and wondering what she had

heard.

“Begging your pardon, Miss Elizabeth, Mr. Faulkner, but there’s no way you’re a mere carriage driver, sir,” Hill said. “You speak too well to be of the likes of my husband and me—you’re no servant. And I’ve heard you mention politics before—not that I be eavesdropping, mind—and there’s no servant I ever heard of what’s involved in the making of the laws.”

“Have you heard any of the talk regarding our guest, Hill?” Elizabeth asked her.

“Only what the other Misses Bennet have heard, mostly,” Hill replied. “Folk are curious about who he is, who he ‘worked’ for. And at risk of speakin’ out of turn, Mrs. Bennet has been known to complain to Mrs. Phillips, Mrs. Long, and Lady Lucas that she wishes Mr. Faulkner could be taken out of the house—housekeepers talk to other housekeepers, see. She feels it inappropriate that he be in the house with four unmarried young ladies and an engaged one, even if he is only a carriage driver. She had hopes that your rich relatives what came to visit would take you with them, sir, and is vastly displeased with Mr. Bennet that they did not.”

“Could I have gone with them, madam, I assure you I would have done,” Lord Stashwick told her. “But as you have seen for yourself when tending my wounds, I am in no state to be moved at present.”

“Aye, sir,” said Hill with a nod. “I seen what those ruffians done to you, and you’re mighty lucky to have survived it. Mr. Jones and Mr. Wallace—that be the surgeon from Hatfield—is both of them right in restricting you to bedrest. Any man, no matter his rank, would have the same orders were he injured as you are.”

Elizabeth glanced at Lord Stashwick and smiled. He grinned as well, then said, “I thank you for your honesty, Mrs. Hill—and your discretion. The whole truth will come out soon enough, but until I can be safely transported without exacerbating my injuries, I must stay here. And because I must

stay here, I must insist on what little anonymity is left to me. It is for the protection of your master's family."

Hill sat up straighter. "Mr. Hill and I take that most seriously, sir, you can be sure of that," the lady said with a firm nod, before turning her attention back to her stitching.

Elizabeth looked to the marquess. "Mr. and Mrs. Hill have been with my family since before I was born," she said in a low voice. "I can assure you; they are very dedicated and loyal servants."

Stashwick nodded. "That is good to know—it means that not only will they not talk of what little they know but will ensure that the rest of the staff remains tight-lipped as well."

"By now the people who did this to you must be aware of your survival," Elizabeth observed, before she took a sip of her tea.

Stashwick inclined his head again. "Aye, I've had a letter from my brother-in-law on the matter—sent via Theodore, of course," said he. "Disley and his elder son, as well as my sister and brother, have been keeping apprised of any talk attached to my name. It is extraordinary fortune that all anyone seems to know is that I was to give a speech at Cambridge and fell ill on the journey. I am apparently recuperating at home in Berkshire."

Elizabeth lifted an eyebrow. "You mean in the drafty old stone building?"

The patient laughed. "The very same. I really do wish to show it to you—it's a magnificent structure."

Warmth filled her cheeks. "Sir, I..."

Stashwick sighed. "Do not distress yourself, my dear. I said I would not pressure you on that matter, and I shall not. I know it was a shock for me to even mention it, having known you only a few days. I just—"

"Don't like to waste time, I remember," she said.

"I want you to know something: I was and still am as surprised as you are by my feelings," Stashwick continued. "I

may well have been considering taking another wife, but even I do not understand how I could find myself so suddenly and strongly attached to a lady—”

“With low connexions, vulgar relations, and no dowry.”

“Do stop that,” the marquess said, a note of censure in his tone. “I do not like to hear you speaking so meanly, of yourself or your family.”

“I do not mean to speak ill of either, sir,” Elizabeth retorted. “Only to remind you of what you’d be facing if you persist in fantasizing that such a match could be made.”

“And I remind you, Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” Stashwick said, gesturing with his teacup, “that at my time of life, any eccentricities are usually forgiven. Not only do I not care to waste time, but I can also hardly afford to—I shan’t get any younger, you know. With a daughter grown and the other near to it, and no living son, a man my age and in my position taking a second wife is almost *expected* to marry a lady young enough to bear him an heir before it is too late, and he is dead.”

“Are there not a bevy of young ladies amongst the *ton* who would be willing to marry you?” She leaned closer and lowered her voice. “You know, someone from a *titled* family?”

“There may well be, but I know most of those families and many of the wealthier gentry—and I don’t want any of them. I like *you*.”

Lord Stashwick tilted his head, his gaze fixed on her face as though searching for something—he’d looked at her in a similar fashion before, and she once again felt her cheeks warming. Feeling unequal to bearing his scrutiny, she lowered her own gaze as she took another sip of tea.

“You don’t think you’re good enough, do you?” Stashwick said after a time. “For someone like me.”

“Society will think me not good enough, sir,” Elizabeth corrected him. “Mr. Darcy did not think us worthy of his friend, and Mr. Bingley’s origins are not entirely different from my own—I descend from landed gentry, he descends

from a respectable family of tradesmen. Our rank is technically greater, and *still* we were not good enough. What will the *ton*, or your fellow peers, have to say if you should present a country nobody with no fortune and low connexions as your chosen bride? What will your family say?"

"My dear, whatever your connexions may be," said Stashwick, "if I do not object to them, they can be nothing to anyone else. With regard to any possible resentment of my family, or the indignation of the world, if the former *were* excited by my marrying you, it would not give me one moment's concern—and the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn."

Elizabeth scoffed. "You truly would not be distressed if your daughters, your brother, or your sister should object to your choosing someone whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath your own? You surely do not expect them to rejoice in the inferiority of my circumstances."

Lord Stashwick growled softly. "Elizabeth, why do you argue so strenuously against the idea of marrying me?"

A gasp issued from the direction of Hill, but this time Elizabeth ignored her. "I do not argue against the idea, sir. Only the impracticality. You will be scorned for your choice, and I will be censured, slighted, and despised for accepting you. Given that you recuperated from your injuries in my home, I will no doubt be accused of scheming to entrap you."

"But I'm not in your home—I am recovering from my illness in Berkshire, do not you remember?" quipped Stashwick with a grin. "And do not think I have not taken notice that you have not once said you do not like me."

Elizabeth fought the smile that threatened to break free by reaching for a piece of toast and taking a bite. "You are correct," she replied nonchalantly when that bite had been swallowed. "I have never said I do not like you."

"Ah, progress! And you are not put off by the difference in our ages?"



“Though I *know* you are but five years my father’s junior,” Elizabeth began, “I actually find it rather difficult to *think* of you as being five-and-forty, even if your hair is starting to grey. You certainly do not much act like a man in his mid-forties.”

The marquess grinned. “And I never shall, if I can help it,” said he. “Do not mistake me, I can adopt a serious mien when a given situation requires it, and sometimes my joints do ache. But as I still feel youthful, I choose to act youthful. Besides, however is an old man like me to convince a beautiful young woman like yourself to consider him when there are handsome, virile young men like my nephew and Darcy running about?”

Elizabeth sputtered indecorously into her tea. “Good gracious, *Mr. Darcy?! I’ve only just quit loathing the man last evening!*”

“You loathed him? That’s quite a harsh judgement. Whatever brought that on—besides his interference with your sister and Mr. Bingley? There must be more for you to dislike him so strongly.”

“Oh, there is definitely more to it than that!” Elizabeth said with a nod. “From the very beginning—from the first moment, I may almost say, of my acquaintance with him—his manners impressed me with the fullest belief of his arrogance, his conceit, and his selfish disdain of the feelings of others. These were such as to form a groundwork of disapprobation, on which succeeding events built what I believed an immovable dislike; and I had not known him a month before I felt that he was absolutely the last man in the world I could ever be prevailed upon to marry.”

Lord Stashwick’s eyes widened a fraction. “It was him, wasn’t it? The foolish boy that insulted you at that assembly—I don’t know how I didn’t realize until now.”

A sigh escaped her. “It was,” Elizabeth confessed. “I no longer hate the man, but I still do not particularly like him. I am sorry if it pains you to hear it, being that he is a distant relation of yours.”

“So, what made you wish to make peace with Darcy?” Stashwick queried.

“You, in part. Your charming nature—” At this he smirked. “—reminded me somewhat of a mutual acquaintance of mine and Mr. Darcy’s. After about four days in your company, I found myself noting that though both of you are most agreeable companions, there was a marked difference in the manner in which you presented yourselves. It pained me to realize that this gentleman’s manners are very practiced, and yours more refined and natural. So, I decided it was past time that I ask Mr. Darcy directly what had caused the discord between him and his former friend—I had already had Mr. Wickham’s version of events and wished to hear Darcy’s, that I might discern who was telling the truth.”

“Not George Wickham, the son of the late Mr. Darcy’s steward?” Stashwick asked.

Elizabeth nodded. “He is, yes. Do you know him?”

Stashwick shook his head. “I have never met him, but I have heard tell of him from my brother-in-law. By Disley’s account, the boy is more trouble than he looks.”

Elizabeth sighed again. “So I have come to understand. Mr. Darcy corroborated much of the story Mr. Wickham told me, but his version of their history vastly differed, and I had little choice but to accept that *his* must be the genuine one, for I simply cannot imagine a man of his sense and education crafting such a tale. Besides which, Mr. Darcy once professed that disguise of every sort was his abhorrence.”

“As it should be to any man who calls himself a gentleman,” said Stashwick.

“Mr. Darcy has, after I expressed concern for my sisters and the local young ladies, given his word that he will call in Mr. Wickham’s debts. He is to go to a debtor’s prison for some years, that he is no longer able to prey on impressionable girls.”

Stashwick nodded. “Seems a solid plan to rid himself and the world at large of a scoundrel, at least for a good while.”

“Sir, what if I should agree to be complicit in your madness, but we find we do not suit?” Elizabeth asked then.

Stashwick shrugged. “Then we do not suit. We will both of us be grateful for the time we spent getting to know one another, shake hands, and part as friends when at last I can get up and walk.”

After a few moments of their drinking tea and eating toast and fruit in silence, he asked her, “So, my dear Miss Elizabeth, are we agreed that you will cease arguing for practicality and just let the mutual admiration between us take its natural course?”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrow again. “Why do I get the feeling that you think you already know the outcome of the ‘natural course’?” she asked.

Lord Stashwick’s grin became a smirk of pure confidence, though his reply was insouciant. “I am not merely a man who doesn’t like to waste time, my dear Elizabeth. I am also the sort who does not let anyone, or anything, get in the way of what I want.”

“What insufferable presumption,” Elizabeth retorted in the same manner. “Are you certain that you and Mr. Darcy are only related by marriage?”

His responding laughter was soon accompanied by her own.



# Chapter Twelve

**Jane Bennet** and Charles Bingley were married at Longbourn Church, where all her friends could see, five weeks to the day that he returned to Netherfield.

Charlotte Lucas had married Mr. Collins there only the week prior, but Mrs. Bennet would allow no comparison between the matches, except to say that Jane's was much better and that her daughter's and Bingley's wedding breakfast was much grander than that of the future mistress of Longbourn.

Sir William Lucas was affable enough to concede that Jane had made herself a very fine match indeed. Lady Lucas, on the other hand, was so offended that—while she was all politeness the day of—for nearly a week after she neither called on Mrs. Bennet nor accepted a visit from her.

Elizabeth was extraordinarily happy for her sister's good fortune. Jane had married the man she loved, and Bingley absolutely adored his new wife—and all it took to “help him on,” as Charlotte had once observed, was for Jane to “do more.” Only one afternoon of Lydia-like conduct had been necessary to appeal to Bingley's already established attraction, and their conversation while he waited for his horse that day had secured him, for not only had he revealed the machinations of his sisters and Darcy, but Jane had assured him they were entirely wrong in their judgment.

Bingley's sisters put aside their disdain for the Bennet family for the day and did their duty to their brother—Mr. Hurst didn't much care who his brother married and attended only for the food and drink—but it was clear to Elizabeth that they would rather have been elsewhere. Her consolation for having to endure their presence was knowing that Bingley had actually threatened to cut them both if they tried to leave

before he and Jane departed on their wedding tour. Given the knowledge that both sisters disliked Hertfordshire and her family, Elizabeth was also comforted by the belief that she would not often have to see them. They and Darcy departed for London as soon as Bingley's carriage was out of sight.

The day after the wedding, Mr. Wallace—the surgeon from Hatfield—called at Longbourn to examine Lord Stashwick's leg. It was healing so very well, said he, that in another fortnight, he would consent to the patient taking “very short” walks with the assistance of crutches.

“Do *not* attempt to walk without them, Mr. Faulkner,” the surgeon warned. “I do not doubt that you long to be out of this bed, sir, but you will do yourself no favors if you rush your recovery. The leg will be weak from lack of use, so assistance *will* be necessary.”

“Very well,” the marquess had reluctantly agreed, before glancing up at Mr. Bennet to say, “I am sorry, sir, but I must beg that you and your family endure my intrusion into your lives at least another fortnight.”

“I am sure we will somehow muddle through,” Mr. Bennet had replied, before escorting the surgeon from the room and out of the house.

He returned a few minutes later, surprising Lord Stashwick when he closed the door behind him. “Sir, there is a delicate matter that I wish to discuss with you regarding your residence here.”

Stashwick, who had been preparing to read, set aside the book in his hands. “What matter do you wish to discuss, Mr. Bennet?”

“Elizabeth.”

The marquess sighed. “I have been expecting this discussion for some time,” said he, before gesturing to the chair that Elizabeth usually sat in. “Do sit down, Mr. Bennet—you might as well be comfortable while you question my intentions toward your daughter.”

Mr. Bennet sat down. “Elizabeth has spent a great deal of time with you these five weeks. I have permitted it, in part, because I thought the interaction harmless—there was little you could do to take advantage of her when you are confined to that bed, and she is always chaperoned when she comes into this room. I have permitted it because I have difficulty denying her anything which brings her pleasure, and for whatever reason, she enjoys spending time with you. And I have permitted it because you are a marquess and have the power to utterly ruin me if I deny you anything that brings *you* pleasure.”

Lord Stashwick shook his head. “You have a really poor opinion of the nobility, sir.”

“Perhaps I do,” said his host, “but I note that you did not deny you could do it.”

“I do not deny that I have the power, no. What would be the point in prevarication?” Stashwick retorted. “However, I am a father too, Mr. Bennet, and I am as protective of my daughters as you are of yours. Had you chosen to deny me the pleasure of Miss Elizabeth’s company, I would have abided by your decision. As I told you once before, this is your house, and I am but an inconvenient guest.”

“My daughter is not yet one-and-twenty,” Mr. Bennet said then. “As she has told me, your eldest daughter is older than she by only a year.”

Stashwick nodded. “She is, yes.”

“If you mean to pursue Elizabeth simply for the chance of her bearing you a son, I won’t allow it. My daughter has too lively a mind, too brilliant a spirit, to be bound to a man who wished only to use her as a broodmare.”

The marquess frowned. “I am almost insulted that you would assume such a thing, sir,” he said. “What you suspect of me is done—I’ll not deny it—but it will *not* be done by me. If Elizabeth and I should marry, and she bears me children, I should be the happiest man in the world whether they are daughters or sons. I admire her because of who she is, not

what she may be able to do for me. I was immediately attracted to her beauty but have fallen in love with her soul.”

Mr. Bennet’s eyebrows lifted toward his hairline. “You believe yourself in love with Elizabeth? A girl young enough to be your own daughter?”

“I know I am in love with Elizabeth,” Stashwick corrected him. “And her age means nothing to me—were she a forty-year-old spinster, I would love her the same. All I want is a companion for the rest of my life. If children should result from a match between us, so much the better.”

“Speaking of the rest of your life,” said Mr. Bennet as he sat back and crossed his arms. “The reason you’re sitting in that bed pretending to be nothing more than a carriage driver is because someone tried to prevent you having one. Why should I allow you to put my daughter’s life in danger merely by association with you? Have you any idea how monumentally fortunate we have been that whoever attacked your carriage hasn’t come looking for you—that no one from Meryton has carried the story of the ‘lone survivor of a carriage attack’ beyond our borders?”

“I have given thanks to God each and every day for that monumental good fortune, Mr. Bennet,” Stashwick said. “I have also asked Him to protect your family from the evil that put me here. I cannot tell you that such an attempt will never be made on my life again; I can only swear that I will do *everything* in my power to protect Elizabeth from harm, if she should accept me. She will certainly never be allowed to take long country walks all alone even when on Stashwick grounds in Berkshire.”

“Judge me if you like for giving her the freedom she has enjoyed until your arrival but remember that had she not taken one of those walks, you might well be dead.”

Stashwick shook his head again. “I do not judge you, sir. From what Elizabeth has told me of Longbourn and Meryton, everyone here knows everyone else, and she has been perfectly safe in taking long walks in the country with no companion but herself for nearly half her life. As the wife of a



marquess, however, her situation in life would be entirely different—she would *require* protection simply for being wealthy and titled. I fully intend to arrange constant security for her.”

Mr. Bennet snorted softly. “Bodyguards? Elizabeth won’t much like that.”

“It is the one subject on which Elizabeth will be given no choice,” Stashwick said firmly. “And hopefully the only one on which we shall disagree.”

He tipped his head to the side then and said, “I must own, Mr. Bennet, to being somewhat surprised by you.”

Mr. Bennet scoffed. “Are you now?”

“Indeed,” said Lord Stashwick. “When first it came to light that I am a titled man, I wondered if you might attempt to use this situation to your benefit—but you did not. You could have claimed I took advantage of your daughter while we were alone in my carriage and blackmailed me for money to ensure your silence. You could be *demanding* that I marry her, and yet there you sit, all but threatening to deny your consent to a match between her and a marquess.”

Mr. Bennet scowled. “I love my daughter.”

“Elizabeth will have more money than she could ever spend. More gowns, jewels, and carriages than she could imagine, and she will get to live a portion of the year in a castle for the rest of her life. I could be of great assistance to your three remaining daughters when it comes time for them to marry.”

“I don’t care about any of that!” Mr. Bennet snapped. “I *do* care about my daughter’s happiness. I know Elizabeth’s disposition far better than you. I know that she could be neither happy nor respectable unless she truly esteemed her husband and looked up to him as a superior. Her lively talents would place her in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage—she could scarcely escape discredit and misery. I will not be grieved by Elizabeth being unable to respect her partner in life.”

“Do not you think, sir, that it is for Elizabeth to determine if she will be happy with me?” Lord Stashwick asked.

Mr. Bennet inclined his head. “Aye, it is her decision,” he conceded. “And while I am observant enough to discern that she enjoys your company, can you give me any reason to believe that she returns your affection?”

Stashwick smiled. “Elizabeth willingly reads to me even though I have been perfectly capable of reading for myself for some four weeks. She plays games with me, talks to me—she is never afraid to share what is on her mind, and she listens to me when I talk of my work or my family. She makes me laugh, and I haven’t truly laughed in years. She smiles and blushes when I say she is pretty, and when I call her ‘my dear’. And she *is* dear to me, Mr. Bennet. So very, very dear.”

“Yes,” said Thomas Bennet with a resigned sigh, after a long moment of studying the features of the man across from him. “Yes, I can see that she is.”

After uncrossing his arms, he clapped his hands to his knees and then pushed to his feet. Mr. Bennet turned round at the door, his hand on the knob, to say, “I have but one more query, and I shall have done. What about your family—your daughters, your brother, your sister? Will not they have something to say on the matter? Will not the rest of high society have some choice words about your suddenly deciding to marry a country squire’s penniless daughter?”

Lord Stashwick drew a breath. “There will be some questions on both sides, I do not doubt. But I will tell them as I have told Elizabeth—God has drawn me to her. That, and I am a rich-as-sin marquess and can do as I please. Once they have had a chance to know her, I do believe that my family will come around. And as for the *beau monde*, they will either embrace Elizabeth as one of them or they will not. I believe she can withstand the worst of them, and the wisest of those will keep their censure to themselves, for they will not want to risk the loss of my good opinion. I may have more enemies than friends, but that is because—as you so succinctly pointed out before—I have the power to ruin a man if I should wish it.”

Mr. Bennet chuckled. “Remind me never to make you angry, my lord,” said he before at last turning the knob to open the chamber door.

A startled Elizabeth gasped as she stopped short of knocking. Beside her was Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Papa,” said Elizabeth. “I am surprised to see you here.”

“Why should you be surprised, Lizzy, that I have come to have a conversation with a guest in my home?” retorted her father. “Silly girl.”

He then moved past the two newcomers and walked off toward the stairs.

Elizabeth stepped into Lord Stashwick’s room. “My father has only visited you twice since you came here,” she said to him. “Was there something amiss?”

“Not at all,” Stashwick said. “Mr. Wallace from Hatfield was here, and Mr. Bennet simply remained during the examination.”

“That’s right,” said Fitzwilliam as he brought a chair for Elizabeth to sit in. “You mentioned yesterday that he’d sent a letter saying he would come today. What was the surgeon’s report?”

Lord Stashwick grinned. “I am most happy to share that my leg is healing very well. I must endure two more weeks of bedrest, unfortunately, but at that time I will be allowed to take short walks with the aid of crutches.”

Elizabeth fought to keep her expression from showing how hurt she felt. The marquess would be gone in two weeks—of that she was certain.

“My dear, I can see what you are thinking,” Stashwick said, drawing her attention. “Pray do not assume anything, for I mean to keep my word.”

“Do you really?” she asked.

Fitzwilliam cleared his throat. “And might your favorite nephew be made aware of this promise you have made, sir?”

Stashwick looked to Elizabeth. Color had risen to her cheeks, but she gave an almost imperceptible nod permitting him to share what they had privately discussed.

Colonel Fitzwilliam would be the first of his family to hear the news.

“I have asked Miss Elizabeth if she would agree to my courting her properly when I am able to walk,” Stashwick replied at last.

Fitzwilliam looked between them, and Elizabeth was surprised by the wide smile he wore. “I knew it!” he cried softly. “I *knew* you would form an attachment to her, Uncle. I told Darcy as much, but I do not think he believed me.”

“You do not mind?” Elizabeth asked.

“Why should I?” he countered. “You are so often here when I have come to call, it is clear my uncle enjoys your company.”

“You really do not mind that your uncle is attracted to a young lady that is a year your cousin Lady Winterbourne’s junior?”

Fitzwilliam shook his head, and quickly went to fetch the other chair in the room. Sitting it beside her, he planted himself on the chair, leaned forward, and said, “Miss Bennet, it is not for me to judge another man’s heart. If my uncle truly cares for you, then there is naught that I can say about it. So long as you truly esteem him—”

“I would not accept him for mercenary reasons, I can assure you!” Elizabeth declared. “In fact, he will tell you himself that I have tried to talk him out of pursuing me! In the eyes of society, my family’s situation makes me unworthy of his notice.”

Fitzwilliam scoffed and waved his hand dismissively. “I personally don’t give a toss what society thinks—though I shall certainly have to pretend to when my mother finally browbeats me into selling my commission and choosing a wife.”

He reached and took one of her hands, patted the top of it with his other, then said, “Madam, I believe in marrying for love whenever possible. I had not known you but a few minutes before I began to suspect my uncle would form an attachment to you, for you are a very pretty and charming girl. And if you can find it in your heart to care for him despite his being a curmudgeonly old marquess—”

“Oi, that ‘curmudgeonly old marquess’ can hear you, Teddy,” murmured Stashwick.

Fitzwilliam grinned and went on as though he’d not been interrupted. “—then I shall wholeheartedly support your match.”

He released her hand and looked at his uncle then. “Mother and Father won’t protest too much, I should think, nor Philip, as long as she can fulfill the duties required of her in your house and in society. I daresay even Addy will adore her, but Henrietta and Uncle Edward...”

“In all honesty, it is Lady Winterbourne whose reaction I dread the most,” Elizabeth confessed. “You will recall that she and I did not get on well.”

“I regret that she will not look on the match with a friendly eye,” Lord Stashwick agreed.

“Oh, and then there’s my Aunt Catherine—from my father’s side of the family, Miss Elizabeth,” said Fitzwilliam.

“Wait—do you mean Lady Catherine de Bourgh?”

Fitzwilliam nodded. “She is my father’s sister, as was Darcy’s mother. How do you know of her?”

“My cousin, Mr. Collins, is rector of Hunsford Parish. When he came for a visit in November, he excessively praised his ‘noble patroness’ and used her full name nearly every time he spoke of her,” Elizabeth explained, “though it was Mr. Wickham who informed me she was the sister of Mr. Darcy’s mother.”

Fitzwilliam scoffed. “I daresay that was one of the few things that worthless scoundrel said that was entirely accurate. I am reminded, by the by, that I have you to thank for Darcy

finally agreeing to have Wickham shipped off, as he ought to have done years ago.”

Lord Stashwick now scoffed and flipped his hand in a dismissive wave. “Don’t even get me started on that old harridan, Teddy,” said he, returning to the previous subject of their conversation. “Catherine has despised my family ever since my father and hers could not come to an agreement regarding Anne and Edward. It’s one of the reasons she and your mother do not get on.”

“Was there really a possibility of Aunt Anne and Uncle Edward marrying?” Colonel Fitzwilliam asked, his voice full of incredulity.

“There was—though naturally, the failure makes it one of those things the family studiously avoids talking about,” Stashwick confessed. “My father very much wanted a second alliance with the Fitzwilliams, and even said he would refuse Lady Anne’s dowry—it could be *her* money, rather than my brother having control of it. However, Anne had by then already fallen in love with George Darcy, and her father allowed her to follow her heart.”

“I am glad for it, as then we’d not have Will and Georgiana, but... I don’t understand why Aunt Catherine would be angry with Grandfather or you for it. You’d think she’d be cross with Aunt Anne for not making a match with a marquess’s son, yet she named her daughter for her sister, and claims to have made an agreement with her that Will and little Anne should marry.”

Elizabeth tried vainly to suppress a snort of amusement. When the two men looked at her, she said, “Forgive me, but what you say has reminded me that I almost feel sorry for Miss Bingley.”

Fitzwilliam laughed. “I see what you mean. That poor girl, to be so determined to raise herself higher in society that she set her cap at perhaps the most determined bachelor that ever was. Darcy isn’t actually betrothed to our cousin Anne—she has too sickly a constitution to be any man’s wife—but neither will he marry a harpy like Caroline Bingley. He’s the

sort who has not the talent of conversing easily with people he has not met before, as I believe you have witnessed, but he also cannot abide blatant ambition. Which reminds me, my father once proposed my cousin Hetty to Darcy as a prospective bride, and she refused to even consider the idea—did she not, Uncle?”

Stashwick chuckled. “She did indeed. Henrietta was of the belief that a marquess’s daughter could—and should—do better than a mere gentleman, even if he does have ten thousand a year. I believe it was Edward that put it into her head that a titled man’s daughter should only marry a titled man. Arthur’s precedence does not equal mine as he is one rank lower than I, but he was the highest-ranked man to offer for her, and after two seasons, the offers were starting to dwindle.”

“So, theirs is not a love match?” queried Elizabeth.

Lord Stashwick shook his head. “Sadly, no. Well, I do believe that despite my daughter’s flaws, Arthur does love her. But Henrietta does not love him—she loves his title and his wealth. She loves his position in society, and that which they all give her.”

He sighed. “I do not know where her mother and I failed her for her to care more about money and rank than she does about her husband.”

Fitzwilliam sighed also. “I’m afraid Hetty *is* most likely to be the one who accuses Miss Bennet of entrapping you for your title and wealth, Uncle. She won’t like having a stepmother younger than she is—she’s gotten used to being first in your life since Aunt Hetty died.”

Elizabeth scoffed. “That is absolutely absurd! Money is important, yes, but I will tell you now, Colonel, that I could never marry a man I did not both love and respect. I would be just as happy to marry a poor man as a rich one if we loved each other.”

Fitzwilliam looked at her, his expression an incredible mixture of sobriety and cheek. “Are you saying that you love my uncle, Miss Bennet?”

“Theodore!” cried Lord Stashwick. “How abominably inappropriate of you to ask such a question! Elizabeth, my dear, you do not have to answer him.”

Although her face and neck heated with her discomfiture—her heart was beating madly and her hands were shaking—Elizabeth valiantly fought the urge to excuse herself and glanced at the colonel as she replied, “I must be honest—I cannot say at present that I love him.”

She then looked at the marquess, fearful of finding disappointment in his countenance, and was relieved on finding only understanding. “I can, however, say that I have the highest respect for him, and that I admire him a great deal. I scrupled against a match between us for his sake more than my own, as I do not wish censure upon him for choosing a nobody like me.”

“Elizabeth...”

On looking to Fitzwilliam again, who did appear appropriately chagrined, Elizabeth continued with, “Your uncle is very charming, you know. I have very much enjoyed his company and I have grown very fond of him.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam flicked his eyes toward his uncle, then looked back to her with a smile. “Then I believe, Miss Bennet, that you shall grow to love him in due course, as he will grow to love you. Thank you for being so very charming that you have drawn him out of his shell again. He was a lively man while my Aunt Henrietta lived and had become quite the recluse after she passed—it was even worse after my cousin Edmund’s accident. I can already see that you will bring light and laughter to his life again.”

Lord Stashwick held out his hand to Elizabeth, and she blushed as she placed hers into it. “She already does, Theodore.”

Fitzwilliam smiled, then suddenly his face fell, and he sat up straight. “Oh, good heavens,” said he. “I’ve just realized...”

“Realized what, boy?” his uncle asked.



“I’ve just realized that when the two of you marry—and with such feelings as you already have for each other, I’ve no doubt you will—Miss Bennet will be my aunt!”

Stashwick winked at Elizabeth before replying, “That’s usually how it works, Teddy.”

“How the devil am I to think of her as my aunt when she is more than ten years my junior?” the colonel asked.

Elizabeth looked at him and smiled as she said, “If it pains you to think of me as your aunt, Colonel, then do not—I shall not hold you to it. If it is easier for you, I should like very much to call you a friend.”

Fitzwilliam returned her smile. “That, my good woman, you may do. And I should be honored to call you mine.”



# Chapter Thirteen

**One week** after he had begun walking again, Lord Stashwick left for London.

The parting was more painful than Elizabeth had expected, and she had been glad for her father excusing her to her room to collect herself before they spoke to the rest of the family. Half an hour after their guest had gone, she and Mr. Bennet gathered Mrs. Bennet and the younger girls down in the drawing room to reveal his true identity, as they had been given leave to do.

There was no surprise when her mother swooned at once upon hearing that “Mr. Faulkner” was, in fact, the Marquess of Stashwick. Mary was immediately before her with smelling salts while Kitty and Lydia screeched about being lied to. Their father countered the claim by asserting that he and Elizabeth had never lied, only not shared the full truth.

“But why did you never tell us, Papa?” cried Lydia. “You know how much I would have liked to marry such a man!”

Mr. Bennet had glanced at Elizabeth with a bemused expression. “I see you have forgotten all about your declaration of a man being nothing if he is not in regimentals,” he said on looking back to his youngest daughter.

“You are a year younger than His Lordship’s youngest daughter, Lydia,” said Elizabeth. “He would never have taken notice of you.”

Lydia crossed her arms petulantly. “And I suppose you think he’d take notice of you?” she retorted crossly.

“Considering I visited the man every day he was confined to bed and helped him learn to walk with his crutches, I would say so,” Elizabeth replied.

“As a matter of fact, Lydia,” began Mr. Bennet as his wife was coming around, “Lord Stashwick has become rather smitten with your sister.”

“Oh, Mr. Bennet!” cried Mrs. Bennet. “Pray tell me you did not deny him! I thought Lizzy visiting that man every day was some form of punishment—and you tell me now that he was a marquess?! He wishes to marry our Lizzy? You’d better not have denied him, Mr. Bennet, or I shall never forgive you!”

To her daughter she now rushed and drew her forcefully to her bosom. “Oh, Lizzy! My dearest, sweetest girl! I knew you could not be so clever for nothing! You knew he was a titled man, and you worked your charms on him, I know you did. You are such a wonderful girl, to do such a kindness for your sisters.”

“Mamma, I did not visit with Lord Stashwick for my sisters, nor did I do so to work my charms on him, such as they are,” Elizabeth protested. “I visited him for no other reason than to be kind to an injured man who was forced by his circumstances to be a guest among strangers.”

“What jewels! What gowns! What carriages!” Mrs. Bennet went on as though she’d not spoken. “How rich and great you will be, Lizzy. Your match is much grander than even Jane’s—Mr. Bingley’s fortune is nothing at all to a marquess’s!”

Her head turned sharply then to her husband. “He *is* very rich, is he not, Mr. Bennet? Pray do not tell me that he is one of those foolish lords who squanders all their good fortune and then marries to settle his debts. La! If he thinks Lizzy’s dowry will save him from the poor house, then he will be vastly disappointed!”

This statement sent Kitty and Lydia into a fit of giggles. “What a shock he will get,” said Lydia, “when he receives only fifty pounds a year!”

“Enough of that, young lady,” said Mr. Bennet sternly. “And no, Mrs. Bennet, you need not have any concern about his being a spendthrift. His Lordship informed me that his

income is more than sufficient to keep our daughter in the style to which you would have her be accustomed, if their courtship should proceed to marriage.”

“If? *If?!*” cried Mrs. Bennet, her eyes flying again to Elizabeth. “I thought you said it was all arranged?”

“No, Mamma, my father only said that Lord Stashwick is smitten,” Elizabeth returned. “Why, I do not know. I still have difficulty believing that his affections are genuine, but—”

“Even if they are not, you *will* marry him when he asks you!” Mrs. Bennet cried, her voice rising in pitch as she spoke. “Do not you *dare* engage in the same foolishness as you did in your dealings with Mr. Collins, Elizabeth Bennet! I will not have it! Bad enough that I should live to see Charlotte Lucas take my place as mistress of this house, when by rights it should have been you!”

“But had Elizabeth accepted Mr. Collins, Mamma, she could not then accept Lord Stashwick,” Mary pointed out.

“Oh yes, she could! I am sure His Lordship could have convinced him to give her up, and then I might have had chance to persuade Mr. Collins to accept you or Kitty!”

Kitty wrinkled her nose in distaste. “Ugh, not me, Mamma! I should never accept such an odious man!”

“You will do as you are told, Catherine Bennet!” admonished her mother.

“Mrs. Bennet,” said Mr. Bennet loudly, to draw her attention over the noise made by Kitty’s protest and Lydia’s laughter. “Contrary to popular opinion—namely your own—no daughter of mine will be forced to accept any man, no matter the advantage to her, if she cannot at the very least respect him.”

“But Lizzy says she visited Lord Stashwick every day! Does that not mean she respects him?” asked Mrs. Bennet. “Lizzy, please, my sweetest, cleverest girl—do not let your inexplicable desire for independence make you a fool! A chance like this shall certainly never come in your way again—and think what a fine thing it would be for your sisters! You

will have a chance to see them all married at least as well as Jane, if not better. You will be a marchioness! You will have jewels that could literally buy this estate, I am sure!”

“And she will get to live at least part of the year in a castle—our Lizzy is as good as a princess if she is living in a castle!” said Mr. Bennet with a grin.

“A...a castle?” stammered Mrs. Bennet, her eyes widening. “Oh. Oh! Mary—Mary, my salts! I feel my faintness coming on me again!”

Mary brought the little vial immediately, and she and Elizabeth guided their mother to the settee to prevent her falling over.

“Papa, must you tease her so?” Elizabeth admonished. Sitting down beside her mother, she took up her hand and held it between her own as she drew a deep breath.

“Mamma,” she began. “Please listen to what I have to say and understand me. Papa and I did not at first know that our guest was a lord—we did not discover this until Mr. Darcy brought his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, to see him, that he might confirm whether the Henry Faulkner who was in our guest room was indeed the colonel’s uncle.”

Lydia sat up straight. “A colonel, did you say?”

“Hush, Lydia,” Mary admonished softly.

Elizabeth ignored the interruption and continued, explaining the whole of the story as best she could—including her visits to His Lordship, without revealing private details from their conversations. “I still do not understand why he should attach himself to me, but he has. He asked me if he might court me when he is able to walk again.”

“And what did you say? Why did he go away if he means to court you?”

“Lord Stashwick removed to London, Mrs. Bennet,” said her husband, “because he felt it inappropriate to remain under the same roof as the young lady to whom he is very nearly betrothed.”

“Very well,” said Mrs. Bennet. “What did you say, Lizzy? What was your answer? Please, tell me it was ‘yes.’ I should be the happiest mamma in all the world if I should get to see my daughter become a marchioness!”

Elizabeth felt the perpetual blush she had experienced since meeting Lord Stashwick warm her cheeks as she replied, “Mamma, I have granted his request, because I *do* like him very much.”

“Do you love him, Lizzy?” asked Kitty. “He was quite handsome, I confess, but he’s rather an old man, isn’t he? He must be as old as Papa!”

“I am very fond of His Lordship, Kitty, and even more flattered that he should admire me enough to even consider making me his wife,” Elizabeth said. “I do believe there to be every possibility of my feelings growing into love in time.”

This statement was not entirely true. Elizabeth had come to believe since parting from Lord Stashwick that morning that she *did* love him. The strain beneath her breast that had robbed her momentarily of the ability to breathe when he was gone could be nothing else.

But she would not say as much to her family—not yet. Her heart was very much decided on Henry being the first to hear her say the words.

“As to his age,” she went on, “I must own that I took little notice of it. I was too much distracted by his charming and flirtatious manner to concern myself with searching for frown lines or grey hairs.”

Kitty and Lydia burst into another fit of giggles at her words, which Mr. Bennet endured for less than a minute before pointedly clearing his throat to silence them, then he announced that he, Mrs. Bennet, and Elizabeth would be going to the Gardiners in London the following week in order to meet Lord Stashwick’s family. Kitty and Lydia were at once indignant that they were not included in the scheme—even the knowledge that their parents were not to stay more than a few days, that Elizabeth was to be in the care of the Gardiners during her courtship, did not appease them.

It was Mrs. Bennet who, surprisingly, put an end to their protestations with a sharply uttered “Hush!”

“But Mamma!” they cried in unison.

“We do not go for a holiday—we go to ensure that your sister is able to be courted by a nobleman! Do you not see how very useful this connexion might be to you girls? We must first secure the marriage, then—in time—it may be possible for your sister to persuade him to bring you all out in society.”

Elizabeth, while having no desire to take mercenary advantage of the connexions she would be gaining by her marriage, would be glad to do her sisters a service—but she would require something from them in exchange. She was already aware that Henry—as she had begun to think of him again—had every intention of being as useful as her mother hoped, for he had once suggested that should they marry, he would be happy to sponsor each of her sisters for a Season. She did not object to the idea, but it was her intention to demand that Lydia and Kitty should be made to go to a seminary for young gentlewomen, that they might at last receive education in those areas which they had both proven deficient. Their manners and decorum would need to vastly improve, or they would get no assistance from her.

She had only to suggest this course of action to her parents and Lord Stashwick. Kitty and Lydia would be furious, but she felt certain that their mother—who already had the highest hopes of their making excellent matches, now that her second daughter was all but betrothed to a marquess—would ensure their complicity.

Mary, whose decorum was not near so bad as her younger sisters’ but who also lacked many social graces—and could benefit from instruction by a proper music master—Elizabeth was still working out how to help. She was too old to go to school, too old for a governess. Perhaps one of the ladies in Henry’s family would have a suggestion.

That evening, as Elizabeth sat at her dressing table combing through her hair as part of her bedtime routine, she



was startled by a knock on the door. A moment later, a rather subdued-looking Mrs. Bennet entered.

“Lizzy, I must speak with you,” said she.

Elizabeth nodded. “Of course, Mamma.”

Mrs. Bennet crossed the room and sat on the hope chest at the foot of her bed while Elizabeth turned around to face her. “Lizzy,” she began, “I wish to speak to you about this Lord Stashwick fellow.”

Elizabeth stifled a sigh. “Very well, Mamma. What about him?”

When her mother looked up from the wringing hands in her lap, Elizabeth found herself struck by her expression: Mrs. Bennet looked almost desperate. But why?

“Lizzy, I am sorry if it seems foolish to you for me to say so, but you *must* accept him when he asks you,” her mother began. “As you said, you will surely come to love him in time, if you already have affection for him. Jane has done well enough for herself in finally securing Mr. Bingley, and she could certainly help her sisters find good husbands, but you can do so much more! I do not think any of you girls truly understand the sad circumstances we shall all of us be in if your father should die—we will have *no home*. Nowhere to live, and not enough money to live on.”

She sighed and blinked her eyes, which Elizabeth now saw were brimming with tears. “I am afraid for you all,” Mrs. Bennet went on. “If you are not all married when the odious Mr. and Mrs. Collins come to throw us out into the hedgerows, I do not know what will become of us. You have too good a heart to wish us a burden on our relations—and I confess that I should not like to be second in my brother Phillips’s house, the only place I might go. I-I shan’t ask you for much, Lizzy, when you are so rich and great. Just *please* be a help to your sisters! I do not expect that they might also marry a man as great as His Lordship, but I am sure you might find them each a husband at least as rich as Mr. Bingley, and then they shall be very well taken care of. And between you all, you might

think of something for your dear old Mamma when it comes time to put Mr. Bennet in his grave.”

Moved by this rational, well-thought-out speech from her mother—perhaps the first she had ever truly heard her give—Elizabeth rose and went to sit beside her. She slipped her arm about her shoulders and leaned to kiss her temple.

“Mamma, I promise you that I will do what I can for my sisters. And for you, when the time comes,” she said softly.

Mrs. Bennet sniffled and looked at her. “Then you will accept him? And become a great marchioness?”

Elizabeth smiled. “I will accept him. As to whether I shall be a great marchioness, only time will tell.”

The weekend passed quickly—with Mrs. Bennet needing to go around the village to speak to her friends about who their guest had really been. She had wanted to tell everyone—especially Lady Lucas—that Elizabeth was being courted by Lord Stashwick and would soon be a marchioness but had been convinced by her husband and second daughter to wait until an official announcement could be made. The same edict of silence was placed on the younger girls as well—Mary agreed with no hesitation, though Kitty and Lydia, of course, protested being made to keep a secret. “I know it will be extraordinarily difficult for you,” their father had said, “but we cannot speak of there being a betrothal if His Lordship has yet to ask. And what if he and Lizzy decide not to marry after all? Would you subject our family to scandal and ridicule?”

It took the threat of the two losing the privilege of being out, as well as an entire month’s pocket money, to get them to agree. Elizabeth could just imagine their indignation when they learned she planned to send them away to school so they could learn proper decorum ... and perhaps a few useful accomplishments.

On Monday morning—after an early breakfast—Mr. and Mrs. Phillips were welcomed into their home to look after the three younger girls while their parents were away. Elizabeth’s

aunt and uncle were still full of astonishment that not only had the “carriage driver” turned out to be a marquess, but that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Elizabeth were going to town to meet his family! The latter knew that they assumed this meeting was some form of reward for the service the family had done him, as did the whole neighbourhood, and she could just imagine what a shock they would get when their inevitable engagement was announced.

Immediately upon their arrival in London, after the reason for their unexpected call had been shared with the Gardiners and they had got over the initial shock, Mrs. Bennet declared that she and Elizabeth *must* go shopping for new dresses. “I wish we had time to have them custom made, but a ready-made gown will have to do,” she said. “As pretty as are your dinner frocks, Lizzy, we *must* make a good impression on His Lordship and his family! You must show them that you can be as fashionable as they are!”

At this, the stunned expression on Mrs. Gardiner’s countenance shifted to a wide smile. “I know just the place to take you, sister! Oh, Edward, may I also—”

Her husband laughed and waved a hand at her. “Of course, you may also purchase a new gown, Marjorie. We must all of us make a good impression, though I recall now that I have met Lord Stashwick briefly, when he came to collect the carriage he ordered for his youngest daughter’s sixteenth birthday this spring. Had I a reason to go into your guest room during our stay in Meryton over Christmas, I’d have known him at once. I see now even more why we had to stay with my sister Phillips.”

Mrs. Gardiner looked at Elizabeth then. “Oh dear, he’s a much older man, then?”

Elizabeth nodded. “His Lordship is five-and-forty. His eldest daughter is one-and-twenty and married to the Earl of Winterbourne, and they have a daughter who is two. Then there is Lady Adelaide, whom my uncle recently made the carriage for. He had two sons also, but sadly both are dead.”

“And you are not uneasy about the difference in your ages?” her aunt asked her.

“As I told my sisters, I took little notice of it. I think it because he was so very charming right from the beginning,” said Elizabeth. She then grinned as she added, “He was perhaps more forward than he ought to have been, but Lord Stashwick said he did not care to waste time, and he’s a man who knows what he likes. Apparently, he likes me—and believe me, Aunt, I am still as astonished as you are.”

“Well, I am not,” said Mrs. Bennet. “Who could not admire such a charming, lively young lady like yourself, Lizzy?”

The others looked to one another with knowing gazes, for Mrs. Bennet had long lamented that Elizabeth might never get herself a husband “with that sharp tongue of hers.”

At the shop of Madame le Blanc, the three ladies were most fortunate. Each found a gown on display that was in fashion and to their taste. Elizabeth was so astonished by the ivory chiffon gown with a net overlay trimmed with white lace, with net sleeves trimmed the same, that she asked the proprietor, “How is it possible that such a lovely gown is on display instead of hanging in someone’s dressing room?”

The lady laughed. “*Mademoiselle*, it was, in fact, a commission—but ze lady could not pay for it after ‘er ‘usband was found to ‘ave very many debts.”

“How unfortunate,” murmured Mrs. Gardiner.

Mrs. Bennet scoffed. “Unfortunate for that lady, but very fortunate for us!” she declared. “It looks like it is just your size, Lizzy. Do try it on.”

Her mother was right—the gown fit so well that it was as if it had been made for her, and not some unfortunate wife whose husband had squandered his money. Elizabeth could not help herself imagining Lord Stashwick’s expression when she walked into his grand London home.

Mrs. Bennet proved to be a little too thick about the waist and full in the bosom to fit the gown she had chosen and began

to panic that she would not be dressed well enough—“We are to dine with a marquess! I cannot be plain!”—but Madame le Blanc was able to calm her with the assurance that she could alter the gown as needed by Wednesday.

“And if you leave your gown with me, *mademoiselle*, I will make it *shine*,” she added with a grin.

Elizabeth had consented to leaving her gown, and often over the next two days wondered what the modiste could do to make it even better. On Wednesday, after breakfast, the ladies at Gracechurch Street went again to her shop on Bond Street. Madame le Blanc insisted on fitting Mrs. Bennet first, and that lady breathed a comfortable sigh of relief that her gown now fit as it should. She then insisted that Elizabeth’s gown be brought out, and when it had been, all their eyes widened in wonder.

Along the hem, waist, and cuffs of the sleeves had been sewn seed pearls and crystals that winked in the light. The embellishment was subtle, all things considered, but it made the gown even more beautiful.

Being practical, however, Elizabeth found herself asking, “But how much will this cost? Can we pay for it, or shall it go on display again?”

Mrs. Bennet immediately took up her reticule and counted all the money she had brought—and found that she was several shillings short of the total quoted by Madame le Blanc. Mrs. Gardiner, quite well aware of the importance of looking their best that evening, was kind enough to cover the difference. Elizabeth assured her she would repay the money when she could, but her aunt would hear nothing of it.

“My dearest Lizzy,” said she as the dress was being carefully laid in packing materials, “do not concern yourself with the money. It is but a trifle, I assure you. And I am more than happy to help you make a good impression on His Lordship’s family.”

Elizabeth had teared up and embraced her. “Thank you, Aunt. I am so very nervous to meet the rest of Lord Stashwick’s family.”

“You will do very well, child,” said Mrs. Bennet as she emerged again from the dressing room in her walking dress and handed her new gown to the modiste to be packaged. “Just remain calm as we enter the room.”

“And you, Mamma—you must remain calm also,” said Elizabeth. “I... Pray forgive me, but you must remember to speak at a rational volume. And these are members of the nobility, you must always let them take the lead in the conversation.”

Mrs. Bennet lifted an eyebrow. “Keep my voice down and speak only when spoken to—is that what you are saying, Lizzy?”

Shame and embarrassment flooded Elizabeth, and her cheeks bloomed with color. “Mamma, I do not mean to insult you, you must know that. But...” Her voice trailed off, as she could not think of how to say what was on her mind without possibly causing a scene.

Mrs. Bennet crossed her arms and huffed. “Never in my life did I think I would ever have to take orders from my own child,” she said. “I shall do as you suggest, if only to prove to you that I am as proper to be among those people as you are.”

“Now Jane,” said Mrs. Gardiner, “do not be cross with Elizabeth. You know more than anyone what is at stake tonight. If we do not make a good impression, Lizzy’s suitor might well change his mind and decide that—”

“I know very well what he will say of us, Marjorie!” snapped Mrs. Bennet, then she sighed. “Pray forgive me. I am as nervous as you are, Lizzy. Let us take these beautiful gowns home that they can be hung up properly to rid them of any wrinkles. And we should all of us have a lie-down, that we are very well rested for this evening.”

With a sigh and a smile, Elizabeth agreed that was a fine idea.



# Chapter Fourteen

**“So, Uncle...** Tonight’s the night, eh?”

Lord Stashwick drew a breath and glanced around at the gathered members of his family. “Aye,” he said in a low voice. “We wait only on your brother and Lady Rowarth to arrive.”

“And your lady, sir?” Fitzwilliam asked.

“She, her parents, and her aunt and uncle with whom she is to stay in town are to arrive just before dinner,” the marquess replied. “I asked the family to be here early so that there would be time for the news to sink in.”

Fitzwilliam snorted softly. “You mean time for Hetty to throw a fit and have done before the Bennets come.”

Stashwick fought the urge to smile. “Aye,” he said, just as the knocker sounded on the front door. “That too.”

Fitzwilliam’s elder brother Philip, the Viscount Rowarth, and his wife Sophia were ushered into the room a few moments later. Lord Rowarth led his lady up to where Lord Stashwick and Fitzwilliam stood by the window; they bowed and curtsied, respectively.

“Uncle Henry, how it gladdens me to see you looking so well, sir,” said Rowarth.

“Thank you, Philip,” Stashwick said. “And believe me, dear boy, I am quite glad to be well again.”

“You’ve a smashing new accessory, I see,” his nephew remarked.

Lord Stashwick lifted the cane in his right hand, a solid rod of dark-stained oak topped with a wide silver cap embedded with small cabochon sapphires. He had quickly tired of getting about with crutches and was glad when his



valet had found the old cane upon his removal to London the Friday before.

How he missed Elizabeth. He'd remained at Longbourn with her family for three weeks after the second visit by the surgeon from Hatfield, the last of which he had so thoroughly enjoyed, for he had—with the assistance of Mr. Hill and crutches—been able to go down the stairs and take walks with her in the garden. He had been formally introduced to Mrs. Bennet and her younger daughters as well and was amused by the lady's none-too-subtle hints that she wished him gone.

Stashwick pushed those thoughts aside and returned his attention to Rowarth. "This belonged to your grandfather," said he. "It had been stashed away in my dressing room when he took to his sickbed toward the end of his life, as I had no need of it. Until now—I am glad to be rid of the crutches, but still require a modicum of assistance, for my leg is still rather weak."

"I am sure you will soon regain your strength, my lord," said Lady Rowarth.

Stashwick smiled at his niece and said, "Thank you, Sophia. I do hope you are right."

Now that all the principal members of his family were collected, it was time he got the announcement over with. The marquess moved across the room to stand before the fireplace, turned around, and rapped his cane on the floor to draw their attention.

"My dear family," he began. "As you know, I spent most of the last two months in the home of a very good family in Hertfordshire, where I was tended through my convalescence with the utmost care by the housekeeper and butler, and the local apothecary. I was also daily visited by the second daughter of the house, who—as you may recall—was the first to find me on the side of the road."

Stashwick paused and cleared his throat as he looked around at his family. Fitzwilliam's amusement was barely contained; Adelaide, Edward, and his wife Lavinia looked

curious; the Disleys, Rowarths, and Winterbourne looked mildly confused. Henrietta wore, as she too often did, a frown.

“You know as well as I that when I lost my Henrietta, I was of the mind that I should never marry again, but—”

His daughter Henrietta shot to her feet. “Oh, Papa, no! No, do not say what I cannot bear to hear!” she cried.

Stashwick captured her gaze and held it. “But I must, Henrietta. I must be honest with you all and declare that I fell quite in love with the young lady.”

Gasps were uttered from the other four ladies in the room. Indignation came from Henrietta.

“No!” she nearly shouted. “Papa, you cannot be serious! She is nobody! She has no fortune, no connexions—not to mention she is rude and insolent—”

“And you are not, Hetty?” spoke up Fitzwilliam.

She glared at him. “Oh, do be quiet, you! This is all *your* fault—you could have put a stop to this nonsense before it got out of hand, and what did you do? Nothing!”

Winterbourne stood slowly. “Henrietta,” he said in a warning tone.

Stashwick’s gaze was drawn by Adelaide’s rising from her place beside her aunt; she moved toward him, her hands clasped together before her. “Are you really in love, Papa? What is her name?”

He smiled at her. “I am, my sweet girl. Her name is Elizabeth.”

“What do you know of her family, Henry?” asked Lord Disley.

“I know all I need to know, Richard.”

“Is she a good sort of girl?” asked his wife.

Stashwick nodded at his sister. “She is, Frances. Perhaps the most remarkable young woman I’ve met in years.”

Henrietta stepped closer. "Papa, be reasonable. This is... It is just an infatuation! You will get over it, I am sure."

The marquess shook his head. "No, Henrietta. What I feel for Miss Bennet is no infatuation that a sick man feels for the nurse who tends him—I do believe I am quite old enough to know the difference between infatuation and love."

"Then she has tricked you!" Henrietta protested. "She has surely used her country-bred arts and allurements to draw you in and away from your duty."

"What duty, Henrietta?" Stashwick asked. "I have been without your mother for near six years and a half. Should I have remained a widower all the rest of my life?"

"Henry," began Edward. "Are you certain this girl has not tricked you? Perhaps she and her father schemed to entrap you —"

"No!" Lord Stashwick said firmly with a rap of his cane on the floor. "That is enough, from both of you. I am quite old enough and quite intelligent enough to know what I am about. And having spent seven weeks in her company, I can say without a shred of doubt that Elizabeth Bennet is the most artless creature I have ever met with. I will have you know that she actually tried to dissuade me from my attachment to her, as she knew that her family's much lower rank would not be looked upon with favor. I told her that I did not care and that neither should she."

"Do you mean, then, to try again for an heir?" Edward asked.

"Oh, Papa! How could you so disrespect the memory of Mamma and my brothers in such a way?" Henrietta wailed.

"Henrietta!" cried Adelaide with alarm.

Stashwick rapped his cane several times, each succeeding tap harder and sharper than the one before it. "That. Is. Enough. I will hear no more talk of that sort from you, young lady. And you, brother, ought to know me much better than to suppose I marry again just for the *chance* of an heir. Elizabeth is the second of five daughters and may give me no son at all,

and if she does not, I will not care. I shall love her and our children as much as I love the children that already were given to me. Falling in love with another woman more than six years after the decease of my wife does not *in any way* disrespect the love and years we shared together. Nor would siring more children, be they boys or girls, disrespect those that died or those that live. God drew my heart to her, and I have heard His message.”

He paused and drew a breath, releasing it through his nose as he worked to rein in his growing ire. “Accept or not as you will that I mean to marry Elizabeth Bennet but do so on your own time and in your own house. In any house of mine, and wherever you should meet us in public, you *will* show her the respect that is due a marchioness. Am I understood?”

Silence immediately followed his demand, which Adelaide was the first to break. “I shall certainly respect your wishes, Papa. And if no one else is pleased by your marrying again, I will be, so long as Miss Bennet makes you happy and is kind to me.”

Lord Stashwick smiled at her and stepped closer, that he could stoop to kiss her brow. “Thank you, sweet Addy. She does make me very happy indeed, and I have no doubt of her being kind to you.”

Lady Disley rose and came toward them, her gaze upon his countenance searching. “You really *are* enamoured of this girl, aren’t you?” she asked softly.

He chuckled. “I am a besotted fool, Frances. And while I acknowledge that with a wife more than half my age, it is entirely likely that I shall sire more children, that is *not* my primary motivation for wishing to marry her. I came to realize sometime in the last twelvemonth that I do not wish to spend the rest of my life all alone, and then suddenly... there she was, bending over me and assuring me that she would help me.

“And speaking of my future bride, she and her parents, and her mother’s brother and lady, shall all of them be here to join us for dinner in under an hour,” Stashwick went on. He

shot a stern glare at his eldest daughter when she audibly groaned and rolled her eyes. “Be civil to them, Henrietta—and if you find that you can think of nothing civil to say, do not speak at all.”

Henrietta looked aghast at her father as though she could not believe what she had heard. Fitzwilliam once again grinned in amusement.

“Oh, I should be glad to know Miss Bennet before she is my stepmother,” said Adelaide. “How old is she, Papa? You said she was more than half your age. Oh, forgive me—that was an inappropriate question.”

“It’s quite all right, sweetling, I do not mind answering. Elizabeth is twenty years old,” he replied. “Her elder sister Jane, who recently married Mr. Charles Bingley—the young gentleman who also helped me that terrible day—is two-and-twenty. Her three younger sisters—Mary, Catherine, and Lydia—are nineteen, seventeen, and fifteen.”

“When do you intend to marry, my lord?” asked Lavinia.

He looked to his sister by marriage. “I have not yet formally asked for her hand; I wait only for Mr. and Mrs. Bingley to return from their wedding tour next week, as Elizabeth would wish her sister to be with us on the day.”

“Then you have applied for a special license, Uncle?” asked Lord Rowarth.

“No, Philip. Though I have little doubt I could persuade the Archbishop of Canterbury to oblige me, I intend to purchase a common license.”

Henrietta had crossed her arms and was shaking her head. “No. No, Papa, I cannot accept this. It cannot and shall be borne that I should submit to the likes of an ill-bred, vulgar country upstart who is a full year younger than myself!”

“Then you are free to leave Stashwick House, Henrietta,” said Stashwick in a grave tone.

His daughter drew a sharp breath, her eyes wide with astonishment. “You cannot seriously be dismissing your own daughter from the home of her youth!” she cried.

“I am,” her father replied. “I am truly sorry that my news displeases you, Henrietta. I’ve no doubt it will displease many, including those ladies in the *ton* who have been trying to catch my eye since the day after my year of mourning for your mother was done. But I shall tell you as I told Mr. Bennet: I am a marquess, and I can do as I like. You can either accept that I shall be marrying again within a fortnight and show my wife the respect and courtesy she is due, or you can refuse and hereafter be as a stranger to me.”

Lord Disley spoke up next. “Forgive me, Henry, but are you certain you wish to take such a drastic measure? Is your marriage to this girl worth the loss of a daughter of your blood?”

Stashwick turned to him. “I certainly do not wish a breach with my daughter, Richard. She does not have to love Elizabeth as a mother—I do not expect anything of the kind, given they are but a year apart in age. She does not even have to like her. I do, however, expect my daughter to respect my wife as she ought, and if she cannot, she is not welcome in my house. To be entirely candid, the same goes for each of you. I do not seek discord, but neither will I give up the best thing that has happened to me since the loss of Lady Stashwick and Edmund. She makes me happier than I have been in *years*. She makes me smile and she makes me laugh. I love her, and I will not give her up.”

“And I cannot stand by and watch as you make a fool of yourself,” snapped Henrietta. “Come, Winter, we are going.”

“I will gladly have our carriage called for you, Lady Winterbourne,” replied her husband coolly. “But I will not be returning home with you. Frankly, I’m rather ashamed of your conduct this evening. It is one thing to disagree with your father’s choice to remarry, even his choice of bride, but it is another entirely to so blatantly disrespect him as you have done. I will not be party to your childishness.”

“Uncle Edward, surely *you* do not condone this nonsense!” Henrietta cried.

Edward drew a breath. “Whether I condone your father’s decision or not is irrelevant, Henrietta. He is, as he told us, in a position to do just as he pleases, and I have not the power or authority to dissuade him even if I should wish to. I would, of course, rather he’d chosen a young lady of fortune and consequence, but I also recognize that your father’s choice of bride is his and his alone. The young lady is at least a gentleman’s daughter, and not some shopkeeper’s offspring.”

“Thank you, Edward—I think,” said Lord Stashwick.

Henrietta growled and stomped her foot. “I cannot believe my entire family is turning against me over this folly!”

“We are not against you, Hetty, merely your behavior,” said Lord Rowarth. “I intend to reserve judgment of the young lady until I have actually met her.”

“And I *have* met her,” said his brother. “Miss Bennet is all that is charming.”

“Then why don’t you marry her?!” snapped Henrietta.

Fitzwilliam shrugged nonchalantly. “She doesn’t want me.”

Henrietta scoffed. “Of course not! She would rather worm her way to a title she does not deserve, thereby lifting herself from obscurity and poverty to poison *good* society with her ill-bred manners and insolence.”

At this, Lord Stashwick scowled. “Lord Winterbourne, please escort your wife from the room and call for your carriage. I regret to say she is no longer welcome here.”

Winterbourne dipped his head in acknowledgement of the request, then took his wife by the arm. She tried to break free from his grasp, but it was firm, and she sputtered nonsensically as he marched her from the drawing room.

“Oh, Papa,” said Adelaide with a sniffle. “How dreadfully my sister treated you!”

“My sweetest girl, come here,” said the marquess, holding out an arm to his younger daughter. She stepped up to him and wrapped her arms about his waist.

“Do not cry, Addy,” he went on. “I am very sorry for the unpleasantness, but it was little more than I expected... though it does pain me that Henrietta cannot just be happy for me.”

“Well, *I* shall be happy for you, Papa,” Adelaide said as she stood back, then pulled a handkerchief from her reticule and dabbed at her eyes and nose. “I don’t care that Miss Bennet is young, I only care that she will make you happy. I shall be so very glad to see you smile more. You’ve been so very melancholy since Mamma and Edmund died—we all have.”

Stashwick bent and kissed her brow again, feeling relieved that at least one of his daughters was pleased by his decision to marry again. He noted the Disleys glancing at one another, then his sister said, “I feel as Philip does, Henry—I shall reserve judgment until I have seen Miss Bennet for myself.”

He inclined his head. “I do hope she pleases you, Frances, for she will have need of your guidance. Elizabeth is perfectly well-mannered, but she has not been much in society. I would very much appreciate your setting an example for her and helping her to navigate the often-treacherous social waters of London’s elite, until she has found her own way.”

“I am honoured you think me the correct person to advise her,” Lady Disley replied with a bow of her head.

“Might I be of assistance to Aunt Frances, Papa?” asked Adelaide.

Lord Stashwick smiled broadly at her hopeful enthusiasm, and wished very much that Henrietta could have followed her younger sister’s example.

“I should be delighted if you are,” he replied. “I think Miss Bennet will very much appreciate your willingness to know her better.”

“I know she will be my stepmother, Papa, but I rather think it will be more like having another sister, as we are so close in age,” Adelaide observed.



“I can assure you, cousin,” spoke up Fitzwilliam, “that Miss Bennet would not mind if you cannot think of her as a mother. When I realized that she would soon become my aunt, I found myself thinking it would be quite odd to think of her as such—as you said, because we are somewhat close in age. And do you know what she said to me?”

Adelaide shook her head, and Fitzwilliam grinned. “She said to me that I was not required to think of her as my aunt, if it troubled me, and that she would rather like to call me her friend. I daresay she will do the same for you.”

Winterbourne re-entered the room then and stepped up to his father-by-marriage and bowed. “My lady is on her way home, sir. Allow me to apologise for her abominable rudeness.”

Lord Stashwick sighed. “Do not make yourself uneasy, Arthur—as I have told the others, her reaction is little more than I expected. Pray, let us speak of it no more tonight. I wish to recover my equanimity before Miss Bennet and her relations arrive.”

It was but a quarter of an hour’s wait until the knocker rapped on the door. Lord Stashwick, who had taken a seat at his sister’s urging to rest his leg, leveraged himself to his feet and moved to stand before the fireplace. Adelaide came to stand on his left side, and he slipped his free arm about her shoulders.

Simmonds, the butler of Stashwick House, soon after slid the pocket doors of the drawing room open and announced the visitors.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, Miss Bennet, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, my lord,” said the dark-skinned man before he stepped aside to allow the guests to enter. Stashwick’s heart swelled as soon as his dear Elizabeth came into sight, and he smiled.



# Chapter Fifteen

**Elizabeth released** the breath she'd been holding and smiled as soon as her eyes found Henry.

He stood before the fireplace with a young lady at his side that appeared around Lydia's age, whom she suspected to be his daughter, Lady Adelaide. When the butler announced her family, he walked forward to greet them, leaning heavily on the cane in his right hand.

Henry greeted her parents and the Gardiners warmly, then looked at her with a sly grin. "My dear Miss Bennet, you've come at last. I began to think I should never see you."

Elizabeth returned his smile, recalling that he'd used that greeting before. "My lord, surely you must know that no young lady possessed of good sense would have the audacity to refuse an invitation to dine with a marquess."

He chuckled. "Very wisely spoken," he replied as he turned and offered her his left arm. "Come, I must introduce you to my family."

They stopped first before the girl, whom he referred to as "one of the four most important women in my life." Lady Adelaide, to Elizabeth's delight, smiled when she rose from her curtsy.

"I am so very pleased to meet you at last, my lady," said Elizabeth. "Your father has told me so much about you, I feel as if I know you already."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage, Miss Bennet," Lady Adelaide replied. "For Papa has just told all of us about you this last hour."

Elizabeth looked up at the marquess. "You waited until an hour before our arrival to tell your family about our courtship,

sir? When you have had a whole five days to break the news?”

Lord Stashwick sighed. “I have no excuse, my dear, save that I had no desire to be harangued for those five days about my choice to marry again.”

It was then that Elizabeth noted there were four women among his family members when there should have been five. Lady Winterbourne was conspicuously absent, and her husband looked mortified. She chose not to address the matter further, and when she had inclined her head in acknowledgement of Henry’s words, he smoothly went on to complete the introductions, acquainting her with Lord and Lady Disley, the latter of whom was his sister; Lord and Lady Rowarth, his elder nephew and his wife; and Lord Edward’s wife. Elizabeth and her relations would learn something new when he came to her: the wife of a marquess’s younger son was addressed by her husband’s Christian name, with the courtesy title of “Lady” before it; thus, she was called Lady Edward.

“Theodore, be a good lad, will you, and ring the bell? I should like to check on the readiness of our dinner,” Lord Stashwick said when done.

“Of course, Uncle,” said the colonel, before he crossed the room to give the embroidered bellpull a tug.

“Mr. Gardiner, you are familiar to me,” spoke up Lord Disley. “Where have we met?”

“My lord, do not you remember?” said his wife. “This is the man who made the new coach you commissioned last year. He presented it himself.”

“Then you are the Mr. Gardiner of Gardiner’s Custom Carriages?” asked Lord Disley.

Mr. Gardiner lifted his chin a fraction. “I am, my lord.”

Lord Disley’s eyebrows rose. “What a surprise to see you again, sir.”

“I do not doubt it, my lord,” replied Mr. Gardiner.

“My daughter will be residing with my brother Gardiner in Gracechurch Street for the next few weeks,” spoke up Mr. Bennet, “while she and Lord Stashwick court and determine whether they wish to proceed to the marriage state.”

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warm, and her hand on Stashwick’s arm tightened.

“Miss Bennet,” said Lady Adelaide, drawing her attention. “Are you musical at all?”

“I do sing, my lady, and play the pianoforte tolerably well,” Elizabeth replied. “But I confess that I do not practice either as I ought.”

“Would you care to come here and practice with me?” Adelaide proposed hopefully. “I should think it a fine way to get to know one another.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I am much obliged to you, Lady Adelaide. I should be delighted, if my aunt can spare one of her maids to attend me.”

“I think that can be arranged, Lizzy,” said Mrs. Gardiner.

“Madam, you are quite welcome to escort your niece yourself, as your schedule permits,” said Lord Stashwick.

Mrs. Gardiner appeared surprised by the invitation. “I am honoured, my lord,” said she with a bow of her head.

The attention of the party was drawn to the drawing room door when it slid open; Elizabeth felt her eyes widen in surprise for the second time that evening. When they had arrived, they were greeted at the door by a man of African heritage—the woman who entered now she believed to be of Indian origin, given her style of dress. Intrigued as to how her betrothed had come to employ the two foreigners, she made a mental note to ask him about it.

“Yes, my lord?” asked the woman.

“Hiral, is our dinner about finished?” Lord Stashwick said.

Hiral nodded. “About five minutes more, my lord.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Hiral.”

Hiral bowed and quickly departed. Lord Stashwick turned back to his guests and said, “We might as well begin making our way to the dining room, it will take us about that long to get there.”

As she still held onto his arm, Elizabeth was escorted by Lord Stashwick. Lord Winterbourne offered his arm to Lady Adelaide, the married men walked with their wives, and Colonel Fitzwilliam brought up the rear. When they were in the hall, Elizabeth broached the subject of the servants in a low voice.

“I am curious, my lord, how came you to have servants that are not of English blood?” she asked him.

“I do not wonder that you are curious, my dear,” he replied. “Simmonds was a slave owned by my late wife’s father—he ‘gifted’ him to her upon our marriage to serve as her personal footman. I don’t recall where his English name originates, but as he’s never asked to be called by another, I have never questioned it.”

“Is... is he still a slave, sir?”

“Oh, good heavens, no! I don’t believe in slavery, so took pains to free him years ago, well before the 1807 Slave Trade Act was passed,” Stashwick replied. “I offered to arrange his passage home even, but he said he doesn’t much remember his life in Africa as he’s been in England for so long and would rather stay if could find a position for him. He was always a good worker, and I never had any reason to reprimand him, so he was made a footman here at our London home. Four years ago, when my previous butler at Stashwick House expressed his wish to retire, I surprised Simmonds with a promotion to the position.”

“I am sure he was honored and grateful for the recognition,” said Elizabeth. “And Hiral?”

“Hiral is the housekeeper here. Her husband Kunal is my new coachman, given I sadly lost the last one. Their daughter Kiran is one of the upstairs maids. I took my family to India

on holiday shortly before Lady Stashwick fell ill, and the Bakshis served us so well there, and my lady was so pleased with Hiral, that I brought them back here to work for us.”

Stashwick glanced down at her then. “All my servants, both here and at the castle, are very well paid for their service to my family, Elizabeth. I daresay I pay them more than the average rate, but I see no wrong in it. Paying those who serve you well keeps them loyal as well as comfortable.”

“I do not disagree, my lord,” said Elizabeth. “Our servants at Longbourn are certainly paid as well as my father can afford, which I would imagine is but one reason they are so loyal.”

They came then to a dining parlour that was easily twice the size of the dining room at Longbourn. Elizabeth could not help gazing around with wide eyes at the size of the table or the immaculately carved sideboards, the mirrors and artwork on the walls.

The marquess turned as the others filed into the room behind them. “My dear Lady Disley, as we are one short, would you do me the honor of taking the hostess’s place? I do hate to have an uneven number seated to one side of the table.”

“Oh, brother, I was so hoping to be seated by Miss Bennet, that I may get to know her better,” replied Lady Disley.

Stashwick glanced between them. “Yes... You can hardly be of service to her if you do not know her. Lady Edward, would you be so kind?”

“Of course, my lord,” said she, and in a few moments, they were all seated. Elizabeth flushed as she was guided to the place at Henry’s right, which she knew was a place of honor usually reserved for the highest-ranked lady in the company. Was she not next to last among the ladies of the party?

Lady Disley leaned closer to her. “Do not look so astonished, Miss Bennet,” said she in a whisper. “Are you not soon to be a marchioness?”

Elizabeth fought to still the shaking of her hands by clasping them together; to settle the quickened pace of her heart with a slow draw of breath. “Forgive me, my lady,” she whispered back as Lord Stashwick picked up the silver bell by his wine glass and gave it a ring. “But His Lordship has not yet formally asked for my hand, and I am not used to being above anyone.”

“Is not your father a gentleman? Surely there are those in your home sphere whom you outrank?”

“Indeed, madam, but there are none there who have a title above that of Sir,” said Elizabeth.

“Miss Bennet, let me be frank: if you desire to be respected amongst the *ton*, you must learn two things above all,” said Lady Disley. “Keep your chin up, and do not allow your fear to show. There are among the first circles those who would prey upon you if you allow any weakness to show—be it true fear, or even just nerves. If you feel a sense of inferiority, pretend you do not. When you are my brother’s wife, you will be ranked above everyone at this table but him—and a good portion of the nobility besides.”

At that moment, the soup course was brought in. Two tureens were carried by footmen, and a maid walked with each to ladle the soup into the bowls before each diner. When everyone had been served, their heads bowed for Grace, and after a moment their host bid them to begin. Elizabeth looked about her as she lifted a spoonful of the still-steaming soup to her lips. Across from her sat Lady Adelaide, on whose left was Lady Rowarth, next to whom was Mrs. Gardiner. Mrs. Bennet had been seated on the other side of Lady Disley, and the gentlemen were likewise seated according to rank.

After a few spoonfuls of the delicious mushroom soup, Lord Stashwick asked her, “How do you like the result of my cook’s labors, Miss Bennet?”

She looked at him with a smile. “This first sampling of her skill is most enjoyable, my lord. Already I am in anticipation of the next course.”



“Miss Bennet, may I ask what composers you favor?” asked Lady Adelaide.

“I rather enjoy the music of Pachelbel, Handel, and Mozart, and have heard pieces by Beethoven and Bridgetower,” Elizabeth said. “And I once attended a concert in the company of my Aunt and Uncle Gardiner where I heard some wonderful music by English composers such as Stanley, Potter, and Macfarren.”

“You have heard a wide variety, then!” cried Lady Adelaide softly. “That is excellent—I may just have something by all of them, for I do love a wide variety myself. My music master often says that to enjoy only one or a very few composers is to invite the curse of inanity and boredom.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I think I like your music master already.”

“Mrs. Bennet,” said Lady Disley then, “do any of your other daughters play?”

“Indeed, my lady,” replied Mrs. Bennet cheerfully. “My dear Mary, who is next in age to Elizabeth, is perhaps the most accomplished young lady in Meryton. She plays and sings for hours every day!”

“When she has not her nose in a book of sermons,” said Mr. Bennet.

Elizabeth caught his gaze and gave him a pointed look and hoped that he understood this was neither the time nor the place for his usual sharp commentary about his wife and daughters. He chuckled once and nodded his head, and she relaxed the tight set of her shoulders.

“And are any of your younger daughters out, Mrs. Bennet?” continued Lady Disley.

“Indeed, my lady. All of them.”

Lady Disley sat back in her chair as though startled. “What? *All* of them? Is not your youngest but fifteen? Has your governess left you?”

Mrs. Bennet huffed. “My girls have never had a governess, madam,” she said in such a tone as told Elizabeth that she was feeling defensive.

Lady Disley’s gaze swung between Elizabeth’s parents with no small amount of astonishment. Elizabeth found herself feeling both mortified and defensive herself as the lady said, “What? Five daughters out all at once, brought up at home with no governess, and the youngest not yet sixteen? You must have been quite a slave to your daughters’ education, Mrs. Bennet.”

“Lady Disley,” said Elizabeth then, as she could tell by her expression that her mother was now offended, “my sisters and I have not suffered for want of a governess. We can all of us read, write, and do sums. Such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might.”

“Aye, no doubt; but that is what a governess will prevent, and if I had known your family sooner, Mrs. Bennet, I should have advised you most strenuously to engage one,” said Lady Disley. “I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it.”

She paused again and gestured to Lady Adelaide. “My dear niece is sixteen and still under the care of a very diligent lady called Mrs. Wilson. And my brother has not yet allowed her a debut.”

“Whyever not?” challenged Mrs. Bennet. “If a young lady is old enough to marry, she is old enough to be out. And I daresay that as the daughter of a marquess, she would have no want of admirers.”

Lord Stashwick smiled briefly at the blushing Adelaide, then turned his attention to Mrs. Bennet to say, “You may well be correct, ma’am—my daughter’s connexions would indeed draw the attention of many a fine gentleman or man of rank. But they would also draw the eye of many a libertine who desired her only for her fortune, and I will not subject my

daughter to their like until she is properly prepared to move about in society.”

“You see, madam,” spoke up Lady Rowarth, “those of rank and great wealth must take the utmost care of their children, that they are not taken advantage of by fortune hunters. Young ladies in society are more often coming out at seventeen or eighteen these days, depending on their parents’ determination of their readiness.”

“The advantage of such preparation, Mrs. Bennet,” said Lady Disley, “is not only to prepare our daughters to move about in society, but also to prepare them for their marriages. A young lady who is not properly educated and prepared through the diligence of a governess cannot hope to make a good match. You surely wish for your remaining daughters to marry well, do you not? And think of your dear Elizabeth—my brother will be under the scrutiny of the *ton* for his choice of her, which means your family will also be under scrutiny. Would you have her chances of success in society weakened by the knowledge that her sisters had not a proper education? If her reputation in our circle is tarnished, she can be of no help to her sisters in securing them a husband.”

The countess had said exactly what Mrs. Bennet needed to hear: an appeal to her determination to see all her daughters married very well. Indeed, she had—though somewhat less tactfully than Elizabeth herself might have done—broached the very subject of her sisters’ disposition that she had wanted to discuss.

Instead of an outburst of indignation at the none-too-subtle suggestion that her children were not good enough as they were, as her second daughter rather expected, Mrs. Bennet gasped and raised a hand to her lips, her expression fearful. Lady Disley staved off any conversation by the raising of her hand, as the servants were then coming to clear the soup bowls. They were only a moment after followed by another string of servants delivering the next course. When the whole of the table had been served and the servants had gone out of sight, Mrs. Bennet’s feelings burst forth upon her husband.

“Mr. Bennet, what shall we do?!” she cried. “We cannot allow Mary, Kitty, and Lydia to bring ridicule on their sister! However will Lizzy convince His Lordship to offer for her then? How will she help her sisters find proper husbands if society shuns her?”

“Mamma, I have a suggestion, if I may,” said Elizabeth with a carefully modulated tone. “Perhaps we might take Lady Disley’s advice and engage a governess for my sisters. Or we might send Kitty and Lydia to a school for young ladies.”

“I second that notion,” said Mr. Bennet. “I rather like the idea of their being true peace and quiet at Longbourn.”

“But what of Mary? She is nineteen—she is too old for school or a governess, is she not?” asked Mrs. Bennet.

“Not necessarily, Mrs. Bennet,” said the marquess. “She may be at an age at which most young ladies’ governesses leave them, but she can still benefit from the wisdom of such a lady. I propose that we do as my dear Elizabeth suggests—we send Miss Catherine and Miss Lydia to a school for young gentlewomen to help better prepare them for society and marriage, and Miss Mary might come and live with us for a time. Mrs. Wilson will not mind at all taking on another student.”

“But...” Here Mrs. Bennet looked again to her husband. “However would we pay the tuition for the girls’ school?”

“Do not distress yourself on that score, Mrs. Bennet,” Stashwick said. “I should be most pleased to be of assistance to my lady’s family. Would it make you happy, my dear, to do this great kindness for your sisters?”

Elizabeth felt a blush blooming in her cheeks to be addressed so sweetly before his relatives, and at first could only nod. Clearing her throat delicately, she said, “I should certainly like to be of whatever assistance to my sisters that I can be, my lord, but I should also not wish to take advantage of a possible connexion with you.”

“Possible?” he returned. “Do you still think, my love, that the connexion is only *possible*?”

*My love...* Had he really just called her that? Dared she hope it meant that he truly loved her?

Once again, it seemed that her dear Henry understood the direction of her thoughts, for he smiled and leaned toward her as he said in a low voice, “Yes, my dear Elizabeth, I do love you. And I would go on bended knee this very moment if I could, if the weakened state of my leg did not prevent such romanticism. Besides which, I daresay the dinner table is not the proper place to make an offer of marriage to a lady.”

A smile split across Elizabeth’s face and her heart raced so fast that it felt as though her chest might burst with joy. “My lord, this is your home—you may ask me to marry you wherever you like.”



# Chapter Sixteen

**“Will you**, then, my love? Pray say yes, that you will be my wife and make me the happiest of men.”

As he spoke, Lord Stashwick held out his hand to her. Elizabeth smiled and struggled to hold back the tears that now sprung up behind her eyes as she placed her own in it. “It would be my honour, sir, to marry you.”

Henry smiled broadly, his eyes shining with happiness, before he bent and pressed his lips to the back of her hand. He released it only long enough to take hold of his cane in order to stand, the movement drawing the attention of the others at the table. Reaching again to take Elizabeth’s hand, he cleared his throat and said, “My dear family and honored guests... Though I had not expected the conversation to take place so soon—and certainly not at the dinner table—I have nevertheless just asked Miss Elizabeth Bennet for her hand in marriage, and she has accepted me. Please stand for a moment, my dear.”

Recalling Lady Disley’s words about not allowing nervousness to show, Elizabeth drew a breath, lifted her chin, and after placing her napkin beside her plate, rose gracefully to her feet. “May I present to you all the future Marchioness of Stashwick, Countess of Greymoor, and Viscountess Rollington—Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Mrs. Bennet screeched almost softly, before promptly swooning and falling toward Lord Edward. Lord Stashwick’s brother turned just in time to put his hand out and prevent her falling out of her chair.

“Mamma!” cried Elizabeth, as she moved from her place and went to her mother’s side. She snatched up her mother’s reticule and reached into it for the vial of smelling salts that

she always carried with her. In but a few moments, Mrs. Bennet was roused to consciousness.

“Oh, Lizzy! My clever, clever girl!” she cried softly as her wits returned. “A marchioness! A countess! A viscountess! You are to be all of these! Oh, how rich and great you will be!”

Cringing inwardly at the vulgarity of her statement, Elizabeth—aware of the steady gazes of Lord Stashwick’s family—said, “Mamma, remember what I have told you. I do not marry him for riches or greatness, but for mutual respect and admiration. I marry him because I am certain he will be a good husband to me, for he is all that is charming and amiable.”

“I am pleased to hear you say such things, Miss Bennet,” said Lord Edward. “My brother’s position in society is a powerful one, and many a lady has tried to gain his attention to raise themselves further since the passing of his first wife. I admire your principles—it is a rare person indeed whose ambition lies only in gaining affection and admiration.”

Elizabeth stood slowly. “I can assure you, Lord Edward, that while I know His Lordship is a man of great wealth and consequence, those things are nothing without admiration and affection, for they can make one happy but for a short time. I know the value of a good income but place genuine attachment above even that.”

“My good lady, are you well?” Henry said then, directing his gaze to Mrs. Bennet.

“Oh, my lord, I am very, *very* well! My Lizzy is to be married to a marquess! I am all astonishment!” that lady replied.

“Shall we continue with dinner then?”

A chuckle went round the table as Elizabeth returned to her seat. Dinner continued without incident but with many congratulations, the first of which was uttered in a cheerful tone by Lady Adelaide. Speculation as to when the wedding would take place was bandied about, and almost entirely shut



down instantly by Mrs. Bennet's insistence that Elizabeth could not possibly marry without wedding clothes.

"Even more importantly—" began Lady Disley, only to be interrupted by Mrs. Bennet.

"More important?" she objected. "What could possibly be more important than her wedding clothes?"

"Her introduction into society, madam," replied Lady Disley with a supercilious lifting of her eyebrow. "Almack's would be best—there is a ball there each Wednesday."

Henry cleared his throat. "Throwing us into the deep end, aren't you, Frances?"

"Henry, you know as well as I that, given her family's circumstances, she *must* make the best impression on the *ton* that she can. Almack's is the place to do that—which you also know very well."

"Oh, how I wish that I could be there to see you shine, Miss Bennet!" said Lady Adelaide.

"Though I have with me dinner gowns and ball gowns fit for a private party in the country or a night at the theatre, I daresay I have not a gown fit for Almack's, my lady," said Elizabeth hesitantly.

"Then we must get you one," the lady replied. "I know just the place to take you to—and as I am a regular client there myself, I have no doubt that a gown can be ordered for next week."

"A week, my lady?" spoke up Lord Disley. "My dear, do not you think a week is too short a notice?"

Lady Disley gave a dismissive flit of her hand. "Not if she is paid well enough, and if my modiste wishes also to receive the commission for the wedding clothes of the future Marchioness of Stashwick, she will get it done on time."

Elizabeth, for a moment, thought to protest, to say that she was perfectly capable of choosing her own dressmaker to commission a ball gown and her wedding clothes. She decided against speaking up, however, understanding that given how

suddenly the news of Henry's relationship and upcoming marriage had been thrust upon his family, it would be in the best interests of peace to allow Lady Disley some latitude. Besides, she knew she would need every friend she could possibly get as she took her first steps into society and having the sister of her intended firmly on her side, guiding her even, would be seen as approving and accepting the connexion.

When the party separated after dinner, Mrs. Bennet wished to talk of nothing but wedding clothes. Lady Disley allowed her to ramble on for a few minutes before she broke in and said that she must discuss with Elizabeth the etiquette of her debut.

"Oh, can that not wait until tomorrow? Mr. Bennet and I are for home tomorrow morning, and I must be certain my daughter is aware of all that she will need for her marriage," Mrs. Bennet said.

Lady Disley lifted her eyebrow again. "And do you think a countess is not a proper advisor on that subject?"

Mrs. Bennet's gaze narrowed. "I do not doubt, madam, that you can advise her. But she is *my* daughter, and after tonight I'll not see her again until she is married—after which, the Lord only knows when I shall see her again. You will excuse me, but I believe a mother's rights take precedence over even a countess."

Rather than taking offense, as Elizabeth feared, Lady Disley merely nodded and turned to her daughter-in-law and Lady Edward. Releasing the breath she had held during her mother's speech, Elizabeth turned her attention to the back and forth between Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Gardiner about how many of this or that she should purchase.

Lady Adelaide, who sat next to Elizabeth on a sofa, leaned closer and said, "Thank you, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth looked over. "Whatever for, my lady?" she whispered back.

"For making my father happy again," said Adelaide. "We have all of us been so very unhappy since Mamma died, and it

has been so much worse since my dear brother Edmund fell from his horse and passed away. And though I was all astonishment when Papa spoke of being in love with a young lady, I noted a lightness in his countenance that I have not seen in... Well, it's been so long, I cannot even recall the last time. I only know that he has changed, and I do believe for the better—and *you* have done that.”

The short but clearly sincere speech moved Elizabeth to tears, and she pulled a handkerchief from her reticule to dab at her eyes. “That is extraordinarily kind of you to say, my lady,” she replied. “I cannot imagine what it is that I have done to attach your father to me—all I did was talk to him and read to him and play a few games to keep him entertained, as the poor man was confined to bed for near two months.”

“Oh, do you not see, Miss Bennet? That is all you *had* to do—you had only to be yourself!” cried Lady Adelaide softly. “You did not grow up in society as we have done, so you do not know how very *trying* it can be to be so very polite all the time. Not just as a common courtesy, but even to those with whom you are at variance—and my poor father is so often at variance with the other lords. He opposes slavery and is advocating for women to be allowed to not only inherit property—which is rare enough—but to purchase it as well, among other things. Yet, I imagine that he really did enjoy being only ‘Mr. Faulkner’ for those months he stayed with your family.”

“My lady, if I may,” Elizabeth began, “does the difference in our ages distress you?”

“It distressed my sister more than myself,” said Lady Adelaide with a sorrowful expression. “I am sure you have already concluded that she is not with us because she objected to Papa’s announcement. I will own that... that I do not think I shall ever be able to think of you as a mother, for there are but four years between us. I am hopeful that we might be something like sisters instead—that is, if that is all right with you.”

Elizabeth smiled and reached for her hand. “I should be delighted to think of you as a friend and sister, my lady.”

Lady Adelaide smiled brightly. “Then you must call me Adelaide—when it is only ourselves, or with your family. I am afraid my aunts and cousin will prefer formality, at least until you and Papa are married.”

Elizabeth glanced at her mother and aunt, who were still debating the number of gowns and petticoats she would need, then looked back to her companion. “When I am your father’s wife, is there a different protocol?”

Adelaide nodded. “Indeed, Miss Bennet.”

“Oh, just Elizabeth, please.”

Another smile formed, and then, “When you are the Marchioness of Stashwick, everyone whom you meet will call you ‘my lady,’ ‘Your Ladyship,’ or ‘Lady Stashwick.’ Even family will address you formally, though that may change over time if you become particularly close with anyone.”

Elizabeth grinned. “Like you?”

“Oh, I should indeed like us to be close,” said Adelaide. “My sister and I are not very close at all—I was closer with Edmund than I have ever been with Henrietta.”

“You must miss your brother very much,” Elizabeth observed softly.

Adelaide nodded. “I do. And Papa does. If you should give him a son, I daresay he will be extremely overprotective, as he has lost two of them. Did he ever tell you of my brothers?”

“He did, briefly. I understand that his firstborn son, Charles, died in infancy.”

“Yes. I never knew him, of course, nor did Edmund. But Mamma and Papa sometimes spoke of him as a very sweet, happy baby.”

“So,” said Elizabeth brightly, wishing to dispel the melancholy that had overtaken the other young woman’s features, “I shall be addressed formally by everyone but your father and you, and my own family. I suspect that means that I must remember to address others formally.”

Adelaide nodded. “Oh, quite so. Especially the patronesses of Almack’s, or any of the other ladies’ clubs my aunt might wish to introduce you to. Even if you decide you do not like them, you must pretend to and be civil in all your dealings with them.”

“I had surmised I might at some point be required to act a part,” said Elizabeth with a chuckle, “for I am well aware I shall not like everyone I meet, nor will they all like me. I am determined, however, to do my very best. I should not wish to give your father any reason to regret his choice of me.”

“Miss Ben—Elizabeth, may I say that I do hope you will come to love my father, as much as he so clearly adores you,” said Adelaide then. “He is a very good man, I like to think. He’s always been generous and kind to his children, to our servants, to the tenants at Stashwick Castle—oh! Did Papa tell you about the castle?”

Elizabeth laughed. “He did indeed, though as I recall he described it as a ‘drafty old stone building.’”

Adelaide echoed her laugh. “It is a joke he likes to say, though the halls and parlours can be drafty in the winter when the wind blows hard and the windows are not shut properly. If the fires are going, you don’t much feel the wind coming down the chimneys.”

“I look forward to seeing the place for myself, for I have never seen a castle,” Elizabeth confessed.

The gentlemen soon made their appearance in the drawing room, and it was then proposed by Lady Disley that both Adelaide and Elizabeth should exhibit for the party. The proposal was agreed upon and the double pocket doors that stood opposite those that led from the entry hall were opened to reveal a comfortable seating arrangement and the most beautiful instrument that Elizabeth had ever seen in the next room.

*Mary would adore this pianoforte*, she thought, and found herself looking forward to the day that she could bring her to London and show it to her.

It was not until she sat on the bench and prepared to play, with Lady Adelaide beside her to turn the pages, that Elizabeth began to lament her disinclination to practice. She would surely be judged more harshly than ever before by the family of her intended.

Her intended... She could not but smile when she thought those words. She was soon to marry—and not only would she be a wife, but she would be a marchioness! She would not only be rich, but she would be titled! By association, if her sisters did not too much protest the strictures that would soon be placed upon them, her entire family would be elevated far higher in society than any of them could ever have dreamed to reach.

*Take that, Mr. Darcy,* she thought wickedly, then began to play. *You too, Miss Bingley.*

The following day saw the early departure of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet from Gracechurch Street. There were many remarks on the side of the lady to her daughter about doing nothing to offend Lord Stashwick's relations, for "The marriage articles are not even drawn up, and he might well change his mind, and then where will we all be when your father is dead?"

Elizabeth assured her mother that she would do nothing to lead to a withdrawal of Henry's offer; indeed, she was certain he would not. After two performances each by herself and Lady Adelaide, and the party were served coffee, tea, cake, and biscuits in the drawing room, she had consented to taking a slow circuit about the room with Henry as the others conversed. He assured her in a low voice that he was most assuredly in love with her and looking forward to making her his wife.

"I cannot wait to show you about town, to take you to Berkshire and show you the castle—I feel as giddy as a schoolboy!" he had said.

Elizabeth then took the opportunity of expressing to him that she returned his love, that the separation of only five days

had been nigh endurable. Henry had brought her hand to his lips and pressed them to the back longer than was entirely proper, and with a twinkle in his eye had said that were they not in view of so many, he would kiss her properly. She had blushed wildly and wished as they started walking again that they had been alone, that she might learn what it was like to be kissed.

About an hour after her father's carriage had drawn away from the pavement before her uncle's house, another pulled up to it. It was a rather remarkable chaise-and-four, bearing a family crest on the navy-blue painted door.

"Oh, Lizzy," said her aunt, who had peeked out the window. "We are about to receive the greatest honour—at least until you are married."

"Whatever do you mean, Aunt?" asked Elizabeth as she put the sampler she'd been working on aside.

"Why, I do believe the Countess of Disley is coming to my door. A countess, calling here in Gracechurch Street!" cried Mrs. Gardiner as she flitted about the room straightening this or that and plumping the cushions on the chairs and sofa.

"Aunt do not distress yourself, please," Elizabeth admonished softly as the knocker was rapped against the door. "Your home is lovely, and you know it."

Mrs. Gardiner sighed and fought to collect herself, and seconds later, the housekeeper announced both the countess and Lady Adelaide. The former looked about her with a critical eye; Elizabeth suspected she looked to find some feature which she could disdain. It was an effort not to smirk when Lady Disley's expression subtly shifted to one of tempered approval.

"Good morning, Lady Disley, Lady Adelaide," said Mrs. Gardiner with a deep curtsy. "What an honour to receive you this morning."

Lady Disley dipped her head in acknowledgement. "Good morning to you, Mrs. Gardiner. Miss Bennet," said she.

Elizabeth curtsied. “Good morning. To what do we owe this honour, my lady?”

“Do not you remember, my dear? I am to take you to my personal dressmaker to have a gown commissioned for Almack’s. Afterward, we shall call on Lady Cowper, for you must be approved by one of the patronesses before Henry can escort you there, even if he is a marquess—contrary to my brother’s belief, there are some areas in which he *cannot* do as he likes. The patronesses of Almack’s are exceedingly selective in whom they admit, but I do not see any hindrance to your acceptance—especially when we share that you are to be my brother’s wife.”

Elizabeth lifted an eyebrow. “And have we His Lordship’s leave to begin sharing that news about town?”

“My dear girl, we need not his express permission to talk of the engagement,” said Lady Disley dismissively. “It is your betrothal as much as his, and surely you must want to tell all and sundry that you are soon to marry so extraordinarily well. He says you intend to wait until your elder sister returns from her wedding trip?”

“I do, yes,” Elizabeth replied. “I could not possibly marry without Jane to stand up with me as I did for her.”

“Miss Bennet, when shall your sister Mary join you here in town?” ventured Lady Adelaide. “I hope you do not wait until after the wedding, for I am so looking forward to meeting her, and Mrs. Wilson was very much intrigued when I told her this morning that the sister of my father’s intended would be soon joining me in my classes with her.”

“My father will send her to us tomorrow,” Elizabeth replied.

Adelaide smile. “Then perhaps both of you might come to Stashwick House on Saturday? We can all of us practice together and have a luncheon after.”

“That sounds delightful! I am sure both Mary and I would enjoy spending the morning with you. Thank you, my lady,” Elizabeth replied.



“Come now, ladies,” said Lady Disley. “While we are at Madame le Blanc’s, we can look at some fashion plates and begin selecting your wedding clothes, Miss Bennet.”

“Madame le Blanc? Why, that is where we purchased the gowns we wore last evening,” said Mrs. Gardiner. “She is an exceptional dressmaker, my lady.”

Lady Disley nodded approvingly. “I am pleased that you know her work, Mrs. Gardiner. And at risk of offending, I am also pleased you can afford her, for she is one of the premiere modistes in Bond Street and her prices reflect the quality of her talent.”

“I have not thus far been able to commission a new gown, but I have bought a few of her ready-made dresses for evening wear and have had no complaints about the quality of the work, nor the kindness of the proprietress on making alterations,” said Mrs. Gardiner.

Elizabeth quickly collected her heavier outerwear, for Adelaide mentioned it had begun to snow lightly, and they were soon off to Bond Street. It occurred to her, suddenly, that she had not nearly enough money—though her father had given her ten pounds—to commission an entire wardrobe. She did not even know if she had enough funds to commission a ball gown suitable for Almack’s.

“Pray, Lady Disley, how am I to pay for my gown today? I daresay my pocket money shall not be enough for so grand a gown as I assume I will need.”

It was Lady Adelaide who answered her inquiry. “Oh, I had meant to tell you! Papa told me to be sure that whatever purchases you make are billed to his accounts. He bade me tell you that before you protest, I am to remind you that you will be his wife within a fortnight, and then he will be paying for your gowns anyway.”

Elizabeth could not but laugh. “Within a fortnight? His Lordship is quite eager to be a husband again.”

“Do you not agree with his desire, Miss Bennet?” asked Lady Disley. “I understand that you were to come to town for

courtship, but if you think on it, did my brother not essentially court you the whole of his convalescence?"

"I had not thought of it in that way, but I suppose it could be said that he did," she agreed. "And as we are agreed that we shall marry, I suppose there really is no point in waiting any longer than necessary. I surmise, then, that His Lordship intends to purchase a license?"

Lady Disley nodded, and the conversation between the three ladies was filled with talk of the type of gown Elizabeth should commission and the upcoming meeting with Lady Cowper.

That Madame le Blanc already had her measurements was a benefit to them, they learned soon after their arrival at the shop. The modiste was beyond excited on hearing that the rush order was for a debut at Almack's and assured them that she would, indeed, have it ready on time.

"I will do it myself," said she with a firm nod.

At that moment, the bell over the door rang, announcing the arrival of another customer. Elizabeth turned her head and caught the surprised gazes of Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley. They acknowledged each other with a cordial nod on one side and haughty nods on the other.

"And now, *Mademoiselle* Bennet," said Madame le Blanc, drawing her attention "er Ladyship says you wish to talk of wedding clothes? You said nothing ze other day about a wedding. Might I be so bold as to ask who ze fortunate gentleman is?"

Elizabeth's cheeks bloomed, knowing that Bingley's sisters were likely listening to the conversation. Lady Disley answered for her, saying, "Why, it is my brother, Madame. Miss Bennet is soon to be the next Marchioness of Stashwick."

Twin gasps issued from the sisters, and Elizabeth turned round just in time to watch as Caroline Bingley swooned.



# Chapter Seventeen

**For the** span of a heartbeat, Elizabeth meanly relished the thought of Caroline Bingley's being utterly and completely humiliated by having fallen to the floor in a shop, and before nobility no less!

In the next beat, she recalled that Miss Bingley's brother was now also her own, and he would not be much pleased by her doing absolutely nothing to assist her.

Elizabeth rushed over just as Louisa Hurst began to sink under the weight of her insensate sister. "Let me help you," said she as she took Miss Bingley's right arm in hand; Madame le Blanc was directing one of the shop girls who had been working on a display to fetch a chair, and they helped her into it as soon as it was brought.

"Have you any smelling salts?" Elizabeth asked Mrs. Hurst as she began to lightly pat Miss Bingley's cheek. Mrs. Hurst shook her head even as she began to say Caroline's name.

Elizabeth quickly reached into her reticule for the vial she always carried—she had learned to always have salts on hand due to her mother's nervous fits. Holding the salts under Miss Bingley's nose quickly brought her back to her senses, her eyes opening first to her sister.

"Oh, Louisa, it cannot—" she began before taking notice of Elizabeth, who was then putting her salts away again.

"It cannot be," Miss Bingley whispered.

"If you refer to the statement you heard upon entering, then I am afraid I must disappoint you, Miss Bingley," Elizabeth said carefully. "Because it is true. In less than a month, I shall marry and thereafter be known as the Marchioness of Stashwick."

“Good gracious!” cried Mrs. Hurst softly as she stood straight and pressed a hand to her heart. Her eyes flicked to where Lady Disley and Lady Adelaide stood, then back to Elizabeth. “How? How did this happen?”

“Lord Stashwick was our guest for a time at Longbourn,” Elizabeth said, not wishing to give them anymore information that was necessary. Surely, they would not expect her to be forthcoming after the way they had behaved at Netherfield, and certainly not after their attempt to separate her sister from Mr. Bingley.

“When was this? Surely not while we were at Netherfield,” cried Miss Bingley.

When Elizabeth did not answer, she pressed on. “You are really to marry a marquess?”

“I am. His Lordship only last night asked for my hand. And now that you are steady again, Miss Bingley, I must return to my party.”

As she turned away to return to her companions, it occurred to Elizabeth that she might have introduced Bingley’s sisters, but the latter could hardly have expected that, either. Just because she knew the sisters did not mean that her new relations would desire to know them, and besides, it was for Lady Disley and Lady Adelaide—who were the superior in consequence—to seek the acquaintance, if they should wish to.

“Do you know those two young ladies, Miss Bennet?” asked the countess in a low voice as she returned to the counter where Madame le Blanc had laid out fashion magazines and some of her own sketches.

“Yes, my lady,” Elizabeth replied. “They are the sisters of my new brother-in-law, Mr. Bingley, who assisted me in coming to His Lordship’s aid the day I met him.”

Lady Disley glanced briefly over her shoulder. “They are well-dressed,” said she dismissively, before she turned her attention once again to the dress designs before her. Elizabeth

bit back the laugh that bubbled up at her dismissal of Bingley's sisters and did the same.

Lady Disley's choice for her gown was one of Madame le Blanc's own designs, an exquisite frock that was trimmed at the neckline, sleeves, and scalloped hem in flowers and which had trails of a leaf-like design down the back of the skirt. When asked by the countess, Madame agreed that the design could be done in either embroidery or jewels—perhaps even both.

“I could fill in ze flowers and leaves with some jewels or colored glass beads, and trim them in matching embroidery thread,” said the modiste.

“Yes, I think that a perfect idea, Madame,” agreed Lady Disley.

“Oh, that would be extraordinary, Madame, but that is so much work!” said Elizabeth. “Surely you cannot have it all done in less than a week.”

Madame le Blanc studied the sketch again, then gave an affirming nod. “You are correct, *Mademoiselle*. I am sorry, my lady, but this cannot be done in only a week—two, yes, but not one.”

Lady Disley was clearly disappointed and drew a breath that she released slowly. “Very well,” said she. “We still want this one—what think you of it for your wedding, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth felt her eyes widen, but then she smiled as a picture of herself in the gown came into her head. “I think it will be perfect, my lady.”

The countess seemed pleased that she agreed with the idea, and they turned their purpose toward choosing a gown that could be completed in a week. Elizabeth chose another of Madame's sketches, this one a gold-toned chiffon with crisscrossing gold ribbon all over, golden embroidery along the hem, and a bronze-colored ribbon at the neck and waist. Elizabeth was dubious about the modiste's ability to complete

the gown on time, but she was adamant that she could meet the deadline.

“Oh, Miss Bennet, you will be stunning, I am sure!” cried Lady Adelaide. “Almack’s will never have seen the like.”

Elizabeth was hard-pressed to contain her amusement when one or the other of Bingley’s sisters cried out softly at the mention of Almack’s. She knew that they had not yet been, and that both coveted receiving an invitation from one of their rich acquaintances.

*I wonder if they know they must be interviewed by a patroness first?* she mused.

Lady Disley pressed Elizabeth to choose several more gowns for her trousseau “As a start” before they left the shop. When again in the carriage, Elizabeth asked her just how many gowns she was expected to order.

“For we have commissioned eight already!” she said with some amazement. “I do not think I have ever ordered so many at once—Jane had only ten new gowns before her marriage.”

“At risk of being indelicate, Miss Bennet, your sister married a *nouveau riche* gentleman, and you are to marry a marquess. You will be expected to dress in the latest fashions, to impress and inspire others with what you wear.”

It was an effort for Elizabeth not to roll her eyes at the ridiculousness of being judged by what she wore. Lady Disley lifted an eyebrow and she realized she had not been entirely successful.

“Think what you like of the foolishness of our own sex, but it is what we do—women judge other women based on looks and dress,” the countess told her. “The ladies of the circle in which you will soon be moving are the worst of the lot. Being that you were not born one of us, Miss Bennet, it is doubly important that you make a good first impression.”

Elizabeth thought of the gown she had dressed in that morning. “I do hope Lady Cowper approves,” she said, and though she *did* wish to make a good impression, that neither Lady Disley nor Lady Adelaide would carry back an

unfavorable report to Henry, she could not help thinking she looked just fine.

Lady Disley inclined her head. “You look quite well this morning, Miss Bennet. Had I not approved of the gown you are wearing or the style of your bonnet and pelisse, I would have advised you to change. Oh, do not be offended, my dear—I am simply trying to do as my brother asked of me.”

It was now Elizabeth’s turn to lift a curious eyebrow. “And what, pray, did he ask you to do?”

The countess glanced briefly at her niece, who sat beside her, then looked back and said, “Henry said you were perfectly well-mannered—and I own that so far, I have found no fault in your conduct—but that you would need guidance as you enter the upper echelons of society in which we move.”

Elizabeth now recalled a remark Henry had made the night before, saying how his sister could “hardly be of use” to her if they did not get to know one another. She loved that Henry was looking out for her, but it was rather irritating that he had not spoken directly to her about her “need” for guidance. She would have to have a word with him about that as soon as an opportunity presented itself, for she would not tolerate his making decisions for her without consulting her.

Drawing a calming breath, she replied, “It was very kind of His Lordship to ask for your assistance.”

Lady Disley studied her for a moment, then abruptly laughed. “And you are affronted that he did not consult you,” said she. “That is just like Henry—just like any man, really. I gather you are not the sort of girl who takes kindly to not being consulted when it is a matter in which you are directly involved.”

“Oh, please don’t be angry with Papa, Miss Bennet. I am sure he was only trying to do you a kindness,” said Lady Adelaide.

Elizabeth sighed softly. “I am not precisely angry—for I cannot say he is wrong. I *will* need some guidance, for a time, until I have got the idea of who the most important people are



and how to handle them. But I also do not care for his going round my back about it. He could have told me directly that he had asked your aunt for her help, and he did not—and in all the excitement of his formally asking for my hand, my conversation with you, and my mother's chatter about wedding clothes, I quite forgot him saying something as we first went into dinner about her being of use. I should like to have at least been reminded.”

The countess chuckled. “Henry has fallen back on old habits since Henrietta the elder passed away—he has forgot that some women do not like to be ordered about. Oh, there are certainly those who are perfectly content having their lives structured for them, being told what to do and who to see and when to go—and if that is what satisfies you, enjoy it, I say. But there are those of us what cannot bear to be dictated to—I am one of them, and I suspect you are as well, my dear. In some areas I know that I must give way to Lord Disley's will without question, much as I may chafe at the idea. You will need to do the same with my brother, Miss Bennet. But if what you desire is a partnership with your husband, then you must make it clear to him—with all due respect, of course—that you desire open communication.”

“And how will I know in which areas I am to give way to him without question?” Elizabeth asked, sincerely interested in knowing the answer.

“If you discuss the boundaries of your relationship openly and honestly, he will tell you,” Lady Disley replied. “Given the...circumstances under which you first became acquainted, I strongly suspect that Henry will insist on your having personal security.”

“You mean bodyguards?”

Her Ladyship nodded. “I am sure you are aware by now that this is not the first time Henry has been assaulted, and until such time as his investigators can track down the villains responsible, it may not be the last. Miss Bennet, I saw in my brother last night a liveliness I have not seen in an age, and while I cannot say that I was not surprised by his announcement...”

She paused and drew breath. “While I cannot say I was not greatly surprised, it was clear to me that my brother truly adores you. He looked at you as he has looked at no other since my dear sister died. I do not mean to compare you to her, only to demonstrate that you make him happy in a manner similar to how she did. And that is a *good* thing, a very good thing. A man with Henry’s intelligence and sensibilities should have a good woman by his side, and if that woman is you, then who am I to judge?”

The generosity of her sentiments was not lost on Elizabeth, who found herself reaching into her reticule for her handkerchief. “I am very much obliged to you for your kindness, my lady,” said she with a sniffle as she dabbed at her eyes. “Although I have done my best not to let anyone see, I have deeply feared that my family’s lack of fortune and connexions would make you all despise me, that you would think me not good enough for His Lordship, or that you would think me a desperate social climber. I assure you most strenuously that I am only marrying him because I love him. He is the first man to show me what a true gentleman is, and though he did not allow my situation in life to dissuade him, I knew that we could not say the same of his relations. We could not say the same of the rest of society. I know I will be judged, and I am fearful of saying or doing something that will make him look the fool.”

She wiped her nose and laughed mirthlessly. “Pray forgive my weakness, my ladies—this is not at all like me. Usually, my courage always rises at any attempt to intimidate me, and yet—since meeting Henry—I have found myself experiencing emotions entirely foreign to me.”

“I believe you, Miss Bennet,” said Lady Disley as the carriage began to slow. “I believe you love Henry and want to do your best to be deserving of his choice of you. Keep that in mind, my dear girl—always remember what an extraordinary blessing has been given you, and never forget where you come from. Society, when it gets about, certainly will not. If you behave as though you are not ashamed of your origins and connexions, then no denigrating remark can unsettle you.”

Elizabeth felt her indignation stir and looked up. “I am not ashamed,” she declared in a firm voice. “I am a gentleman’s daughter. What does it matter that both of my uncles work for their fortune? What can their situations have to do with anyone? If Henry does not vex himself about it, why should anyone care that one designs and builds carriages and the other drafts wills and marriage articles?”

Lady Disley grinned. “There—do you see, Addy? That’s just the spirit, I daresay, that captured your father’s heart.”

Beside her, Lady Adelaide giggled. “I can just imagine,” she said with a smile.

Elizabeth sighed, and silently chastised herself for becoming irritated. Lady Disley was only trying to help—and in truth, she appreciated her frankness.

The carriage came at last to a stop before an impressive stone façade bearing wrought iron fencing that separated the small garden from the pavement. There were flower boxes at the lower windows which were sadly bereft of blooms, as in winter they usually were.

Elizabeth was about to meet Lady Cowper, one of the most influential women in all of London. The nerves which she felt she had only just conquered returned, though on recalling Lady Disley’s counsel she found a measure of calm. She would *not* allow herself to be intimidated.

After the butler had admitted them, they were informed that his lady was still at her toilette. Lady Disley smiled at him and said she knew that Lady Cowper was not above receiving visitors in her dressing room, and would he please ask his mistress if she was willing. The butler nodded and gestured to a maid that stood nearby; the girl quickly went off up the stairs. When she returned, it was with the favourable reply that Lady Disley had fully expected.

The butler then guided them up the grand staircase and down a hall lined on both sides with artwork, both on canvas and of marble. There were paintings of scenery and portraits as well as busts and small statues on plinths and in alcoves. They were extraordinary, what Elizabeth saw of them, and

collectively, she suspected, cost more than the worth of Longbourn four times over.

Stopping at a door on the right side of the hall, the butler knocked before opening it, whereupon he announced his lady's visitors before stepping aside that they could enter.

Lady Cowper was at her dressing table, her hair being tended by her maid. Elizabeth was surprised to find that the lady, whom Lady Disley had said was a fellow countess, was not many years older than herself. How did one so young have so much influence?

The answer came immediately to mind—marriage—and reminded Elizabeth that she was herself on the cusp of outranking the lady who, in mere minutes, would make or break her debut in their shared society.

“Lady Disley!” said Lady Cowper cheerfully. “So good of you to call, though it is a little early in the day.”

“Pray forgive us for disturbing you, Lady Cowper,” replied Lady Disley genially.

Lady Cowper dismissed the comment with a flit of her hand. “Oh, think nothing of it—you shall entertain me while my maid finishes my hair. Excuse me for talking to you in this way, for if I turn, I am sure I shall be ruined. Do have a seat and be comfortable, all of you.”

The ladies moved to a settee that proved to be most comfortable, with deep cushions covered in velvet.

“Who is that with you and your dear niece, Lady Disley? Mullins gave her name as... Bennet? I don't know anyone called Bennet.”

Lady Disley smiled a calculating, knowing smile as she glanced briefly at Elizabeth, then back to Lady Cowper as she said, “And soon enough, you shall not even know her by that name, for Miss Bennet will soon resign it and take the name Faulkner. Of course, you will then better know her as the Marchioness of Stashwick.”

Her words had their desired effect: Lady Cowper turned around to look at her visitors with a wide-eyed gaze of

astonishment; the maid stepped back and stood off to the side, clearly trying not to look as interested as her mistress in the news. “*Marchioness?*” she cried softly. “Do you mean to say that Lord Stashwick intends to marry again?”

Without waiting for a reply, she held out a hand and said, “Do come here, Miss Bennet. I must have a look at you.”

Lady Disley inclined her head, and Elizabeth knew she had no choice but to go and be scrutinized. Suppressing a sigh and plastering on a smile, she rose and walked over to stand beside her hostess. The young countess looked her up and down with a discerning gaze.

“You *are* a pretty little thing, aren’t you?” she asked.

“That is for others to decide, my lady,” Elizabeth replied. “His Lordship calls me pretty often, but he may well be biased.”

Lady Cowper laughed. “Men usually are, my dear. Tell me, where are you from? How did you meet Lord Stashwick? Please, I must know everything!”

“I hail from Hertfordshire, my lady. My father’s estate is called Longbourn, and it was there that I met His Lordship, when he was a guest in our home,” Elizabeth explained, then smiled as she added, “He began to court me almost from the moment of our meeting, though I still have some difficulty in understanding precisely why. My family is not one of the great families and we haven’t connexions to any of them that one would expect a marquess to seek. However, Lord Stashwick himself has said that God drew him to me, so I have learned to accept that answer.”

Lady Cowper’s eyes widened again. “No connexions at all? Have you any fortune?”

Elizabeth felt her spine stiffen and her chin raise. “No, my lady. My father’s income is but two thousand a year and he has a wife and five daughters to support—four now, as my eldest sister is recently married. There has been, unfortunately, little means for supplying my sisters and me with dowries which would attract creditable matches.”

“And yet you have got yourself a marquess,” observed Lady Cowper.

“You must understand now, Lady Cowper,” put in Lady Disley, “why we are come. My brother is quite in love, and I have found Miss Bennet to be utterly delightful, but as she is not one of our circle or even of the wealthier gentry...”

Lady Cowper held up a hand. “Say no more, my lady, I perfectly understand you. You wish approval for Almack’s, yes?”

“Indeed. I thought it the most proper place for my brother to introduce his intended to society,” Lady Disley replied. “Many of the most important people will be there, I am sure.”

“Oh, certainly!” agreed Lady Cowper. “They will get to see how she walks, how she talks, how she dances. And I am afraid it will also very quickly get about that you’ve no fortune, my dear.”

Suppressing a snort, Elizabeth said, “I expect it will. And while I could wish for greater fortune, no amount of wishing will provide it.”

Lady Cowper lifted an eyebrow. “But your marriage will. Lord Stashwick commands a fortune of forty thousand a year if I recall. He has a fine house in town, and there’s that stunning castle in Berkshire... You’ll never want for anything again.”

“As I have never wanted for anything in my life thus far, my lady, my marriage will bring little change but to make acquiring what I want far easier,” Elizabeth retorted.

“You just said you could wish for more fortune.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I did, yes—but *wishing* and *wanting* are two different things.”

Lady Cowper burst out laughing. “Oh, you *are* a delightful creature!” said she. “Rather impertinent, but I like it! Lady Jersey may not be of the same mind as myself, but she’s difficult with everyone. But she can also be kind, so she may surprise me. Tell me, Lady Disley, do you intend to keep Miss Bennet to yourself until the next ball? Several ladies are

to come on Saturday for a luncheon and I should like for you both to join us—I would invite you as well, my dear Lady Adelaide, but you are not yet out, I understand, and on such occasions, we ladies do like to talk of things not meant for innocent ears.”

Elizabeth looked then to Adelaide, who appeared to be struggling to conceal her disappointment. She could not let it stand, and looking back to Lady Cowper, said,

“I am very much obliged to you for the honour of your invitation, madam, but I have a prior engagement. My sister Mary and I are to spend the morning and afternoon of Saturday with Lady Adelaide at Stashwick House. I should not like to disappoint either by withdrawing my acceptance of the prior invitation.”

“You could, but I admire your unwillingness to do so,” said Lady Cowper. “It shows that you have your priorities in order. A marquess’s lady must honor her obligations.”

“Every lady must honor her obligations,” amended Elizabeth.

Lady Cowper clapped her hands and laughed in a childlike fashion and once again declared her delightful. As Henry already had a voucher for the assembly rooms, the countess vowed that she would see tickets were sent that very day for the next week’s ball.

As they were walking to the door of her dressing room on their departure, Lady Cowper called out, “Are you free on Tuesday, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth and her companions paused; she glanced at Lady Disley, who gave a subtle nod of her head. Turning around, Elizabeth replied, “I have no prior engagement, save an appointment at the modiste for dress fittings.”

“Then you and Lady Disley must join me here for an afternoon tea,” said Lady Cowper. “I should very much like to get to know you better—bring your sister as well. After all, as you are to be a marchioness, the young lady must also acquaint herself with society. And you need not dread being

assaulted by a thousand questions, I shan't invite anyone else, save those you must already know—do find out, Lady Disley, if your daughter and Lady Edward might join us.”

“You are very kind, Lady Cowper,” said Lady Disley with a dip of her head. “As we are to be so intimate a party, might my niece also join us?”

“Lady Adelaide, if you have no engagements, you are more than welcome,” was the reply.

“I am honoured, my lady,” answered Adelaide.

“Excellent! We will be a very merry little party of ladies, and I must say that I am so very delighted to have the first intelligence of Lord Stashwick's engagement! Take care!”

The visitors curtsied and quit the room and were escorted by a waiting footman to the door. When they were in the carriage again and on the way to Gracechurch Street, Elizabeth ventured to say, “My lady, am I wrong in assuming there is some particular reason Lady Winterbourne was not included in Lady Cowper's invitation to tea?”

Aunt and niece, who again sat across from her, exchanged a look. “Henrietta and Lady Cowper do not get on well. They had a rather public row last year, and were it not for her father's influence, Hetty would have lost her membership to Almack's—which would have been a social disaster for her and would have reflected poorly on the entire family.”

“So, His Lordship choosing me for his second wife could really be a bad thing for all of you?” Elizabeth asked, feeling some measure of alarm.

Lady Disley laughed. “It could have been, yes. But there is a reason I wished to introduce you to Lady Cowper rather than one of the other patronesses—she is young and somewhat idealistic, and I suspected she would be more inclined to overlook your family's circumstances for the novelty of a marquess falling in love with—”

“A penniless country nobody?”

“To be frank, yes,” Lady Disley replied. “But you really must cease thinking of yourself in such terms. You are



Elizabeth Bennet, daughter of Thomas Bennet of Longbourn, soon to be Her Ladyship the Marchioness of Stashwick. Remembering your origins does not mean you should not also embrace your future, my dear. You have a most extraordinary one before you, full of endless possibilities.”

“Oh, indeed, Miss Bennet!” seconded Lady Adelaide. “Why, when you are married to my father, there is so much good you can do in the world! Papa is forever telling me I must remember to do good in the world when I am out in society.”

Elizabeth could not help but smile—it was so like Henry to say such a thing. And doing good for others was already very high on her list of priorities as soon as she had the power to do anything at all.



# Chapter Eighteen

**Elizabeth returned** to Gracechurch Street having been strenuously advised to look through any fashion magazines her aunt might possess.

“After all, today’s venture was just the start—you’ve at least two-and-thirty more gowns to order, not to mention all your underclothes, shoes, and accessories!” Lady Disley had reminded her.

Her head spun as she entered the house—she didn’t even own forty dresses now!

“Lizzy, you’re back!” her aunt greeted her when Elizabeth stepped into the drawing room. “And just in time—the morning post has just come, and you’ve a letter from Jane. Oh, and do you see that lovely bouquet there?”

Elizabeth’s eyes had been drawn to the stunning bouquet that now sat on the little table before the window. “They’re lovely!” she said as she approached to sniff their sweet fragrance.

“They’re for you, and I daresay we know who they are from,” said Mrs. Gardiner with a smile. “The card is there with Jane’s letter.”

Feeling a blush creeping into her cheeks, Elizabeth picked up the small envelope atop her sister’s letter; it bore her name and, having watched him write letters while he was confined, she recognized the hand instantly as Henry’s. The card inside had a short, but moving message written on it:

*Thinking of you, my beloved. H.F.*

She knew she was grinning like a fool when she placed the card back into the envelope and picked up Jane’s letter. Elizabeth moved to sit in a chair at the table and broke the seal with some little amount of trepidation, for Jane had been

completely in the dark about the true identity of their guest longer than anyone in the family. She had written to Jane on Saturday to tell her all and had been anxiously awaiting her reply.

*Harley House, Brighton*

*11 February, 9:30 a.m.*

*My dearest Lizzy,*

*I received your letter yesterday but have put off penning my reply until this moment as I had need of the time to overcome my astonishment.*

*That you and Charles and Papa have known for so many weeks that our guest was a lord—and told none of us! Well, I suppose that must be forgiven, as Charles confirmed your explanation as to why secrecy was so important. But a marquess, Lizzy! And he wishes to marry you, truly? I can scarce believe it. Oh, I hope you have not been taken in. I suppose you cannot have been, if Mr. Darcy and his cousin confirmed the gentleman's identity.*

*Do forgive me, my thoughts seem to run about heedlessly since reading your letter and Charles confessing his own prior knowledge. I am all astonishment that one of my sisters is to become a marchioness! I daresay Kitty and Lydia are quite envious of your extraordinary fortune. I find myself a little envious, for had I known that we housed a lord within Longbourn's walls, I might have tried to get to know him as you did.*

*That is, if my dearest Charles had not already captured my heart. Oh, Lizzy, how I cannot wait to see you that we can talk as we used to! I have so much to share with you—how much I enjoy being a wife how much a relief it is to have to worry less about money... And you absolutely must tell me everything about your beau! Oh, to think that within a few weeks you will be a marchioness! I do hope you will wait for*

*my husband and I before you marry. I should like to stand up with you as you did for me.*

*I mean to talk to Charles as soon as I have finished writing to ask that we might remove to London at once. I simply cannot wait to see you. I imagine we shall arrive on Friday in the afternoon or early evening.*

*Yours affectionately,*

*Jane Bingley*

Elizabeth was momentarily thrown by Jane's remarks about being envious, and what she'd have done had she known that Longbourn's guest was a lord. Surely, she had written in jest? Jane had never been envious—and that she would purposely put herself in the way of a man just because he was titled? It was inconceivable!

She then recalled how very Lydia-like Jane had behaved the day Lord Stashwick had been found by herself and Bingley. The low-cut gown, the coquettish manner—the almost intimate purr of her voice. Elizabeth found herself wondering if it was out of character, or an aspect of Jane's character that she had kept hidden.

Elizabeth laughed and shook her head for even entertaining such a thought and dismissed it immediately as folly. Jane could never be mercenary.

“Jane is well, I hope?” asked her aunt.

“Indeed. She has been so astonished to know the truth that she said she would convince Mr. Bingley to depart a little early. Jane says she expects them to arrive in London tomorrow,” Elizabeth replied.

“How wonderful!” cried Mrs. Gardiner. “She can join Mary and I in helping you choose your wedding clothes.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Speaking of those, I am under orders to ask if you have any of the latest fashion magazines about, that I might do just as you propose.”

“Your day with Lady Disley and Lady Adelaide went well, I expect?”

“I believe so,” said Elizabeth. “I have commissioned a gown for the ball at Almack’s on Wednesday next, a gown for my wedding, and six other gowns already. Can you believe, Aunt, that Lady Disley says I must order another *two-and-thirty* gowns?”

“I can, as it happens,” her aunt replied, much to Elizabeth’s astonishment. “My dear girl, I do not think you have quite processed how important a person you will be when you are married. As silly as it is, ladies—and some men—will judge our sex by what we wear. Not just the style, but also the quality of the fabric, and which modiste did the sewing. As a lady of the nobility, Lizzy, you will be held to an even higher standard, so you must set the example. Lady Disley is really the properest person to guide you, being a member of the *ton* herself from birth. She seems to have accepted your match with Lord Stashwick, but even were she to secretly disapprove of you, she would not dare to anger her brother or invite the censure of the *ton* on her family by leading you astray in your choice of gowns.”

Elizabeth began to nod her understanding, then said, “Lady Disley said she was optimistic that there would be little difficulty in convincing the *ton* to accept me, given Lady Cowper’s approval.”

Mrs. Gardiner smiled. “Quite so, Lizzy. Even I am aware that if one can secure the approbation of one of the patronesses of Almack’s, they have an advantage—and if your debut there goes off well, you are guaranteed to be a social sensation.”

Elizabeth scoffed. “I care not if I am a sensation, Aunt. I just want to stop the spread of negative remarks if I can. Henry has told me himself that he has no need of more connexions as he has plenty already. And given that there is genuine affection between us, why should it matter to anyone that I have not similar connexions or fortune?”

Her aunt sighed. “My dear, for your sake I wish that it did not. Unfortunately, rank and wealth do matter more than they

should. Just keep your chin up, your back straight, and a smile on your face. If you should hear any unkind remark or read it in the Society column in the papers, you must not allow yourself to be bothered. The best way to put an end to the remarks is by being the best version of yourself you can be and not allowing any distress you may feel to show.”

Mrs. Gardiner paused then and tilted her head. “I assume Lady Disley means to attend the ball on Wednesday next as well?”

“She has not indicated otherwise,” said Elizabeth. “After all, it was her idea that I should be introduced there, and I would imagine she would want to go and witness the result of her labors to dress and educate me. Why do you ask?”

“Lizzy, I could not allow you to attend without the benefit of a chaperone, no matter who your betrothed is,” said Mrs. Gardiner. “I am sure Lady Disley has considered that, however, and will attend to serve that duty, as she will know as well as I that propriety *must* be observed.”

“Oh, have near forgot!” Elizabeth cried then. “My engagement will soon be spread about the *ton*, but not only by Lady Cowper.”

“Oh?” said her aunt with a raised eyebrow. “How so?”

“Of all the shops they could have chosen to walk into, Mr. Bingley’s awful sisters came into Madame le Blanc’s as the ladies and I were looking at fashion plates and a few of Madame’s own designs—oh, wait until you see the gown I shall wear when I marry His Lordship! Madame designed it herself, and it is exquisite.”

Elizabeth went on to quickly describe the gowns she had chosen that morning, much to the delight of Mrs. Gardiner, before returning to her original subject.

“Madame had asked if she might be told who I was to marry,” she went on. “I had not even the chance to draw breath to answer when Lady Disley replied that I was soon to be the next Marchioness of Stashwick. And forgive me aunt, but when I turned around at the gasp of one or the other of

Bingley's sisters and saw that Caroline Bingley had fainted, I was almost giddy with delight to see her embarrass herself in front of the lofty society she so hopes to join. But then I recalled that her brother is also mine now and could not in good conscience laugh aloud or leave poor Mrs. Hurst to bear her weight alone. I helped stop Miss Bingley falling and sat her in a chair, revived her with salts, and when they asked the inevitable questions, I answered honestly."

"What did you tell them of Lord Stashwick's stay in your home? I thought he had not yet made any statement about it," asked her aunt.

"Only that he had recently been a guest in my father's house," replied Elizabeth. "I said the same thing when Lady Cowper asked how we met. You know, I had not expected her to be so young! She is not more than two years older than Jane, I am sure of it!"

"And when you are married, dear Lizzy, you will outrank her, which I am certain she is well aware of," observed Mrs. Gardiner. "Lady Cowper, from what little I have learned of her in the Society columns, is a very shrewd young lady. She not only has a great deal of influence in society, but she's intelligent enough to know that whatever your origins, it would serve her well not to offend you."

Elizabeth scoffed. "Let us hope that the rest of those hoity-toity ladies feel the same," she mused. "Or at least a small number of them. I mean, I am aware I shan't be liked by all of them, and that they shall not all please me. But I should like to make at least a few real friends among the *ton*. Should make my transforming into a 'leader of society' a little easier."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled. "My dear Lizzy, I do not doubt of your making friends—you are such a lively, amiable girl, and they shall not be able to resist you."

The ladies were at that moment startled by a knock at the front door. As neither were expecting callers, they waited with some curiosity to see who the visitor was. A few moments later, the housekeeper came into the drawing room carrying a letter.



Mrs. Gardiner thanked her as she took the note in hand and smiled as she read the address. "It is a note from your uncle," said she as she turned it over and broke the seal, then began to read aloud:

"My dearest wife, I hope you have ordered a good dinner this evening, as we shall be two extra. Please forgive me extending an unexpected invitation, but I daresay you and our niece shall not mind the Marquess of Stashwick and his daughter, Lady Adelaide, joining us at table. How did this come about, you wonder? Why, His Lordship came to me short time ago to commission a carriage for the exclusive use of his future bride. Pray, do not mention that part to Lizzy, I'm fairly certain it is meant to be a wedding present. Yours forever, Edward."

Mrs. Gardiner gasped and drew a hand to her lips, eliciting a giggle from Elizabeth. "Do not worry, Aunt," said the latter. "I shall not speak a word of it."

"'Tis not that, though I am sorry I have spoiled the secret," said her aunt. "It is that I shall be hosting a marquess in my home! He shall be sitting at my table!"

"So? In only a few weeks you will have a marchioness for a niece. Will you treat me any differently than you do now?"

"Certainly not, Lizzy," retorted Mrs. Gardiner. "But he is \_\_\_"

"But nothing, Aunt," Elizabeth interrupted her. "I can assure you, Henry would welcome being just one of the family. Pay him all the respect and deference he is due, of course, but do not feel you must go to extraordinary lengths to entertain him."

Mrs. Gardiner drew a couple of steadying breaths, then nodded. "Yes. You are right, Lizzy, I am sure. But I really must go and speak to Cook about dinner, to be sure we shall have enough for two more."

She stood then and went out of the room, and Elizabeth turned her attention once more to the beautiful bouquet of flowers on the table next to her. She realized that she felt no

nervousness at receiving His Lordship in her uncle's house—she had no need to. Her aunt and uncle were intelligent, well-spoken, and educated. Henry had got on with both of them very well the night before. Their home was immaculate and handsomely furnished. Her aunt truly had nothing of which to be nervous.

After Mrs. Gardiner had spoken to the cook, she and Elizabeth looked over the few magazines she had and made a list of the gowns Elizabeth liked. They also made up a list of the many accessories, hats, shoes, and other items which Mrs. Gardiner said a newly married lady would require. Elizabeth was flabbergasted by the length of the list and the projected cost of it all and felt rather bad that Jane had not got nearly as much.

*I shall just have to treat her—and Mary—to some new gowns once I am married,* she thought.

Some time after her uncle's return home from work was spent with the Gardiners' four children, and it was as Elizabeth was helping to take them all up to the nursery—where they would be fed their supper and put to bed by their nurse—that the knocker was once again rapped against the door. Elizabeth bid the nurse to continue up the stairs with the elder three children while she went to answer the door herself, carrying the youngest boy on her hip.

Great was her surprise and delight to find Lord Stashwick and Lady Adelaide on the other side of the threshold. "Henry! Adelaide! We were not expecting you for another half hour, at least. Do come in out of the cold at once, I see that it is snowing again."

Henry blinked and returned her smile, then gestured for his daughter to precede him into the house. "I hope your aunt and uncle will forgive us our early arrival," said he marquess as Elizabeth was closing the door. "I take full blame for it, my dear, for I was entirely too eager to see you again."

Elizabeth blushed at his words, and Mr. Gardiner was then entering the hall. "Lord Stashwick, Lady Adelaide! What a

pleasure and an honour it is to welcome you to my humble home.”

“You are most kind to receive us here, Mr. Gardiner,” Stashwick replied. “I apologise for our coming early, as I see Miss Bennet has not had a chance to dress for dinner.”

“I shan’t be long at my toilette, I assure you,” said Elizabeth. “If you will excuse me, I must get little Benjamin up to the nursery so that I may dress.”

After dipping into a curtsey, Elizabeth turned and went quickly up the stairs, where she was met on the landing by the nursemaid. After transferring her charge into the nurse’s care, she hurried to her room and rang for a servant, for she would need some assistance getting into her dinner gown. A maid was quick to answer, and in only a quarter of an hour, she was making her way downstairs again.

Henry stood and smiled as she stepped into the drawing room. “You look lovely, as always, my dear,” said he as he crossed the room to greet her.

Elizabeth placed her hand in his left when he held it out to her, smiling as he lifted her hand to touch his lips to her knuckles. “You are looking remarkably well yourself, my lord,” she replied.

“Now you are come down, Lizzy, I shall go and hurry your aunt along,” said Mr. Gardiner with a chuckle. He, of course, was already dressed for dinner—it was his habit to be dressed early.

When he had gone, Elizabeth and Henry sat next to one another on the sofa. The marquess glanced between her and his daughter, who sat in an adjacent chair. “Addy tells me you had a profitable morning,” said he. “She said Lady Cowper was delighted with you.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I believe she was. She was certainly pleased to be the first in your set to receive intelligence of our engagement. Although, I should tell you she is not the only one to learn of it.”

“Yes, Addy mentioned that Frances spoke of it to the modiste.”

“She did, yes,” agreed Elizabeth. “But while we were in the dress shop, I met with the sisters of my new brother, who came in as Her Ladyship was informing Madame le Blanc that you and I are to marry. Mr. Bingley’s younger sister was so stunned upon hearing the incredible news that she fainted, and I was required to assist Mrs. Hurst in bringing her around again. They asked if what they’d heard was true, and I said it was.”

Her betrothed lifted a shoulder. “If you are distressed over it, do not be. It was bound to get out that I have decided to marry again. In fact, my dear, I spent at least an hour at my club talking over the matter with some friends, before I met with my attorney to draft the marriage articles. You can be certain that all eyes will be on you upon our entrance at the ball on Wednesday.”

Elizabeth suppressed a groan. “I feared as much,” said she, then drew a breath and squared her shoulders. “But it is no matter. We knew that the *ton* would be surprised by your choosing to marry again, and that I should be scrutinized.”

Henry reached for her hand again. “My dear, I do not doubt it will be overwhelming for you, but I hope you will not be too much distressed. I should like you to enjoy the evening, though I shall not be able to dance but maybe one set with my leg in its present condition—and I take this opportunity to claim the first two dances.”



# Chapter Nineteen

**Elizabeth smiled.**

“I shall be glad to accept your offer, sir,” said she, “though I am sorry to hear you shall only dance once—and not just because I shall only be dancing one set the whole evening. I would wish you to enjoy the outing as well.”

“Oh, I shall enjoy it immensely, for I will be showing off my beautiful bride-to-be and making her the envy of every one of those ladies whose wish to ensnare me has been thwarted. However, you shall not dance only once the entire evening—I appreciate your sense of loyalty, my dear, but you will need to dance with a few other of the attendees or you risk offending the patronesses and everyone else whose good opinion we hope to gain.”

“Then I shan’t mind the duty, as I do enjoy dancing, though I must own that I dread the inevitable questions they will ask,” Elizabeth replied.

“Best to have done with it, my dear,” Henry said. “In fact, it will be to our advantage that you dance every set, if you are able. The more men you dance with, if they are willing to ask about you instead of talking only about themselves, the more they will be talking about you to their friends and relations throughout the ball and in the days following.”

“And I do not doubt they will have only good things to say, Miss Bennet, for you are all that is charming,” said Lady Adelaide.

Elizabeth laughed. “You only think so because you do not yet know me well, my lady. I have yet to display for you my acerbic wit and unladylike impertinence.”

“Well, those cannot be all that bad, as Papa has fallen in love with you,” Adelaide returned.

“True enough,” replied Elizabeth with a grin, “though another of my failings which even he has yet to observe is an unfortunate tendency to take offense when I or my family is slighted. I feel no shame in our situation, as I told your aunt this morning, but the reason I dread all the questions I shall be asked is because I fear any vexation they generate will lead to my tongue becoming sharper than is necessary. It is not so much what will be said, as I have some idea of that, but the manner in which they might say it that gives me concern.”

“My dear Lizzy,” said Mrs. Gardiner, as she had just then entered the drawing room with Mr. Gardiner. “I know it may be difficult for you, but you really must make every effort to disregard any unkind remarks or slights against your lack of connexions and fortune.”

“I fully intend to do my very best, Aunt,” said Elizabeth.

“We know that you will, Lizzy,” said Mr. Gardiner.

“Just you remember, my dear, that above every other woman I could have chosen, I chose *you*,” said Henry. “That means there is something very remarkable about you. Focus on that—on how happy we shall be together when we are married—and let any snobbery that you encounter fall away as smoothly as water off a duck’s back.”

Elizabeth smiled and, suddenly feeling a little bold, leaned over to touch her lips to his cheek. Henry’s eyes sparkled, and his lips were turned up in a wide smile when she sat back again.

Dinner that evening was splendid, and Elizabeth was relieved to feel much of her anxieties melting away. Henry was so very amiable and relaxed in the presence of her aunt and uncle that they soon seemed to forget that he was a marquess. After the meal, it was suggested they play cards for a game or two, but as they were an odd number, Elizabeth and Adelaide elected to split the duty of playing on Mrs. Gardiner’s spinet while the others played at cards for one game, then they would switch for the second.

Henry declared his intention to depart for home after coffee and tea were served. Elizabeth was reluctant to part

company so soon but resigned herself and prepared to say her farewells for the evening. As the father and daughter were putting on their outerwear, Mrs. Gardiner cleverly devised a means of giving the two lovers a moment of privacy in the hall, by asking Lady Adelaide to show her again the fingering of one of the songs she had played.

“My dearest Elizabeth, I am glad we have this moment to ourselves,” said Henry as he took her hands in his. “For there has been a thought on my mind all evening which I cannot but share with you, though I fear it will frighten you.”

“Frighten me?” Elizabeth returned. “My lord, we love each other, do we not? Nothing you say could frighten me.”

“I hope that remains true, my dear,” said he, then cleared his throat. “I have maintained from the start that I want to marry you because of my affection for you, and no other reason. However, when Addy and I arrived this evening, and you opened the door holding your youngest cousin, I... I could not help thinking how very natural you looked with a child in your arms. And I could also not stop myself hoping that I shall one day in to not-too-distant future see such a scene again, only the child you hold will be our own.”

Elizabeth gasped—when he’d spoke of frightening her, she’d not imagined he meant talking of children. That there was every chance they would have a child together she had already acknowledged, but that he desired the same after having sired four already and losing two sons...

The emotion rising beneath her breast was nearly overwhelming, and on impulse, Elizabeth stood on her toes and kissed him. Henry responded by wrapping his arms around her, pinning her hands to his chest and kissing her back *very* thoroughly.

Her head spun when at last he set her back on her feet—and just in time, for Mr. Gardiner then escorted Lady Adelaide and Mrs. Gardiner into the entry hall. Elizabeth felt her cheeks aflame with both mortification and pleasure. Henry had kissed her, *really* kissed her! It was so unexpected, and yet so wonderful! Her knees felt weak and there were sensations



coursing through her she had never known she could feel—and there was a part of her already in anticipation of the next chance they might have to kiss.

She went to bed that evening with a smile on her face and a very light and happy heart. She was in love with a man who adored her, who knew how to kiss, and who cared not a jot that she brought almost nothing to their union but herself. How in the world had she managed to receive such good fortune?

Following a light repast after waking the next morning, Mrs. Gardiner suggested they go back to Madame le Blanc's to finish ordering the new gowns for her trousseau. Elizabeth agreed it was best to do so, though gowns were not all they ordered. Her aunt took her to a number of other shops to purchase items or place other orders to complete the whole set, and they returned to Gracechurch Street to a somewhat late breakfast, the carriage loaded with packages. After they dined, Elizabeth spent an hour in her room organizing the handkerchiefs and cravats and other items they had bought. Oh, she had never imagined she would be expected to buy so much! Henry had assured her that she must buy whatever she liked, and to "...buy the very best, even if it will cost more, because you are worth every shilling."

Mr. Bennet's carriage arrived with Mary shortly after noon. She was welcomed with warm smiles and embraces from her aunt and sister.

"So, Mary," Elizabeth began after they had sat together in the drawing room. "Did Mamma and Papa tell you anything of our plans for you and my sisters?"

Mary nodded. "They did. I understand that I am come to town to take some instruction from the governess of Lord Stashwick's daughter."

"You will take lessons at the same time—Lady Adelaide says that Mrs. Wilson is looking forward to meeting you, and Lord Stashwick has said that he will speak to Lady Adelaide's music master about taking you on as well," said Elizabeth. "I... I hope you are not offended, Mary."

Her sister drew a breath. "I must own that I was, at first. I know that my skill is not as great as Mamma would have everyone think, but I do try hard to play well. And I know that I do not do well in large company, but again, I do try."

Mrs. Gardiner offered a kind smile. "We know you do, Mary. It must so hard to be the only one in the middle, with two pairs of sisters who are the best of friends on either side of you."

"It has not been easy, but I would never complain," said Mary. "God placed me in the middle of my sisters for a reason, I am sure."

She looked again to Elizabeth. "After some reflection on the reason for my journey hither, I was forced to admit that I *would* benefit from further instruction at music and in the social graces. So no, I am not offended, Lizzy. I must further confess that I should very much like to be more at ease at balls and parties."

Elizabeth reached for her sister's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Mary, I am sorry you were offended, but I am pleased you are now looking forward to proper instruction. Pray understand that for you, at least, the suggestion is not borne of embarrassment, but a genuine desire to see you improve. To see you not only perform and act better, but to feel better about yourself."

"I understand from Papa that I am to live with you and Lord Stashwick for a time after your marriage?" Mary asked.

"Yes, if it is not disagreeable to you," Elizabeth replied. "His Lordship and I talked of it some last night at dinner—he and Lady Adelaide dined with us here, much to my aunt's eternal delight—and he has proposed that after we are married, he and I will spend at least a fortnight alone together at Stashwick Castle before returning to London for the rest of the Season. You would stay with Aunt and Uncle Gardiner until our return, and then you would come to live at Stashwick House. When the Season is over, you would go into Berkshire with us."

"I am not to take part in the Season, am I?"

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, not at present. You shall certainly take dinner with us at home; go to concerts, plays, and the like, but Lady Disley has advised that we not bring you out until next year, though you are of an age for a debut. She thinks it best that we concentrate on establishing my place among the *ton* before I introduce my sisters to society. However, you are invited to spend the morning and afternoon at Stashwick House with Lady Adelaide and I tomorrow, and you are invited to tea with Lady Cowper on Tuesday.”

“Who are Lady Disley and Lady Cowper?” asked Mary.

Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner chuckled, and Elizabeth explained who the two countesses were. “But if I am not to be brought out, why should Lady Cowper wish to meet me?” asked Mary.

“She said that as I am to be a marchioness, as my sister it is best you begin to get used to society,” Elizabeth replied. “But the only ladies who will be there at this gathering besides ourselves and our hostess are Lord Stashwick’s female relations. They are all of them titled, but it will be a small party.”

“I suppose that will be all right,” Mary mused. “But I haven’t anything to wear that is suitable for a countess’s drawing room.”

“You need not be dressed as if going to dinner, Mary,” said Elizabeth with a laugh. “But if you are truly concerned, we can go through your wardrobe and pick out what’s best—or I can lend you a gown.”

“Now Mary,” spoke up Mrs. Gardiner, “do tell us how Kitty and Lydia responded to the news that they are to go to school. I cannot imagine that went very well.”

Mary’s countenance for a moment flashed amusement, but she quickly schooled her expression. “They were rather indignant about being taken away from their flirting and fun with the officers, as Papa said that while they were in school, they would no longer be out except when they are at home.”

“They should not be out at all, though as they have been so long amongst our neighbours in Meryton, it would be rather pointless to take that away from them,” Elizabeth observed.

“Mamma threatened to,” said Mary, her remark drawing the astonished gazes of her sister and aunt.

“*Mamma* did?” said Elizabeth.

“Your *mother* did?” said Mrs. Gardiner.

Mary nodded. “Indeed! She said that if they did not go to school and behave themselves, and do well, they would not be allowed out at all until their behavior changed. Mamma said she would not have their silliness and ignorance make her daughter the marchioness look bad, as then she could not support any of us in finding a husband.”

“Upon my word,” said Mrs. Gardiner. “I could not have imagined her capable of putting her foot down—do forgive me girls, but you know as well as I how foolishly indulgent your mother has been of those two, especially Lydia.”

“I only regret that the only reason Mamma has decided to take them to task is because she fears Henry will change his mind about me,” said Elizabeth. “If he changes his mind about me or the *ton* rejects me because they are ignorant, idle, and vain, then they shall never be married and will starve in the hedgerows when Papa is gone.”

She then recalled the conversation with her mother when Mrs. Bennet had come to her room the night she learned who their guest had been. With a sigh, she added, “For all her silliness and vulgar manners, however, I know that Mamma is truly concerned for our welfare should anything happen to Papa. She knows that Mr. Bingley could certainly have been of help to her and my sisters as Jane’s husband, but my newfound wealth and connexions will be of greater influence.”

“She’s not wrong, Lizzy,” observed Mrs. Gardiner.

“I know, Aunt,” returned Elizabeth with a nod.

After a few minutes’ more conversation, Elizabeth announced she wished to go and lie down for a while. When she arrived at her room, instead of taking to the bed, she sat

herself in the window seat and drew her legs to her chest, wrapping her arms around them and resting her head on her knees. A deep sigh escaped her just as there came a soft knock on the door.

Lifting her head, she called out, "Come in."

The door opened and Mary stepped hesitantly into the room. "Lizzy, are you well? You seem rather cast down for someone who is soon to marry a great man."

"I think that is precisely why, Mary, that I appear so," said Elizabeth. "I am..."

She tipped her head back against the window casing and sighed again. "Do you remember when Mr. Bingley first returned, and I said something about feeling we were on the verge of change?"

Mary crossed the room and sat next to her. "I do."

Elizabeth looked at her. "The change is happening now, and I am at the center of the storm," said she. "I have begun to feel the enormity of the expectations of my mother and society and ... and I am so overwhelmed, Mary! My behavior is timid and cautious—more like you or Jane than like myself."

Mary surprised her by smiling. "I used to secretly envy your impertinent nature, Lizzy," said she, "for you never seemed to let anything distress or vex you—except my younger sisters, and they would vex anyone. It is nice to know that you are, in fact, just as human as the rest of us."

She reached over and laid a hand atop one of Elizabeth's knees. "Lizzy, even the strongest are allowed to be weak, the bravest allowed to be timid, on occasion. You have such an indomitable spirit I would almost call it formidable—remember that when you are feeling nervous."

Leaning closer, Mary said, "And remember that of all the women Lord Stashwick could have fallen in love with, he fell in love with *you*. That means you have something all those other women do not, and if you have some aspect of character that is remarkable enough to draw the attention and affection of a great man such as the marquess, you are surely strong

enough to handle anyone and anything. You should embrace that, Lizzy. Take some small measure of pride in being chosen by such a man as he.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Henry has said that God drew him to me,” she said softly.

“I do not doubt it,” agreed Mary with a nod. “Our Heavenly Father would not have put you in each other’s path if He had not some greater purpose in mind. That means that God also believes that you can weather this storm of uncertainty, Lizzy. And knowing that God is on your side, you can have no reason to be afraid.”

Tilting her head, Elizabeth regarded her sister with a renewed sense of admiration. “Thank you, Mary. Truly, I appreciate your insight as I have never done before. And I am sorry I have not respected your opinions as I ought.”

“I own that I do have a tendency to sermonize,” Mary admitted. “But I think it due in part to what Aunt Gardiner said—that it is difficult to be all alone in the middle of my sisters, with no other sister to be close with. I try to share with others the lessons I read about simply in an effort to be noticed. Since I have not beauty to recommend me, I wish to be as clever as the rest of you but find I often do not know what to say or how to speak aloud the thoughts that are in my head.”

“Firstly, Mary, you are not so plain as certain others would have you think. If you would hear my opinion, I think if you did your hair in less severe a manner and wore some brighter colors once in a while, your prettiness would be better seen. As to your trouble with speaking, perhaps Mrs. Wilson will be able to help you there, as will spending time in the company of His Lordship’s daughter and other relations,” suggested Elizabeth.

“The ladies, perhaps, but I should think the men would intimidate me,” said Mary with a shudder.

“Well, Lord Winterbourne—Lord Stashwick’s son-in-law—we are not likely to see much of, as Henry and his eldest daughter are not on speaking terms after her behavior before our arrival at dinner on Wednesday evening,” said Elizabeth.

“I’ve no notion of how close my betrothed is with either his brother, his brother-in-law, or his elder nephew, but he’s on very good terms with his sister and her younger son, seems to be on good terms with his niece-by-marriage and his sister-in-law—and of course, he adores Lady Adelaide.”

“How old are Lord Stashwick’s daughters?” asked Mary.

“Lady Winterbourne is one-and-twenty, and Lady Adelaide is sixteen.”

“And you do not feel awkward being so close in age to your future stepdaughters?”

Elizabeth turned so she was facing into the room. “It was a little disconcerting, at first, but having spent time with Lady Adelaide, we agreed we shall think of each other more like sisters. It is comfortable for both of us.”

“I can agree it makes sense,” said Mary. “And really, what else can you do? Besides, is it not fairly common for a gentleman of Lord Stashwick’s age to marry a younger woman if he has no heir?”

“Indeed. Our age difference is not what the *ton* will focus on, I imagine,” said Elizabeth. “I am sure they will think he marries me to try again for an heir, but they will wonder ‘Why her? Why a girl unknown to any of us, unconnected to any of us, one who has no fortune at all?’”

“If only you could simply tell them all to mind their own concerns,” said Mary with a soft snort.

Elizabeth chuckled. “Oh, how much I would enjoy it if I could,” said she. “However, I cannot carry on here in town in the wild manner I was suffered to do at home.”

“Be civil, Lizzy, as you must,” said Mary. “But do not let your new circumstances change the essence of who you are.”

Elizabeth looked over at her. “You know, Mary, you are absolutely right. I thank you again for talking with me, for you have dragged me from the doldrums. Really, I cannot imagine what has come over me these last few days.”

“It is as you said—you’ve been overwhelmed as you’ve come to realize the many expectations and responsibilities that will be placed on you in your married life,” Mary observed. “We are all of us allowed to be overwhelmed once in a while, even you.”

“Well, I must hope that this uncharacteristic behavior subsides, and soon. I do not feel like myself,” Elizabeth replied. “And I do not like when I do not feel like me.”





# Chapter Twenty

**That evening**, just after dinner, a note arrived at Gracechurch Street from Mr. Bingley:

*Berkeley Street*

*14 February, 6:15 p.m.*

*Dear Miss Elizabeth...or rather, Miss Bennet,*

*We are arrived safely in London—I surprised my lovely wife with a house in Chelsea! It is a leased home, but I daresay if Jane loves it very much, I shall have to purchase it.*

*Speaking of my beloved, she had thought to come to you all straight away, but we only came into town while you would have been at table, and I thought it too uncivil to disturb your dinner. Miss Bennet, your sister cannot wait to get you alone that she may glean as much of the previously concealed information about our mutual friend as you are at leave to reveal. We are both of us astonished—not that anyone’s admiring you is astonishing, my dear new sister—that you are the object of that gentleman’s affections! But how could it not be so, when you are so very charming?*

*If you all are free tomorrow evening, do come and take dinner with us. We should be glad to see you!*

*Your new brother,*

*Charles Bingley*

A reply was immediately written and dispatched accepting the invitation, and Elizabeth shared a knowing smile

with Mary, for they would have even more to share after spending the day at Stashwick House on the morrow.

That visit went splendidly. Mary was at first intimidated by the elegance of Lord Stashwick's London home, but Lady Adelaide soon put her at ease. Each of the girls took turns playing and singing at the beautiful pianoforte—which Mary did very much admire—and each talked about their lives prior to making each other's acquaintance. Lady Adelaide also took the time to introduce Mary to her governess, and Mrs. Wilson spent several minutes speaking to her about her education, so that she could determine in which areas she might truly need any instruction.

"I would have you begin immediately, Miss Mary," said she. "Do come on Monday, if you are able."

Mary agreed at once, though Elizabeth reminded both her sister and the teacher that they were to go to an afternoon tea at Lady Cowper's on Tuesday.

"Oh, yes!" said Adelaide cheerfully. "I am so very happy to be included in the invitation. My aunt says it is not only an honor but will be instructive to me on hosting similar gatherings."

Elizabeth, with a smile, agreed that it would be an informative event for all.

She was both surprised and delighted when Henry joined them for their luncheon. He was reintroduced to Mary and tried to make her feel welcome and at ease.

"You will soon be my sister, Miss Mary, and if it is to your liking you shall live with us here and in Berkshire after Elizabeth and I are married," he told her.

Mary nodded. "My parents and sister have all of them spoken to me about the arrangement," said she. "And I was introduced to Mrs. Wilson a short time ago. I must admit that I am usually averse to change, but I know that further education will be beneficial to myself and my sister, especially once she is a marchioness."

“Exposure to society can only help you improve, so long as you have a proper guide,” said Henry. “My sister and yours will no doubt set you to rights—not to mention that you will be introduced to eligible gentlemen while you stay with us.”

Mary turned her gaze from him to Elizabeth and then back again. “Lizzy told me I shan’t be introduced into society until perhaps next year.”

Elizabeth nodded. “It was Lady Disley’s suggestion that we establish my place among the *ton* first, my lord.”

“Hm... I suppose Frances has the right of it there—she is rather more knowledgeable about that sort of thing, especially where other ladies are concerned,” the marquess agreed. “Still, it does not necessarily mean you won’t be introduced at all—when we attend the theater or a concert, for instance, we will inevitably meet with gentlemen of my acquaintance who have unwed brothers or sons in their party. And there is a harvest ball at Stashwick Castle every year in which we celebrate the bounty God gives us. You’ll certainly meet local young men there.”

“You are too kind, my lord,” Mary had replied with a blush.

“And speaking of eligible young men,” Henry continued, turning to Elizabeth with a grin. “I happen to know a fellow who has just gone over the first draft of the marriage settlements with his attorney and approved them. A copy is to be sent to the attorney of his lady’s father by express today.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “You have moved quickly, my lord,” said she.

Henry’s grin widened. “Indeed, I have, because now that I have been blessed in love again, my dear Elizabeth, I cannot wait to begin sharing my life with you. As soon as your father approves, I shall purchase a license and we can fix a date to make you the Marchioness of Stashwick.”

Warmth had filled her cheeks, but Elizabeth had smiled. “I look forward to it, but I must own that I rather more look

forward to being your wife, my love, than being a marchioness.”

“I don’t blame you at all. Sometimes I wish I could go back to being ‘Mr. Faulkner’ again, but I must remember that I was put in a position of power and influence for a reason. It has always been my aim to do some good with it.”

“That is something I have wished to discuss with you, sir,” said Elizabeth. “When I *am* a marchioness and have the same, or at least similar, power to do some good, I should like to know in what ways I might act.”

Henry smiled again. “I am glad to hear you want to be active, my dear. I would suggest you speak with Frances, Lavinia, and Sophia about how you can do good works here in town, and in Stashwick Parish it would be best to speak to the local ladies’ society. Tell me, what forms of charity are you most interested in? Have you any idea?”

Elizabeth glanced at Mary. “Well, the talk of sending my sisters to school reminded me that I believe every person, no matter their station in society, ought to be afforded the opportunity to learn. If nothing else, a person ought to be able to read and write and do basic sums. Young men might also be taught things like riding and driving a cart—the easier to apprentice them later to skilled tradesmen—and young ladies might also learn some of the basic household skills like needlework, washing, and cooking.”

“And they might also be further instructed in the teachings of God’s Word,” added Mary.

Henry chuckled, and smiled as he said, “I should not be astonished, my love, that you think as I do—that all young people should have a chance to learn basic life skills. Truth be told, I have been considering opening a school in the parish for the working class and farming families. The only trouble might be in finding teachers, for the pay would not be much for a few years until the school is well established.”

“Papa, could not we send letters to schools or place advertisements in the papers? Perhaps Mrs. Wilson will know

some ladies who might be willing to teach in a parish school,” suggested Lady Adelaide.

Her father nodded. “Yes... I might also speak to some of my fellow peers whose children are soon to be past the need of a governess or tutor, to see if those soon to be in need of work might be interested. And our rector at Stashwick Church would surely not mind coming in for an hour two or three times a week to give a lesson to the students. A fine idea we have indeed, my dear ladies. Elizabeth, my love, when we are removed to Berkshire for the summer, I think our first priority will be in locating a suitable location for this school.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Somewhere in or not too far from the main village, I should say.”

“I agree, my love. Anything besides education that interests you?”

“Yes. I like to ensure that everyone has enough to eat—it pains me to see anyone hungry,” Elizabeth told him. “Perhaps anyone with a surplus of food can donate it to the poorer families. We might have a room at the schoolhouse where it can be stored and distribute from there.”

“Oh, Miss Bennet, that sounds like a very fine idea!” said Lady Adelaide. “Our estate farm always produces so much in the way of eggs and apples and the like, our cook is forever baking and filling the storeroom!”

The party spoke a little more about the two projects before the Bennet sisters took their leave. Elizabeth was delighted when Henry stole a kiss as they waited for the carriage to be brought around. When he noticed her smile, he grinned and said, “So, you like to be kissed?”

“I do, my lord. Am I not supposed to?” Elizabeth retorted with an arch smile.

He laughed. “Quite the opposite—I am pleased that you do, for it bodes well for...”

Leaning closer, Henry continued in a whisper. “...for more intimate relations yet to come.”

He kissed her again, then stood back. “But I should not speak of such things to you before we are wed. It is highly improper.”

Elizabeth was for a moment too overcome by the highly improper image that had come into her head at his words to reply with more than a nod. Heat suffused her neck and cheeks, and she surely blushed a bright red. She was relieved when Simmonds stepped into the drawing room and announced the arrival of the Gardiners’ carriage.

They were in the entry hall, where two maids waited with hers and Mary’s outerwear, when Henry said, “By the by, Elizabeth, I have been meaning to ask you if you have a lady’s maid.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No—at least, not one that serves me alone. The upstairs maids at Longbourn served all my sisters and me, and at my uncle’s it is the same.”

“I’ll send one of the maids to your uncle’s in an hour or so to tend you,” said Henry.

“Oh, my lord, that is not necessary—” Elizabeth protested, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand.

“My love, you shall have a maid of your own when you are my wife,” Henry insisted. “I think it best the young lady begins learning her duties now. In fact, I may send two maids, as Miss Mary will require a maid also—and before *you* make any protest, Miss Mary, remember whose sister you will soon be. It would be expected for you to have your own maidservant, especially as you will be a member of my household.”

Mary, who had been about to protest, swallowed her words and dipped into a curtsy. “Thank you, my lord, for your generous gesture. I had not even a notion I should have my own maid.”

“I know just who we might make their maids, Papa,” said Lady Adelaide. “Both Kiran and Hannah have learned from St. Claire and served in her stead when she has been indisposed or ill.”

Henry smiled at his daughter. “Kiran and Hannah it shall be. You may inform them yourself, dearest, that they may pack their things.”

Adelaide nodded and curtsied, and after saying farewell to Elizabeth and Mary, she took herself away to carry out the task. Henry escorted Elizabeth and Mary to the carriage and handed them in, lifting Elizabeth’s hand to his lips before he released it.

When they were away from the pavement and heading in the direction of Gracechurch Street, Mary ventured, “I am quite honoured by Lord Stashwick’s asserting I should have my own maid.”

“As am I, Mary,” said Elizabeth. “And he was right—it would be expected for any member of his family to have their own man or maid. I just hope that there will be room enough for the two of them in my uncle’s house.”

“And whatever shall they do when they are not helping us to dress or undress?” Mary queried. “Have you ever wondered, Lizzy? I am rather ashamed to say I have not given much thought to what duties a lady’s maid performs.”

“I should expect they would be the same or similar duties to any other maid,” Elizabeth replied, “except a personal servant’s duties are more specific. As I understand it, she helps her mistress dress and undress, styles her hair, helps her bathe if requested, and tends to her clothes personally. They also run errands for their mistress and entertain her by reading to her—if they can read—as well as singing or playing music if they have either skill. I am sure the two young ladies Adelaide recommended will know what to do.”

When they arrived back home, Elizabeth immediately informed her aunt they were to expect two new additions to the household. Mrs. Gardiner confessed that she had been expecting Lord Stashwick would soon assign Elizabeth a maid, though she had not thought he would do the same for Mary.

“His Lordship’s logic does make a great deal of sense,” said she when they had explained his reasoning. “Though we



do not have beds for them here, unless you would be willing to share a room and allow your maids the other.”

Mary offered at once to give up her room. “That is, if it is agreeable to you, Lizzy. My room is the smaller of the two, and as we must have more possessions than the two maids—”

“Say no more, sister, I am in accord with your thinking,” Elizabeth said. “I do hope the girls will not mind having to share a bed—the sleeping arrangements are, after all, only temporary. When we are living with Lord Stashwick, they shall have their own rooms, I believe.”

When the two maids arrived, they were immediately shown to the room they would share, and as expected, neither expressed any complaint as to the arrangements. As lady’s maids, with new duties and an increase in station and pay, the two would traditionally be addressed henceforth by their surnames; Hannah had no issue with being called Carey. Kiran, who was to be Elizabeth’s maid, asked that she continue to call her by her given name.

“I know the tradition is to use family name, Miss Bennet, but even His Lordship calls my *mātā* and *pitaji* by their given names, and not always Mr. and Mrs. Bakshi. I will, of course, abide by your wishes.”

Elizabeth had smiled at the girl, who was not but a few years older than herself, and replied, “I do not mind being a little non-traditional. I think your name is very pretty and shall do as you wish. I’ll not be a tyrannical mistress, Kiran, you have my word on that.”

That evening, the sisters and their aunt and uncle made their way to the Bingleys’ new home in the Chelsea neighbourhood for dinner. Elizabeth was not in the least surprised—and no less disappointed—to find that Miss Bingley and the Hursts had also been invited.

“My dear Miss Eliza!” cooed Miss Bingley with the most insincere warmth that Elizabeth had ever heard as she came toward her, hands outstretched, after she had shared a tight embrace with Jane. She held her hands up as civility demanded and Caroline gripped them tightly.

“My dear Miss Eliza—” she began again, but here Elizabeth interrupted her.

“Miss Bennet,” she said. “As my elder sister is now married, it would be proper for you to address me as Miss Bennet.” *Not to mention we have never been on terms so intimate that I would grant you the privilege of shortening my name,* she added silently.

Miss Bingley exchanged a look with Mrs. Hurst. “You are correct, of course, but very soon, I expect, we shall address you in yet another way, shall we not?”

“Indeed—if we should meet in public, you would address me as ‘my lady,’ ‘Your Ladyship,’ or ‘Lady Stashwick,’” said Elizabeth with a pointed gaze that Miss Bingley seemed determined to ignore.

“But more importantly than all of those, *I* get to call you sister,” said Mr. Bingley with a wide grin as he stepped up to her, forcing Caroline to relinquish her hold on Elizabeth’s hands. After bending his head to kiss her cheek, he said again, “Welcome to our new London home.”

“We are delighted to be here, Mr. Bingley,” said Mr. Gardiner.

“You have chosen a very lovely house, Mr. Bingley,” said Mrs. Gardiner as she looked about the drawing room. Elizabeth had done the same and privately declared that ‘lovely’ was not precisely the word she would have chosen. The furniture was rather *outré* for her taste.

Bingley laughed. “You are being kind, Mrs. Gardiner. Feel free to say what you really feel—the house was already furnished when I signed the lease, though we thankfully have leave to redecorate as we like.”

“Jane will no doubt make it all right as rain soon enough, sir,” Elizabeth said.

“Dinner is in another quarter of an hour,” said Jane then. “Why do we not all sit down and make ourselves comfortable?”

Moving toward a sofa, Elizabeth was relieved when Jane and Mary beat Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst to the places on either side of her. However, she was not to be spared an inquisition, for Jane immediately grabbed her hand and said, “Now Lizzy, do tell me everything about him—Lord Stashwick, I mean. Oh, I cannot believe you were being courted right under my very nose and I knew nothing of it!”

“Sister, there is little more to tell you than what I wrote in my letter,” Elizabeth said. “I do not marry for any mercenary reason, I can assure you.”

“No one could ever expect such a sweet and amiable girl like you to be mercenary, Miss Bennet,” said Mr. Bingley. “I hope my friend Darcy did not intimate such nonsense! I’ll call him out if he did, for you are my sister now and I’ll not stand for you to be insulted.”

Elizabeth and her relations all laughed, and his sisters both twittered.

“Do not be silly, Charles!” cried Miss Bingley. “You would never call out dear Mr. Darcy.”

“I would indeed, Caroline, if the insult was great enough,” her brother retorted.

Chuckling again, Elizabeth said, “Do not distress yourself, Mr. Bingley, you shall not need to challenge your friend’s honour. No one has made such an accusation, save perhaps Lord Stashwick’s eldest daughter. She is unfortunately not pleased that her father is marrying again, let alone that his chosen bride is a girl near in age to herself. I said what I did about being mercenary because there is every chance I shall be accused of it by some members of society, and I wish my family above all to understand that I do not marry His Lordship for any reason other than that we are genuinely in love, as unbelievable as you may think it that he should attach himself to someone like me.”

“Oh, Lizzy, do not talk so!” cried Jane softly. “*Of course* he is genuinely attached to you—how could he not be, after you were so kind as to visit him every day to be sure he was entertained! I would surely have visited him as well had I not

been so preoccupied with planning my wedding to dearest Charles.”

“And I am sure he would have welcomed a visit, but do not make yourself uneasy that you did not,” Elizabeth replied, wishing Jane had not said so much before Bingley’s sisters. “My lord understands that you were much distracted by your marriage.”

“Did you hear that, Louisa? ‘My lord’ she calls him! How very sweet it is!” twittered Miss Bingley.

“Oh, indeed, Caroline!” Mrs. Hurst agreed with a simpering smile. “An endearment I am sure we will hear oft repeated.”

*Not if I can help it*, thought Elizabeth as Mr. Bingley admonished his sisters that referring to the marquess as ‘my lord’ was neither sweet nor an endearment—it was protocol.

“And you will do the same, if you should meet him,” he added.

“If?” countered Miss Bingley as she arched an eyebrow. “Why Charles, surely we shall make his acquaintance, for Miss Eliza—that is, Miss Bennet—is our sister.”

“You are only partially correct, madam,” said Elizabeth, her gaze penetrating and firm. “I am Mr. Bingley’s sister by writ of his marriage to Jane, but that does not make me yours. And my own marriage to Lord Stashwick does *not* guarantee you shall ever meet him. I am sorry, but I could not introduce you without his wishing make the acquaintance himself.”

A tense silence fell then, in which Miss Bingley returned her gaze with astonishment and what Elizabeth surmised was a small dose of outrage. *Upon my word!* Elizabeth thought. *The sheer hubris of the girl, to expect she would make the acquaintance of a marquess just because the sister of her brother’s wife was to marry him. What nerve!*

“Lizzy,” Jane said brightly, “have you yet started on your wedding clothes? No doubt Mamma wishes she were here to advise you, for you surely do not know the best warehouses!”

Elizabeth laughed as she turned her attention to her sister. "I have, actually. Mamma insisted it was my first priority when we were at dinner Wednesday last. Lady Disley, Lady Adelaide, and Aunt Gardiner have all of them helped me to select the ridiculous number of gowns I was told I must purchase. You know how little fashion really means to me, but I must own that I am beginning to look forward to having them, for they are so very pretty! I must take you with me to Madame le Blanc's sometime to see if she will show us the sketches she has made of the custom gowns I ordered."

"Custom gowns? Oh, how very fortunate you are, Lizzy!" cried Jane.

"I am very fortunate, Jane, and so very blessed," Elizabeth replied. "Believe it or not, I was nervous for a short while when I had met His Lordship's family, but I have been advised to embrace my new role in society, and I mean to."

"As well you should, Lizzy," offered Mr. Gardiner with a smile.

The housekeeper then stepped into the drawing room and announced dinner, adding a measure more relief to the atmosphere as the party moved towards the door. For the first course of the meal, Caroline Bingley stared daggers at Elizabeth, until what Elizabeth assumed as a kick or a pinch from Mrs. Hurst, who sat beside her, led to her softening her countenance. She then began to speak pleasantly, having apparently decided to return to obvious flattery in attempt to gain Elizabeth's favor.

Elizabeth chose this time to simply accept her compliments, but every time she spoke of their being related or hinted that she hoped for an introduction to Lord Stashwick and his family, Elizabeth would shut her down by politely changing the subject or ignoring the remark and giving her attention to one of the others at the table. Miss Bingley was very clearly frustrated by the time the sexes separated after the meal, and it was as they were leaving the dining room that she began to pray that the three gentlemen would not be long at their port.

She really did not know how much more of Caroline's false friendliness she could take.



# Chapter Twenty-One

**Dinner at Berkeley Street** was not the reunion with Jane that Elizabeth had hoped for.

Instead of talking with her sister about all the wonderful things she and Bingley had seen and done while in Brighton, she was fending off Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst's simpering solicitude and insincere flattery. It was clear to Elizabeth from the first moment of Caroline's greeting that all she and her sister cared about was what the connexion could mean for their own rise in society.

Jane's behavior also disturbed her greatly—she talked only of Elizabeth's future connexions, her wardrobe, the jewelry she might wear. Did she not know better, Elizabeth would have supposed her to be a new acquaintance entirely, for she did not act like the Jane she had grown up with. She was once again acting more like Lydia, or even Caroline Bingley.

She seemed almost...jealous. And that was not an emotion Jane had *ever* displayed.

Elizabeth was relieved when at last the party was over, and she, Mary, and the Gardiners were on the way home. Furthering her relief, little attempt was made to engage her in conversation, nor did Mary speak to her as their new maids helped them to ready for bed. When she climbed into the large four-poster, Elizabeth turned her back to her sister with a mind in turmoil, and Mary had long been asleep before she fell into a restless slumber herself.

The following day, at morning service, Elizabeth prayed for patience with Bingley's sisters and understanding with her own. Both prayers were tested when, shortly after returning to her uncle's house, Jane called on them and asked for a private audience. Confusion and curiosity were surely evident in her



expression when she agreed and led her sister up to hers and Mary's bedchamber.

The moment Jane had closed the door, she said, "Lizzy, how could you be so rude last evening?"

Elizabeth's eyes widened in astonishment. "Rude? Whatever do you mean, Jane?"

"For one thing, it was incredibly ill-mannered to speak to Caroline as you did, reminding her that she must call you Miss Bennet," Jane said. "And to say that you might never introduce her to Lord Stashwick—how could such a thing come into your head? Of course, you will introduce them! Caroline is family!"

Irritation flared and Elizabeth crossed her arms. "As I pointed out last night, Jane, Caroline is *your* family, she is *not* mine. You know perfectly well that I have never liked either her or Mrs. Hurst, for they are selfish, self-centered, mean-spirited, social-climbing snobs who thought themselves above their company when they were in Hertfordshire. They were only kind to you and solicited your company because they thought you the only girl in the neighbourhood worth being acquainted with—but look how fast they tried to drop that acquaintance once they had taken their leave. And have you forgotten that they conspired with Mr. Darcy to keep you and your husband apart? That they refused to attend your engagement dinner?"

"Caroline and Louisa explained everything before your arrival last night, Lizzy—they only interfered to spare their brother heartache, because they mistakenly thought me indifferent," said Jane. "And they did not attend the dinner because they had a prior engagement!"

"Oh, balderdash, Jane!" cried Elizabeth. "I do not know how you can be so obtuse—Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst did not want you to marry their brother because they wanted him to marry Miss Darcy. Miss Bingley had high hopes of *that* marriage inspiring Mr. Darcy to offer for *her*—and all because they are rich and related to nobility. They did not want a connexion with our family *at all*. They think us beneath them

because of our mother and sisters' improper behavior and our uncles' professions. We are not good enough for them even though they are only one generation from trade themselves."

"Lizzy, Charles' sisters and I have made our peace, and we are so looking forward to the future as a family. How can you dismiss them so casually?" Jane retorted. "Every time one of us tried to talk to you about your marriage, you changed the subject or ignored the question. That was abominably rude of you, and disrespectful to me and to Charles."

"I am sorry you feel that I was being rude and disrespectful—believe me, Jane, I *could* have behaved a great deal worse," Elizabeth said. "The reason I made every attempt to avoid the subject of my upcoming marriage is because I do not wish to give rise to any expectations that can have no hope of being furthered. The only reason Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were so solicitous of me last evening is because they want to be introduced to Lord Stashwick's family. They want to be able to claim a connexion to nobility, thereby raising themselves even further in society. I cannot even introduce them without His Lordship or his relations requesting an introduction, as you all well know that the person who is superior in station must be the first to seek it, and I will *not* suggest introducing them because I refuse to be party to their abuse of your relationship to me for the sole purpose of furthering themselves."

"Oh, Lizzy, that is utter nonsense!" Jane snapped. "Caroline and Louisa would do no such thing."

"Yes, Jane, they *would*," retorted Elizabeth angrily. "Mr. Bingley's sisters are kind to you now because they have no choice but to be, for they cannot escape the fact that you are their sister. They were never kind to me before—never sought my company or asked after my welfare—and I know they disparaged me at every opportunity when we stayed at Netherfield during your illness. But lo! Ill-mannered, plain, tolerable Elizabeth Bennet has miraculously found herself to be the object of a titled gentleman's affections, and suddenly they act as if we have been friends since childhood! I was

insulted by their impudence and am astonished that you cannot see through their hypocrisy!”

Jane snorted and mimicked Elizabeth’s posture. “You will not be kind to my husband’s sisters, but you will introduce Mary, of all people, into the marquess’s society? Mary, who preaches Fordyce’s *Sermons* as though she stood at a pulpit and spouts soliloquies that no one cares about? *She* is worthy to be noticed, but Caroline and Louisa are not?”

“Unlike Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, Mary actually *is* my sister,” said Elizabeth. “Lord Stashwick has invited her to live with us so she may further her education and accomplishments as a gentlewoman, that she might actually make a creditable match. He has pledged to send Kitty and Lydia to school so that they can also be taught the skills and accomplishments of a gentlewoman—not to mention the proper decorum and manners which our parents unfortunately failed to instill in them—so that they might have a better chance of making a good match than they do at present. They will none of them receive any assistance in finding a husband, in society, or have their acquaintance with Lord Stashwick and his family furthered if they make no effort to change. They must *earn* our help.”

“And what about me, Lizzy? Am I to suffer the same cruelty? Am I not worthy to be noticed?” Jane asked snidely.

It broke her heart into pieces to say the words, but Elizabeth could not but reply, “At the present, no. I have no idea what’s come over you, Jane, no notion of what has led to this almost complete alteration to your character. You’re not the sweet, compassionate, modest, and gentle Jane I’ve known all my life—the woman before me is an entirely different creature. This blindness as to the true characters of your new sisters, their blatant ambition and your own! I am stupefied as to where this all comes from, because it’s not you *at all*.”

“Then maybe you don’t know me as well as you think!” Jane shouted. “You have *no* idea what it’s like to hear, day in and day out, that your beauty is such as will save us all from starving in the hedgerows—that you *must* marry very well, or we shall all be destitute when your father is dead! You’ve no

idea the pressure I have been under my *entire life* to be perfect and sweet so as to attract a man, or how it feels to have the attention of one only to have our ignorant, ridiculous mother drive him away with her vulgar insinuations or because he doesn't have enough fortune to satisfy *her*. As if she will see any of my husband's money!

“And to think that if it had not been for Bingley coming back, I could have been visiting with Lord Stashwick as well and perhaps attached him to myself! It could be *me* about to become a marchioness, to soon be the mistress of so many fine gowns and jewels and carriages!”

Elizabeth's eyes burned with the effort to hold back tears of pain and anguish. Here was a person she had known all her life ... but never truly known. It broke her heart again to realize that Jane was not who she had thought her to be.

“I thought you loved Mr. Bingley,” she said softly. “You told me that you loved him.”

“I *do* love him, Elizabeth,” Jane snapped, “but that doesn't mean I cannot wish for more. To have missed the opportunity to marry someone even richer and with greater consequence... I do not know how you attached such a man, as impertinent and impudent as you can be.”

A tear escaped before Elizabeth could stop it. “Because I never pretended to be anyone other than who I am,” said she. “And you would never have received his attentions, for Henry would have seen what our entire acquaintance has failed to.”

Suddenly there was a knock at the door, followed by their aunt's voice. “Girls? Is everything all right?”

With an angry, indignant huff, Jane turned round and wrenched the door open. She brushed past Mrs. Gardiner without a word and noisily descended the stairs; the front door opened and slammed shut seconds later.

Mrs. Gardiner turned an astonished gaze to Elizabeth. “Lizzy?” was all she managed to say before her niece fell to her knees with wracking sobs. The startled lady rushed to her and knelt down, holding Elizabeth close as she cried.

Just as her wretchedness was subsiding, Mary appeared in the doorway with Henry behind her, and on his seeing Elizabeth, she had barely time enough to step out of his way as he rushed in and knelt down on Elizabeth's other side.

"My love, what's happened?" he asked as he touched a hand to her shoulder.

Mrs. Gardiner transferred the duty of holding Elizabeth to her betrothed and stood, quietly suggesting to Mary that the two be given some privacy—she even shut the door as she left.

Elizabeth began to cry again as she clung to Henry's strong arms, and through many tears managed to recount the row he had missed witnessing by mere minutes.

"Oh, my dearest love," he began softly when she had finished. "I am so very sorry. It pains me that this has happened when we are on the verge of such immeasurable happiness."

"I-I just don't understand," said Elizabeth with a hiccup. "How could we have missed it? I have been closer to Jane than I have been with anyone else in all my life, and never once did I suspect she was ambitious or mercenary!"

"Sometimes, my love, those closest to us hide the deepest secrets," said Henry. "The masks they wear are of the finest craftsmanship."

Elizabeth sniffled. "I do not know how I can go down to my aunt and uncle. I feel so thoroughly wretched, and I must look an absolute fright."

Henry chuckled and lifted a hand to her chin, tilting her head up with his finger until her weepy eyes were looking into his. "You could never look a fright to me, my dearest Elizabeth."

She sniffled again. "You are blinded by love, sir."

"And if I am? Would you truly wish me to say you look otherwise?"

"Perhaps not," Elizabeth replied. "How can I tell my family about Jane? The truth can only break their hearts as it

has mine.”

“I cannot advise you there, my love,” said Henry, “except to say that same heart must be your guide.”

Elizabeth sighed heavily and lowered her head. Henry tucked it under his chin and held her for some minutes longer in silence, before sighing himself and saying,

“As much as I relish holding you like this, my love, I daresay one or the both of us must make an appearance in your uncle’s drawing room soon.”

A mirthless chuckle escaped her. “Indeed, or my uncle will come running to defend my honour and force you to marry me.”

“What a delightful punishment that would be,” Henry replied as Elizabeth sat back on her feet. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and held it out to her; she took it, wiped her face and eyes, and blew her nose as delicately as she could.

With another sorrowful sigh, Elizabeth pushed to her feet. “How did you even get down on the floor? I thought your leg could not yet bear your weight well enough.”

“Necessity breeds determination, my love,” said Henry. “You needed me, I found a way to get down on the floor. As to how I shall get myself up again...”

The chagrin in his features teased a small smile onto Elizabeth’s face and she turned herself so that she could slip a hand under his right arm. “However shall you manage to dance with me at Almack’s if you cannot even get yourself up from the floor?”

“By the strength of my will alone, if needs must,” he replied as she pulled on his arm and he got the foot of his strong leg flat on the floor. It took them a few tries, but at last they managed to get him up on his feet. Henry stood gasping for a moment and looked at her sheepishly.

“Don’t tell anyone it knocked the breath from me just to get up, will you?” he said as she handed him his cane. “I’ve a formidable reputation to uphold, after all.”

“It’ll be our secret, dear Henry,” Elizabeth replied, and for a moment looked at him with concern. “You’re not in any pain, I hope? Your leg or your stomach? It can’t have been pleasant to strain those muscles just now.”

“My leg aches, and though where I was stabbed was indeed strained a little, my abdomen doesn’t hurt at present.”

“I should like you to take something for pain just in case. I will ask my aunt discreetly,” Elizabeth said.

“Do not put yourself to the trouble, my dear,” Henry protested.

“I will ask her,” said Elizabeth firmly, then she drew a deep breath. “Come, my lord. I shall need what strength you have left for this conversation.”

Henry nodded and gestured toward the door. Elizabeth slowly led the way downstairs, taking her time to accommodate his weakness, and found not only her own family but also Lady Adelaide awaiting them in the drawing room. It was then she recalled that the marquess and his daughter had been invited to join them for breakfast.

After she and Henry were seated beside one another on the sofa and he had slipped his arm around her shoulders, Elizabeth drew a breath and once more recounted the argument with Jane, and as she did so, struggled to keep in check the anger that was beginning to outweigh the heartache.

Astonished was not strong enough a word to describe the reactions of her aunt, uncle, or Mary. Adelaide looked at her with sadness and sympathy in her expression, as though she knew how she felt.

“I... I do not know what to say,” Mr. Gardiner murmured. “It does not sound like our Jane at all, yet I know Elizabeth would never invent such a story.”

“I cannot have her standing up for me now,” said Elizabeth. “I do not even know if I want her at my wedding.”

“Now Lizzy, do not make that decision right now—you are too emotional to think rationally,” cautioned Mrs. Gardiner.

“My aunt is right, Lizzy,” said Mary softly. “You should not make a choice now that you may later come to regret.”

Elizabeth, no longer trusting herself to speak without being churlish, dipped her head in acknowledgement before laying it on Henry’s shoulder. He turned his head and kissed the top of hers as he gave her shoulder a light squeeze. When Mrs. Gardiner suggested they go into breakfast, Elizabeth attended them into the dining parlour but found she could not bear the thought of putting anything in her stomach, and so excused herself after begging the pardon of her guests. When she returned to her room, Elizabeth asked Kiran to fetch some peppermint oil for her head, which was beginning to throb, and after having some of the mixture rubbed on her temples, she climbed into her bed to lay down, hoping for rest but fearing the pain and anger over her argument with Jane would prevent it.

Without even realizing she’d fallen asleep, Elizabeth later woke to find Mary sitting in the window seat, reading. On seeing that her sister was awake, the younger stood and crossed to the bed as the elder slowly raised herself into a sitting position.

“How long was I asleep?”

“About four hours.”

“Were Lord Stashwick and Lady Adelaide very angry that I abandoned them?” Elizabeth asked.

Mary shook her head. “Of course not, Lizzy,” she said. “They were sorry to see you go, of course, but were very sympathetic and understanding as to why you needed solitude.”

She cleared her throat. “Mr. Bingley called while you slept.”

Elizabeth groaned. “I suppose he came to have a go at me for upsetting his dearest angel,” she said bitterly.

“Not at all. He said that Jane had returned very upset and would not explain what happened, so he came to find it out,” Mary told her.



“And what was he told?”

“My uncle only said that you and Jane had a row. When Mr. Bingley asked if he knew what the argument was about, Mr. Gardiner said he did not feel it was his place to divulge the specifics of the disagreement, that it should come from you or Jane.”

“I appreciate my uncle’s discretion, but he might as well have explained,” said Elizabeth. “I can barely tolerate reliving it in my head—how can I explain it again? I’m so angry and hurt and utterly confused by her behavior! And what of our parents? Do we tell them that their precious angel is no angel at all?”

“My aunt asked the same question, and my uncle said he believed we should say nothing to Mamma and Papa,” Mary said. “Uncle said that now Jane has shown her true feelings once, it is only a matter of time before she will expose them again. Mamma and Papa will eventually see for themselves how she truly is.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I suppose you are right,” said she. “But what about Mr. Bingley? How can I tell him who Jane really is—*should* I even tell him?”

Mary was silent for a moment, appearing to consider the questions, then said, “Perhaps you ought not to reveal what Jane said of wishing she had been able to attach Lord Stashwick to herself. It is possible, Lizzy, that she does genuinely love Mr. Bingley.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, I cannot believe that. Mary, how can she be in love with her husband yet be envious of me for having gained Lord Stashwick’s affections? Why would she be wishing Mr. Bingley had never come back? None of you cared at all about Henry when you thought he was only a carriage driver.”

“I am ashamed enough of not having done my Christian duty, Lizzy,” said Mary. “And while it is true that none of us showed an interest, he did not ask to meet any of us, nor did you ask us if we should like to take a turn entertaining him.”

“I cannot speak for Lord Stashwick, except to speculate that he may have thought the fewer people he socialized with, the less chance of his secret getting out,” Elizabeth returned. “As for myself, I shouldn’t have had to ask you—you should each of you have volunteered. Of course, I do not truly expect Kitty or Lydia would have sat with him, as they are selfish and care only for their own pleasures. Jane was caught up with entertaining Mr. Bingley, Mamma with ensuring the whole neighbourhood knew Jane had got him at last and would be rich, but you... I’d have thought you would want to, as you so enjoy talking of books and scripture and music.”

“It was not because we believed him a carriage driver and thus beneath our notice—as Mamma once said—that I did not offer to entertain ‘Mr. Faulkner,’ Lizzy. Having reflected on the situation once or twice since meeting him, I believe I did not because I did not think even a carriage driver would be interested in what I have to say,” replied Mary.

“But why would you think that?”

“Because no one ever listens to me, Lizzy. They tolerate me, speak over me, or ignore me all together. Mamma only says I am the most accomplished girl in the county because she thinks it will make *her* look good.”

Elizabeth could not deny her sister’s assertions—it was regrettably true that Mary got the least amount of attention and respect in their family, and she knew she was as guilty as her parents and sisters in not giving her equal consideration.

“I am truly sorry for my part in not considering you as I ought,” said Elizabeth. “Allow me now to say that, of late, I have genuinely appreciated your understanding and your insight. You have been most helpful to me in sorting my own head out.”

Mary colored under the praise but offered a smile. “I thank you for that, Lizzy. Especially since you have so very much on your mind right now.”

Elizabeth groaned again. “Don’t I know it. I have the expectations of my mother, my future husband, his family, and the whole of so-called ‘good’ society to live up to. I already

have one possible enemy in Henry's eldest daughter, and I know there will be censure from some members of the *ton* no matter how charming I am. Then there's Mr. Bingley's wretched sisters and Jane's complete reversal of character to have to contend with. I feel as though I will have a continual headache for at least a year!"

"You are still angry about Jane, aren't you?" Mary asked.

"I am angry," Elizabeth confessed. "I am angry because she accused me of things I didn't do, angry that she would take their side over mine, and I am disappointed that she was fool enough to believe Caroline and Louisa's lies."

She paused and sighed. "And I am hurt because I have long believed myself a good judge of character, and in Jane's I was so thoroughly deceived."

"We all were, Lizzy," said Mary. "But Jane being sweet and modest cannot have all been false. Not always, I mean. There must be *some* good in her."

"Let us hope so, Mary. Let us hope so."



## Chapter Twenty-Two

**Elizabeth** passed the remainder of that Sunday in a melancholy mood.

When she awoke Monday morning, she felt little better, but was greatly cheered by a second present of flowers from Henry. The card read: *May these blossoms bring you some measure of comfort and happiness, my love. H.F.*

His sweetness in thinking of her, and his tender words, did help Elizabeth feel better, and she sat down to reply to some letters in brighter spirits. Mary left Gracechurch Street for her first day of lessons with Lady Adelaide at Stashwick House, and Elizabeth asked her to give Adelaide her warmest regards—and if she saw Henry, she was to express gratitude for his thoughtfulness on her behalf.

Her renewed equanimity was challenged when Mr. Bingley called about an hour after the flowers were delivered. Mrs. Gardiner took herself to the nursery to give Elizabeth some privacy. There was an awkward silence for some moments after they had sat down, then Mr. Bingley cleared his throat and asked if she was willing to tell him what she and Jane had argued about.

“For I asked her again this morning what the trouble was, and she would say nothing of it,” he said. “I do not understand it at all—the two of you are so very close and have not seen each other for a month. I should think you’d want to be together for hours and hours, talking over whatever it is ladies talk about when they’re alone.”

Elizabeth almost laughed at his last statement, then drew a breath and explained that Jane had accused her of being rude and unfair to his sisters, impudence in general, and disrespectful to herself and her husband. Taking Mary’s

advice, she said nothing of Jane's more mercenary declarations.

Bingley sat back in his chair and stared, his eyes wide with incredulity. "I... I can scarce believe it," said he after a full minute's passage. "I did not think you rude at all, and certainly not disrespectful—in fact, I was rather glad to have someone else reminding my sisters of the proper protocol for introductions, especially as regards nobility, as they sometimes act as though the rules no longer apply to them now we are in elevated society. And you were correct—my sisters now being Jane's does not make them yours. I admit that I had hoped we could be one big, happy family, but while I may never have acknowledged it, I do know that you and my sisters have never got on so well as they do with Jane. I must also own that I thought it rather presumptuous and arrogant of Caroline to believe she would become acquainted with His Lordship just because you were to marry him and she happens to know you, given you are not on friendly terms."

A little surprised—though certainly relieved—at Bingley's reply, Elizabeth thanked him for his candor. He did not stay long after and said as he was stepping out into the cold that he was sorry for the discord between her and Jane, and that he hoped it would be resolved soon. Elizabeth said she hoped the same, but refrained from adding that she did not think things between herself and Jane would ever be as they once were.

In truth, she feared that the bond between them had been irrevocably broken.

Tuesday came, and Elizabeth knew that thoughts of the damaged state of her relationship with Jane had to be put aside—she and Mary were to have tea with Lady Cowper that afternoon, and she needed to have her wits about her. First, however, she had another appointment to keep. Her aunt and Mary joined Elizabeth at her dress fitting at the modiste's, where they found that the gold dress for the ball was nearly complete and needed only a minor alteration—that was some relief to Elizabeth's overburdened thoughts. Once back at home, extra care was taken with her hair and dress, and even

Mary was nervous enough about the engagement to ask Elizabeth's opinion on what she would wear. They were just coming down from their room when Lady Disley's carriage drew up to the pavement outside. The countess and Lady Adelaide came in to kindly pay their respects to Mrs. Gardiner, then the four departed.

"Miss Bennet," said Lady Disley after some minutes, "are you well? You do not seem as bright and cheery as is your usual countenance."

*She's an observant one, isn't she?* Elizabeth thought. "Pray forgive me, Lady Disley—I shall try to govern myself better," she replied aloud.

Lady Disley frowned. "Did something happen of which I ought to be made aware?"

Suppressing a sigh, Elizabeth said, "I do not know that you *need* to be made aware, but out of respect for your assistance in my introduction to society, I shall be candid. My sister Jane and Mr. Bingley came into London on Friday evening, and we dined with them on Saturday. Both of his sisters and the elder's husband were also in attendance, and the sisters made plain their desire to become acquainted with Lord Stashwick and his relations—they clearly believed our now being related by marriage guaranteed an introduction would be forthcoming."

The countess arched an eyebrow. "These are the same sisters we encountered at Madame le Blanc's?"

Elizabeth nodded. "They are. I reminded them firmly that I could not introduce them to any of you without your first seeking the acquaintance, as your consequence is far greater than theirs. Then yesterday, my sister called at my uncle's, and we had a row about it, in which I learned something about *her* that I had never known. It has... It has been trying on my spirits."

She could not miss the curiosity that was evident in Lady Disley's expression, but the countess thankfully did not press for specifics, and merely said, "I am sorry to hear that you and Mrs. Bingley disagreed. I wonder if Henry will speak to Mr.

Bingley about it, for he mentioned when I called for Adelaide that he was to ‘see the young man who aided my dearest Elizabeth in saving my life’ today.”

Unable to help herself, Elizabeth smiled. “Henry has been incredibly supportive since this unfortunate affair took place. His love has been a great comfort to me.”

Lady Disley smiled and glanced at Adelaide, and the younger woman said, “Papa looked as though it pained him to see you hurting, Miss Bennet. That tells me—though I have never questioned his assertions—that he truly cares for you, and deeply so.”

“You are very kind to acknowledge our attachment, Lady Adelaide. I hope that others will also see it tomorrow night,” said Elizabeth. “Perhaps if our affection for each other is obvious, the rest of the *ton* will overlook my... less than *noble* origins.”

“I daresay many of them will,” conceded Lady Disley. “Many of the marriages in our set were arranged by parents rather than the choice of the pair involved, my own included.”

“Do you not love my uncle Richard?” asked Adelaide. “I have always assumed you did; you seem so fond of one another.”

The countess smiled. “And we are, dearest. Like your father and dear honored mother, our attachment grew over time, and now we have the deepest respect and affection for one another.”

She then looked back to Elizabeth. “Some of the ladies—and the men—will be rather envious of your obvious esteem for one another, especially those whose marriages are not entirely cordial. It is a rare and beautiful thing to witness genuine love between a man and a woman.”

Her expression then took on a more serious quality. “Tell me honestly, Miss Bennet... Are Mr. and Mrs. Bingley—and Mr. Bingley’s sisters—*worth* knowing?”

“Mr. Bingley, absolutely—he is as amiable and good-mannered as ever he was,” Elizabeth replied without



hesitation. “And until Sunday, I’d have said the same of my sister. I cannot give you an answer about Jane until I understand this change in her—or revelation if that’s what it truly is. As to Miss Bingley and the Hursts...”

She paused and glanced at Mary, then looked again at the countess with a sigh. “Lady Disley, I have never liked Mr. Bingley’s sisters. Their manners are good, and they can even be pleasant—when it suits them. They speak well and, as you noted, they are fashionable. However, they are also snide, rude, mean-spirited, and think their fortunes make them superior to others. Their only desire is to use what few connexions they already have to rise even further in society. Miss Bingley is the type of girl who will talk sweetly to you even while she is insulting you, and who denigrates you even further when you are not in her presence. And Mrs. Hurst, though the elder of the two, agrees with everything her sister says.”

“And Mr. Hurst is an idle, card-playing lush,” added Mary.

Lady Disley surprised—and startled—Elizabeth when she burst out laughing. “My dear girls, you’ve just described nearly half of ‘good’ society!” she said. “If they like you, they will build you up and be kind to you ... but will not hesitate to drive a knife into your back the moment it is turned if you displease them. Make one mistake, even a minor one, and they will glory in tearing you down—that is, unless you can still be useful. Then they will simply whisper about you behind their fans and in the salons of their friends when you are not around.”

“Why on Earth would anyone *wish* to be considered ‘good’ society, if half of the lot are so vicious?” Elizabeth asked.

“Because unfortunately, my dear Miss Bennet, we are social creatures,” replied Lady Disley. “We crave the attention and approval of our fellow men and women, and when you are wealthy—and especially if you are titled—you can almost purchase that approval. But even money and titles can only take you so far—a good character is essential.”

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. “Then how does half of society get away with being gossiping vipers?”

“They get away with it because they are better actors even than those who make the stage their life’s work. It is a skill you will unfortunately be required to master, because you will eventually meet with those in our circle with whom you will not agree. There are certain to be those who will think you unworthy of the distinction my brother gives to you in having raised you from obscurity to be his wife. There will be women who are jealous that he chose you and not them, who will think they are better suited because they have more beauty or more fortune.”

A pang of sorrow flashed across her consciousness as Elizabeth thought of Jane, and annoyance when her sister’s image was immediately followed by that of Miss Bingley. Both of them were as Lady Disley’s last statement described.

“At present I have no desire to become acquainted with Mr. Bingley’s sisters,” the countess went on. “Though no doubt colored by your dislike of them, your description of their characters leaves a great deal to be desired, and I will make sure my brother understands this. I would like to meet Mr. Bingley at least once, to thank him for his part in saving my brother, and if Henry desires to further the acquaintance, it will mean the occasional evening spent in the company of your sister as well. Thankfully, being Mr. Bingley’s friend does *not* automatically mean we must befriend his sisters.”

At this comment, Elizabeth secretly felt some measure of relief—she had thought Henry might wish to extend an invitation to Mr. Bingley to attend the wedding breakfast, as a means of thanking him for his service that terrible day. She’d feared that inviting Bingley—and Jane—might mean having to invite Miss Bingley and the Hursts as well and was glad to know it did not.

They were the first to arrive at Lady Cowper’s posh residence, though the wait for the arrivals of Lady Rowarth and Lady Edward was not long. Tea was served with a wide variety of cakes, muffins, and biscuits, along with some fruits and cheeses.

“Isn’t this delightful?” said Lady Cowper, glancing around at her guests as she lifted her cup. “I am so pleased you all could come.”

“And we are honoured by the invitation, my lady,” said Lady Edward.

“Well, I thought it only right that you all should be here, seeing as you are to soon be related to our newest marchioness!” the young countess said as she flashed a smile at Elizabeth. “Speaking of, my dear Miss Bennet, have you any idea of when the happy event will take place?”

“Lord Stashwick and I have yet to discuss it, though I imagine it will be soon,” Elizabeth replied. “My lord is very eager to begin our life together, as am I.”

“I can well imagine. And I do hope you shan’t mind my having mentioned your engagement at the Almack’s patronesses’ meeting yesterday. I held my tongue on Saturday, though it was a great effort, but as I had given your approval, I thought it necessary to mention the circumstances to the other ladies in charge of membership.”

*So, the talk has begun,* Elizabeth thought as she glanced sidelong at Lady Disley. “I quite understand, Lady Cowper,” she said aloud. “You were only doing your duty as a patroness, of course.”

“So that explains it!” cried Lady Disley. “Lady Castlereagh called on me yesterday and Lady Sefton called on me this morning, and they were each quite excited to share that they knew my brother was to marry again. Naturally, they hoped to glean as much information about the young lady as possible.”

Elizabeth glanced at Lady Cowper. “May I ask what you said during your meeting, my lady?”

Lady Cowper flitted her hand in a dismissive gesture. “Oh, hardly anything, my dear! I said only that I had some news of great interest, that I had it from Lady Disley herself that Lord Stashwick was to marry again. I said I had met the young lady in question and gave them your name, as it was

His Lordship's hope that he should be allowed to present you to society at the ball on Wednesday. They asked what I knew of you and I said that your father had an estate in Hertfordshire worth two thousand a year; you have four sisters, one of whom was recently married; and that you sadly had no creditable dowry, but that Lord Stashwick had for a time been a guest in your home and he had quite fallen in love—so much that he did not care you had no fortune!”

Elizabeth again looked to Lady Disley, her expression surely as clear as her thoughts: *She calls that “hardly anything”?*

“Lady Jersey was rather vocal about it,” Lady Cowper went on. “She said that she wondered if Lord Stashwick was in his right mind when he met Miss Bennet, for he *had* been ill recently, but I reminded her of His Lordship's income and said he is hardly in need of a dowry. And when Lady Sefton asked about Miss Bennet's connexions, I was honest and said we spoke little of them, save that you had said you had none to the great families of our sphere.”

She lowered her cup then and said, “I do hope you are not offended, Miss Bennet. It may seem like gossiping to you, but in truth, I thought it best to begin with the most influential women of London society. The lot of them seemed more curious than judgmental, save Lady Jersey. They are eager to make your acquaintance and are looking forward to the ball tomorrow night with even greater anticipation than usual.”

“I can well imagine, my lady,” said Elizabeth after taking a sip of her tea. “And I take no offense, as I knew that talk of the Marquess of Stashwick and his penniless bride would get about eventually. No doubt we shall be the talk of the ballroom within an hour.”

More than one of the ladies around her chuckled. “No doubt you are correct, Miss Bennet,” said Lady Rowarth. “Members of the *ton* do love a sensation, which you are sure to be, one way or another.”

Elizabeth smirked. “And I should be delighted to entertain the masses in exchange for a favorable review in Thursday's

Society columns.”

This remark elicited another round of laughter. “I should think you will do well enough if you keep your wits about you, Miss Bennet,” offered Lady Edward. “Just remember that most men prefer to talk about themselves.”

“And their estates, and their horses, and their sport,” added Lady Rowarth in a droll tone.

“Now, you, Miss Mary!” cried Lady Cowper suddenly. “Let us not forget our new Lady Stashwick’s sister, who sits here among us.”

Elizabeth glanced at Mary, whose cheeks were suddenly a pretty shade of pink. “Do not feel you must discuss Mary, my lady,” said she. “My sister does not much care for the scrutiny.”

“Well, whether she does or not, it will be upon her soon enough,” said Lady Cowper. “Do you intend to bring her out this Season?”

“No,” said Lady Disley. “I thought it best that this be Miss Bennet’s Season, as she will be one of us very soon and must firmly establish herself as a leader of society.”

Lady Cowper tilted her head as though in thought, her eyes darting back and forth between Lady Disley, Elizabeth, and Mary. “Yes... I suppose you have the right of it, Lady Disley,” she said after a moment. “It is best to bring out she who will be the highest ranked among the sisters.”

“Mary is also to live with us after Lord Stashwick and I are wed,” said Elizabeth. “She is to further her education under the tutelage of Mrs. Wilson alongside Lady Adelaide.”

“But you still intend to take her out with you to all the places that a young lady who is not out may go?”

“Certainly. Mary is an enthusiast of music, so we shall certainly take her to the theatre, opera, and concerts,” Elizabeth replied.

“A-and my uncle said we might also visit museums,” said Mary. “Which I shall be glad to do, for I am fond of learning

—especially history.”

Lady Cowper grinned. “Well then, this may not be *your* Season, Miss Mary, but if you are often in the company of your sister, I daresay you may yet be wed by the end of it—for her rank alone will draw the attention of eligible men to a relation of hers, and you are not entirely plain yourself. I daresay with the right clothing and hairdressing—perhaps some light enhancement with cosmetics—your hidden beauty will come to the fore. Then you shall be wed almost before you are aware of it!”

“That would certainly make our mother happy, to have three daughters wed in the same year,” murmured Elizabeth.

“Is it not the same with all mothers?” wondered Lady Adelaide, who had until now been nearly as silent as Mary throughout their conversation. “Do not they all to wish to see their daughters well settled?”

Lady Disley reached over and laid her hand atop her niece’s shoulder. “That they do, my dear. And I am so very sorry yours is not here to see the remarkable young lady you are becoming. She would certainly be just as frenetic about your making a proper match when you are of an age to begin thinking of marriage.”

Lady Adelaide looked down at the cup in her hands. “I so wish she could be here, but I shall have you, and I will have Miss Bennet, and my aunt Lavinia, and cousin Sophia as well.”

Lady Cowper smiled. “Then I daresay, my lady, that in the absence of your honored mother, you could not have found yourself in better hands. The same to you, Miss Bennet. You are a most fortunate young woman, to have found new relations of such welcoming and understanding character. Their love and loyalty to Lord Stashwick means they want the best for him, and though you might not have met their ideas of a second attachment for him, because you are what he wants and you make him happy, they will nevertheless do their part in promoting your match to advantage.”

Elizabeth inclined her head. “And I am well aware of my good fortune, Lady Cowper, I assure you. May it do naught but continue.”





# Chapter Twenty-Three

**The drawing** of the curtains Wednesday morning drew Elizabeth from a somewhat fitful sleep.

*Tonight is the night*, she thought as she yawned and then stretched herself, before turning over to find that Kiran had already brought her a cup of tea. Sitting up, Elizabeth took it from the bedside table and lifted it, and the scent of mint wafted up to her nose.

“Kiran, I could get used to this,” she said to her maid before taking a sip. *Spearmint, one sugar*, she noted. *Just how I like it—she has caught on quickly.*

Kiran, who had just collected her dinner gown from the night before off the back of the chair where she’d placed it, turned around with a smile and bowed. Elizabeth was impressed that the swath of fabric over her left shoulder did not slide off and wondered if she had pinned the end of the sari to the shoulder of her top.

“I will bring you tea every morning if you wish it, Miss,” said the maid.

Elizabeth smiled. “I think I’d like that. Thank you.”

She finished her tea before getting out of bed and sat at the dressing table to brush her hair as Mary stepped out from behind the dressing screen in the corner, followed by her maid. Elizabeth looked at her sister in the mirror and shook her head. “I do not know how you are up and dressed before me, Mary.”

“I am sure you needed the rest, Lizzy,” said Mary. “After all, you have a very important event this evening.”

“I know,” said Elizabeth. “I am doing my very best to ignore the nervousness already coursing through me. I may feel a little less so when Madame le Blanc delivers my gown this morning.”

“I am sure you will do well,” said her sister. “I remember you once saying that your courage always rises with any attempt to intimidate you.”

Elizabeth grinned at her in the mirror as Kiran came over and took the brush from her, taking over the attention to her hair. “Indeed, it does—and knowing that I shall be discussed, that there are those who will look at me only to find some fault, will be a great help in keeping my back straight and my chin up.”

“I shall be spending the whole of the day in lessons with Lady Adelaide and Mrs. Wilson while you get to wile away your hours,” Mary said then.

“Did you not say that you were to meet the music master today? At least that is something to look forward to,” observed Elizabeth.

Mary nodded. “Yes. Lady Adelaide says he is a handsome, charming fellow.”

“Let us hope he is not so handsome that he distracts you from actually learning something,” Elizabeth teased.

Mary’s brows drew together. “Lizzy, you know I would not allow such a thing to happen. Besides, it would not matter if I found his appearance agreeable, for he will not think the same of me.”

“Now Mary, do not think so meanly of yourself. Even if not the music master, some gentleman *will* take notice of you some day,” Elizabeth said.

Mary’s expression became rueful. “From your lips, Lizzy, to God’s ears.”

Elizabeth chuckled as Kiran finished tending her hair, and continued conversing with her sister as Kiran helped her to dress. As they talked, she began to see that Mary could be truly insightful if one only took the time to listen, and she felt rather ashamed of herself for not giving her younger sister the attention she ought to have received long before.

The sisters enjoyed a small repast together before the carriage was called to take Mary to Stashwick House.

Elizabeth decided to keep herself busy by helping the Gardiners' nursemaid with the children, and while she helped the eldest girls with their reading, she could not help recalling Henry's confession of wanting to give her children—how it had seemed natural for her to be holding one. Her heart warmed at the idea of being a mother to her own children.

Breakfast was delayed for a short time by the arrival of Madame le Blanc with Elizabeth's ballgown. Mrs. Gardiner insisted on her trying it on, and she was in raptures with how well it fit her niece. After appropriate accessories were decided on, she was helped out of the golden gown and back into her morning dress; the ballgown was hung up in the wardrobe, and Madame le Blanc was sent away happy, with a couple extra guineas in her pocket for her willingness to bring the gown into Cheapside.

When the morning post came, Elizabeth had a letter from her mother and one from Charlotte. She read them both and was little surprised at the contents of each, and when she had finished penning her replies, she bundled up to take a walk about the garden. She took several turns as her thoughts wandered from Henry to the ball to Jane... So much was on her mind, she had difficulty in forming an opinion of one idea before another came into her head.

Elizabeth had turned back toward the house for the fifth time when a face suddenly appeared at the top of the high hedge separating her uncle's garden from the neighbour on the left, startling her.

"Good afternoon, miss," said the man. "Can you tell me if yours is the residence of Mr. Edward Gardiner, the carriage maker?"

"Would not a neighbour know if this is Mr. Gardiner's house?" Elizabeth asked, knowing full well that he was not, as she knew the residents on either side of her uncle's home.

The man chuckled. "A neighbour would, yes. Are you one of Mr. Gardiner's servants? Can you tell me about his niece, Miss—" He looked down, ostensibly at something in his hand,

and Elizabeth began to get a sneaking suspicion of the man's profession.

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet?" the man continued.

"I am not at liberty to discuss any person in this house, sir. I should not have spoken to you at all. Good day," said Elizabeth, then she whirled and started at a quick pace for the back door of the house.

She heard a rustling noise behind her and turned around with a gasp to see that the man was now attempting to climb over the hedge!

"Sir, do *not* continue into this garden and do *not* importune me further!" she said, raising her voice in the hope that one of the servants in the kitchen would hear her. Fortune was with her, in that George—one of the two footmen who were also Mr. Gardiner's coachmen—came out on the back stoop a moment later.

"What be going on here?" he said with a narrow gaze at the man who had just dropped into the garden.

"George, I think this man is a reporter. He was asking about Mr. Gardiner's niece," Elizabeth say, praying that George would not expose her ruse.

"Was he now?" countered George, who crossed his arms and lifted an eyebrow. "You didn't go speaking about Miss Bennet did you, Sally? Our master is a kind man, but you know as well as I he'll dismiss you right quick if you be gossipin' about his niece."

"I swear to you, I'll not tell a soul where I got the information from," said the reporter quickly. "I've just got to confirm what I've heard—that she's to marry the Marquess of Stashwick! Who would have thought it—a tradesman's niece to be elevated to nobility!"

"Sally, your respite is over," said George in a commanding tone. "Best you be getting back to the kitchen, girl."

"Yes, George," said Elizabeth, and she hurried up the steps into the house.

“That was her, wasn’t it?” she heard the reporter ask. “That cloak and muff were too fine to belong to a lowly kitchen maid.”

“You get out of here, you!” George said. “I’ll send for a constable and have you took off for trespassin’ you don’t go now!”

Any other exchanges between the two, Elizabeth missed as she hurried further into the house. Her aunt caught her as she stepped into the drawing room.

“Lizzy, you’re a bit out of breath, dear—are you well?” Mrs. Gardiner asked.

“There was a man out in the garden, Aunt,” said Elizabeth as she tossed her muff on a side table and removed her bonnet. “He was a reporter, I’m sure of it. He was asking about me—he said he had heard I was to marry the Marquess of Stashwick!”

Just then, George came into the room. “Are you all right, Miss?” he asked, all the command of his pretense making way for respect. “That reporter fellow didn’t accost you or anything?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, not at all,” she assured him. “And thank you, George, for going along with my ruse, though it seemed he did not believe us.”

“Yes, thank you, George, for coming to Lizzy’s aid,” said Mrs. Gardiner.

George smiled and bowed before turning and making his way back toward the kitchen.

“I don’t like this, Aunt,” said Elizabeth as a maid appeared and silently took her outerwear. When she had gone, Elizabeth moved to sit on the sofa. “I think it one thing that Lady Cowper spoke to the Almack’s patronesses, that Lord Stashwick spoke to some of his friends. But I cannot imagine any of them going to a newspaper to offer up the story! Who else could have known about Uncle’s profession or where he lived?”

Mrs. Gardiner's expression was grim as she suggested, "What about Mr. Bingley's sisters ... or yours? Oh Lizzy, I do dislike thinking meanly of Jane, but in light of what happened on Sunday..."

"I understand you, Aunt," said Elizabeth quietly. "I don't like suspecting Jane, either, even after her behavior on Sunday." She paused and sighed and fought an unwelcome sting of tears behind her eyes. "Mr. Bingley's sisters I could imagine being affronted enough to go to a newspaper, but Jane? Is she really so angry with me that she would do such a thing?"

Mrs. Gardiner echoed her sigh. "I do not know, my dear. And I suspect it is unlikely we shall know which of them are responsible, as neither are likely to confess their guilt."

"Indeed not," agreed Elizabeth.

"And though I know you will chafe at being restricted, I do not think you ought to go outside alone, Lizzy, even in our garden," her aunt continued. "If you really feel the need to take a walk, take George or Frederick with you."

Elizabeth acquiesced with a nod, then sat back and tipped her head back with a soft groan. "You know what this means, do you not?" she asked. "It means that by tomorrow morning there will be men outside the house, and I don't mean only reporters."

Lifting her head, she looked into Mrs. Gardiner's somewhat confused gaze and said, "Security for me, Aunt. Lady Disley said that Lord Stashwick is like to insist on it when we are married, and when he hears I've been accosted by a reporter, he'll have men here before sunrise, I am certain."

-...-

When Elizabeth descended the stairs in her ballgown that evening, Henry was waiting for her.

She had not expected him to arrive until after she had come down but was nonetheless pleased that he was there to see her with Mary and the Gardiners. He stood as soon as she stepped into the drawing room and crossed it to meet her.

“My lord,” Elizabeth greeted him, dipping into a curtsy.

Henry bowed. “My lady,” said he, before he reached for her hand and lifted it to press his lips to her gloved knuckles.

Elizabeth arched her eyebrow. “I am not your lady yet, sir,” said she.

“You soon will be, my dear Elizabeth,” Henry replied with a grin. “In fact, it is my very great pleasure to tell you that I have had word from my solicitor today. Mr. Phillips—your father’s attorney, who I believe is also your uncle—sent word from Mr. Bennet that the marriage articles are approved without need for alteration.”

“You must have been very generous, my lord,” said Mr. Gardiner. “Lizzy is my brother’s favorite daughter, you know, and I must own that I expected him to make at least a show of being difficult.”

“I wonder that Papa did not write me directly,” Elizabeth said.

“Perhaps you will receive a letter from Papa tomorrow,” suggested Mary.

“Perhaps,” Elizabeth replied, though she did not expect it. Her father was a rather unsatisfactory correspondent—he liked to receive letters, but rather abhorred the obligation of having to write back.

“Come, my love,” said Henry then. He gave the hand he still held a tug to draw her toward where her family stood. “I have something I wish you to wear tonight.”

“Is my aunt’s jewelry not enough?” Elizabeth asked; she had borrowed a gold bracelet and a pair of gold and pearl earrings, and her hairpins were gold with small diamonds—her own garnet cross already hung from a thin golden chain. “Mrs. Gardiner and the modiste agreed that small, simple jewelry would accentuate my gown best.”

“And I do not disagree, my dear—you are quite stunning, I must say,” said Henry with a smile at her before he picked up a wooden box from the side table. Turning to her as he opened it, he said, “I should also like you to wear this.”

“This” was a tiara with two rows of teardrop-shaped points over two rows of small diamonds. Most of the teardrops held a cluster of diamonds and were interspersed with larger diamonds in the same shape.

Elizabeth gasped at the beauty of the piece. “Oh, Henry... It’s beautiful! But...” She looked up at him. “But would it be proper for me to wear it?”

“Whyever would it not be? Many ladies wear tiaras who are not titled—and you soon will be,” Henry said. “This one in particular has been in my family for four generations, and technically belongs to Adelaide now—it was she that recommended I should offer you to wear it. I have others that will be yours when we are married.”

“Lady Adelaide is so very kind,” said Elizabeth over the emotion that swelled in her chest. “I am so remarkably fortunate that she has accepted I will be your wife.”

“Addy has always been a compassionate, warm-hearted girl,” said Henry. “And I am certain she adores you already, for you have not imposed yourself on her and have offered to be her friend.”

“Well, I could hardly be a mother to her when she is nearly a woman grown,” Elizabeth said. “Besides, even were I older than I am, I would never expect to take the place of a mother. No one can do that.”

“No indeed, my love,” said he. “Will you wear the tiara?”

Elizabeth smiled. “I would be honoured,” she replied, then moved to a chair so that her aunt could fix the tiara to her head with a few strategically pulled hairpins.

“Perfect,” said Henry with a glowing smile when it was done.

“I’ve gone from stunning to perfect,” quipped Elizabeth with a grin. “My work for the evening is already complete.”



Laughter followed her comment, and then a maid was summoned to fetch her outerwear. Henry assured Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner that his sister would be at Almack's to act as chaperone for Elizabeth, but that he could not resist escorting her to the assembly rooms himself.

In the carriage, Henry stared at her in silence for two blocks. "You truly are stunning, Elizabeth. That golden gown brings out your eyes, making them look like amber."

"Is that a good thing?" she asked.

"It is to me. They're already a very fine, dark shade of brown, but the gold seems to lighten them," Henry replied.

"Thank you, Henry," Elizabeth replied with a smile. "It is very sweet of you to say. And may I say what a fine figure you cut in your evening wear. I noticed that your cravat and waistcoat are of a golden hue."

Henry chuckled. "I wished our ensembles to complement one another, so begged of Adelaide to give me at least a hint of what color you had chosen to wear this evening."

Elizabeth's smile grew. "Just wait until you see the gown I shall wear when we marry. Lady Disley would have preferred it be the one I debuted in, but Madame le Blanc could not complete it in time."

She reached up and tentatively touched the tiara at her crown. "I do hope I shan't lose this," said she. "I've never worn a tiara before, let alone danced while wearing one."

"If you feel it coming loose, just excuse yourself to the retiring room," Henry advised. "Any lady in the room will assist you, but if you're not comfortable asking for the assistance of a stranger, go to Frances before leaving the ballroom, and she will join you there to help you reset it."

"I shall keep that in mind," Elizabeth said.

A moment of silence passed, and she knew that before they reached the assembly rooms would be the best time to bring up the reporter, but just as she drew breath to begin telling him of it, Henry spoke again.

“I suspect Frances may already have told you, but I had a meeting with Mr. Bingley yesterday at White’s,” he began. “At risk of upsetting you, my dear, I must confess that I spoke to him about the unfortunate confrontation between you and his wife.”

Alarm shot through Elizabeth. “Pray tell me you did not mention what she said about you!” she cried.

Henry chuckled. “Fear not, my love, I promise you I did not mention Mrs. Bingley’s regret that she did not ensnare me herself. I should hate to sow discord in another man’s marriage when it is little more than a month old. If she is truly mercenary, her nature will be revealed to him in due time. I must say, I feel rather sorry for him if she is.”

“Worse would be both me and Mr. Bingley having to tell his sisters and Mr. Darcy that they were right about Jane after all. I simply do not understand her! How can she claim to love him, yet wish she had been the one to receive your attentions?”

“Not knowing Mrs. Bingley well, I can only speculate,” said Henry. “Perhaps she does truly love Mr. Bingley but fears your mother will be angry with her for not having tried to attach me, knowing now who I am. Though in the defense of your sisters, I know your mother would never have encouraged them to pursue the man they thought I was—a gentleman’s daughter cannot marry a carriage driver without some damage to her respectability.”

Elizabeth considered that for a moment, then said, “You are very generous in forgiving my sisters taking no interest in you at all. And I suppose it is possible what you said of Jane—she did allude to feeling pressured all her life, and our mother has long said that Jane could not be so beautiful for nothing. Although I can imagine my mother not understanding why the most beautiful girl in the county was unable to secure the affections of a marquess—had Jane not already been engaged, of course—I daresay that it would not matter which of her daughters caught you, so long as one of us did.”

She paused and sighed. “What did Mr. Bingley have to say?”

“He apologised to me for his wife’s behavior and said he had spoken to her about it after seeing you on Monday. Bingley told me that your sister claimed she was not in her right mind when she spoke to you due to a particular indisposition only women suffer, and that she had begun to fear you might be right about the influence of *his* sisters, as she also claimed that Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst had been ‘attacking’ her to get you to arrange an introduction to me and mine. He said he would see to it that she apologised to you but was respectfully waiting until after the ball.”

Elizabeth snorted softly. “Well, if nothing else, I can certainly believe the part about Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst. Much as I adore Mr. Bingley, his sisters leave a lot to be desired. They are so desperate to distance themselves from the stigma of being a former tradesman’s daughters that they have embraced the worst traits of high society.”

She did not say what else was on her mind—that she feared Jane had only said what she did to deflect the blame for her uncharacteristic behavior away from herself rather than owning up to it. Besides, if she had been telling the truth, why had she not called again at Gracechurch Street to apologise? Why wait until after the ball?

Elizabeth then drew a deep breath—she could not spare the energy to stress over Jane now—and told Henry about the encounter with the reporter before she lost the nerve to do so. As expected, he was none too pleased, and he confirmed her suspicion about security arrangements, stating that he would have men watching her uncle’s house by morning. He said he also intended to speak to Mr. Gardiner about having a man accompany her at all times whenever she left the house.

“Pray do not contest me on this, Elizabeth,” Henry said firmly. “I admire your independent spirit, my love, but I will not permit risks to be taken with your safety. My daughter also has bodyguards with her wherever she goes.”

“I do not intend any protest, my lord,” she replied. “I was already informed by Lady Disley that you would be likely to arrange security for me after our marriage. That reporter’s boldness only means I shall have that security sooner... and if I may say so, sir, you might consider that it is past time you hire guards for yourself. You’ve already been attacked multiple times, have you not?”

“The two men who died in my place in Hertfordshire *were* my bodyguards, Elizabeth,” Henry retorted. “Kunal Bakshi, the new driver, is no guard, but the two men on the back of the carriage are.”

Elizabeth felt due chagrin and said, “Forgive me. I should not have accused you of caring so little for yourself.”

Henry chuckled. “Believe me, my dear, I *like* being alive. There have been five attempts on my life in the last three years, and I can assure you that I have traveled with personal security since the first.”

“Have you any idea why someone wants to do you harm?” Elizabeth asked. “I do not think you ever said.”

“I confess I am not entirely certain,” he replied. “I don’t receive threatening messages of any kind; there have only been attacks on my person. I can only assume my politics are the reason—some people fear change, Elizabeth, and I am trying to make big ones. That has apparently ruffled the feathers of the old guard who would rather things remain as they are.”

It was not long after that they were in the long line of carriages waiting to release their passengers before the famous Almack’s Assembly Rooms. Elizabeth swallowed and fought to keep the nervousness she felt below the surface at bay. When at last it was their turn to disembark, she closed her eyes, drew a breath, and said a quick prayer that the evening would be a success. When she opened her eyes again, the footman was just opening the door and unfolding the step. Henry stepped out and then turned to her and held out his hand.

“Are you ready, my dear?” he asked her.

Elizabeth recalled Lady Disley's words—*Keep your chin up, and do not allow your fear to show*—and, drawing another fortifying breath, smiled as she placed her hand into his. “As I shall ever be, my love.”



## Chapter Twenty-Four

**Henry handed** her down and wrapped her hand around his arm. They walked at a steady pace toward the door through which others stepped; Elizabeth noted that the building itself was plain and unpretentious, which was something of a surprise given this was a place which could make or break a person's respectability.

Lady Disley met them almost immediately upon their entering the building. "There you are! I began to wonder what was keeping you."

She paused and gasped, and Elizabeth noted the direction of her wide-eyed gaze. "Mother's tiara," she said softly, then flicked her gaze to the marquess, who spoke then, saying,

"Addy suggested it, Frances. She thought that we should present my dearest Elizabeth as the jewel that she is."

Elizabeth blushed at the praise as Lady Disley smiled and replied, "Your youngest daughter is wiser than we give her credit for, brother. It is the perfect accessory to the gown—what did you think of that?"

Henry smiled at Elizabeth. "That she looked like a treasure."

"Hen—my lord," Elizabeth began, recalling quickly that in the rooms, she must remember to address him formally. "You really must stop praising me so, or I shall be in a perpetual blush the whole evening."

"Which would only enhance your natural beauty," he retorted with a grin.

Lady Disley shook her head. "Come, Miss Bennet, we must go and get your dancing shoes on, pin up that dress, and begin the introductions."

Elizabeth followed the countess into a room off the entry hall, where they made quick work of getting her ready for a long evening of dancing and conversation. Lady Disley told her as she was pinning her train that she intended to introduce her to the rest of the patronesses first.

When the two rejoined their escorts, Lord and Lady Rowarth were just coming in. Lady Disley asked her son if they should wait until the pair had changed their shoes, but he encouraged her to go ahead.

“After all, I daresay we must not delay Miss Bennet’s debut any longer,” Lord Rowarth told her, with a wink and a grin at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth returned his grin as his mother conceded the point, and they proceeded into the ballroom. Henry gave their names to the caller, and she lifted her chin a fraction as the man cried out, “The Most Honorable The Marquess of Stashwick and Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Almost everyone turned to look at them as they descended the few steps into the room. Elizabeth concentrated on keeping her smile in place as the Disleys were announced and was forced to suppress a laugh when she noted Lady Cowper hurriedly making her way over to their party, a gentleman she assumed was the countess’s husband at her side.

“My Lord Stashwick,” said the man as he bowed. “It is a pleasure to see you here, and well recovered after your long illness, sir.”

Henry acknowledged the greeting with a nod. “A pleasure it is to be here, Lord Cowper. Lady Cowper. As to my illness, the truth is I was not ill at all, but recovering from an attempt on my life.”

Lady Cowper gasped and lifted a hand to her lips as her husband’s eyes widened. “I am astonished, my lord,” said the earl. “But why the report of illness, if I may ask?”

“Because I wished to keep secret my location, Cowper. I did not want them to try again while I was unable to defend myself,” Henry replied. “Thus, I allowed my relations to say I



was ill and recovering in Berkshire to throw the ruffians off my trail. In reality, I was very kindly taken in by Mr. Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire, where I met and was immediately enchanted by this most charming young lady. May I present to you my betrothed, Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

“Mr. Bennet is your father?” Lord Cowper asked Elizabeth.

“He is, my lord. I am the second of his five daughters,” she replied.

“I recall my lady mentioning you had many sisters,” said Lord Cowper. “One is lately married, I believe?”

“Yes, my lord. My elder sister Jane is recently wed to Mr. Charles Bingley of Netherfield. The estate is but three miles from my father’s.”

“Cowper, my love, there is time enough for an inquisition later,” said Lady Cowper. “I really must introduce Miss Bennet to the other patronesses. Do come and let me introduce you.”

Henry nodded and asked her to lead the way, and the Cowpers walked before them over to a group of very finely dressed ladies and gentlemen. Introductions were quickly made to the ladies and their husbands, and Elizabeth made every effort possible to remember all the titles she heard. Lady Jersey visibly turned up her nose and Lady Castlereagh eyed her as though not certain what to make of her, but Lady Sefton seemed amiable. A short time later, after she’d answered about a dozen questions about her family, she and her companions turned their heads when the caller announced the arrival of Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy.

“Oh, good, Theodore got Darcy to join him,” Lady Disley observed. “Darcy only gave me a conditional reply when I asked if he was attending this evening.”

The colonel and his cousin were welcomed warmly by their relations, and Elizabeth could not help noticing that Darcy stared at her. He could hardly be looking to find fault with her now; she wondered what his thoughts were but was

forced to put that curiosity aside as Lady Disley announced she wished to introduce Elizabeth to a couple of her friends that she had seen across the ballroom.

“One moment, if you please, Mother,” said Colonel Fitzwilliam with a grin. “If my good uncle does not mind, I should like to claim a dance with his future bride. Would you do me the honor of dancing with me this evening, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth smiled—she had missed his liveliness. “I should be delighted Colonel, if His Lordship does not mind.”

Henry chuckled. “That reminds me, my dear, that I must put my name down on your dance card,” said he. She offered it to him along with the little pencil as he added, “And I do not mind at all, Colonel. You are already friends with my lady, are you not?”

“I like to think so, Uncle,” Fitzwilliam replied, still smiling. He took the card from his uncle and applied his name to the second set, then turned to his silent companion.

“Say, Darcy—why do you not take Miss Bennet’s supper set? Then she’ll not have to go into supper on the arm of a stranger.”

Darcy swallowed, and Elizabeth could tell his smile was forced. Had they not made peace after all? she wondered.

“I should be delighted if Miss Bennet would allow me the honour,” he said, and at her nod of agreement, he took her dance card from his cousin and added his name.

“My, my, Miss Bennet,” twittered Lady Castlereagh as the card was passed back to Elizabeth. “You *are* a fortunate creature. Not only have you managed to capture the affections of a marquess, but you’ve actually been offered a dance with one of the most reticent gentlemen in all of London—Mr. Darcy rarely dances at any ball, even when ladies outnumber the men!”

“I am quite well aware, my lady,” Elizabeth replied. “In fact, the first time I met Mr. Darcy was at a ball, where he danced only four dances, though gentlemen were scarce; and,

to my certain knowledge, more than one young lady was sitting down in want of a partner.”

“I remind you, Miss Bennet, that I knew no one beyond my own party,” Darcy returned.

“Oh, I remember, sir,” Elizabeth parried with a smile. “I also remember that your friend Mr. Bingley offered to have his partner make introductions ... and you declined.”

For a moment she thought she had said too much and embarrassed him, for his color increased, but to her surprise, Darcy’s lips turned up in a faint smile before he said, “Perhaps I should have judged better had I sought an introduction, but I am ill-qualified to recommend myself to strangers.”

“Shall we ask your cousin the reason of this?” said Elizabeth, addressing Colonel Fitzwilliam. “Shall we ask him why a man of sense and education, and who has lived in the world, is ill-qualified to recommend himself to strangers?”

“I can answer your question,” said Fitzwilliam, “without applying to him. It is because he will not give himself the trouble.”

“I certainly have not the talent which some people possess,” said Darcy, “of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done.”

“But that is what introductions are for!” cried Lady Cowper. “Once you are introduced, you may stand there and just listen to the conversation around you, or you may ask questions regarding those subjects which interest you. However do you think anyone furthers an acquaintance, Mr. Darcy, if they do not make an effort?”

Darcy offered her a nod of concession. “You surely have the right of it, Lady Cowper. As my good aunt Lady Disley will attest, she has often scolded me for my reluctance to engage in polite conversation.”

Lady Disley chuckled softly. “I have indeed, Lady Cowper. I have told him many, many times that he shall never make a good match if is not willing to meet people!”

Elizabeth would not have thought it possible, but Darcy's color deepened even further, and feeling some responsibility for his present embarrassment, she said, "My ladies, I fear we are making Mr. Darcy uncomfortable, and is that not meant to be my place this evening, to be under the scrutiny of all?"

The men chuckled and the ladies twittered—and Darcy looked relieved.

The round of introductions continued then, with the party walking the periphery of the ballroom to meet this acquaintance or that, and before long Elizabeth's head began to spin, the names and faces of those she met beginning to blur together by the time the musicians began to play the introductory notes of the first dance. Henry smiled as he led her to a position near the top of the square dance floor, which was outlined by red ropes.

"Do you know how to waltz, Miss Bennet?" Henry asked. "The dance has only recently been introduced here and is still considered somewhat salacious by many. I really ought to have asked you before."

Elizabeth smiled. "As it so happens, my lord, I do know the waltz. And I happen to think it a prodigious good choice for the first dance, as it shall not put too much strain on your leg."

"Which is but one reason I passed my desire for a waltz onto Lady Cowper through my sister," said Henry with a grin.

The dance began a few moments later, and for the whole of it, Elizabeth forgot everyone in the room but Henry. She was reminded of how young he was still at heart by the way he moved and the way he smiled—one might never have known that he had recently been grievously injured, or that he was a man of five-and-forty.

Just after the first dance ended, while the dancers were applauding the musicians, the caller announced the arrival of Lord and Lady Winterbourne. Elizabeth drew a breath and noted that her partner was suddenly tense. She reached for his hand, drawing his attention to her.

“Far be it for me to give you instruction, my lord, but remember to greet her warmly,” she said in a low tone. “You may be at odds, but she is still your daughter, and this is a public forum.”

Henry snorted softly. “’Tis not my behavior you should be concerned with, my dear,” he muttered.

His warning was appropriately delivered, for as soon as Lady Winterbourne saw them, she left her husband’s side and headed—more like stalked—to where they stood.

“What the devil is *she* doing here?!” she demanded of her father, before whirling on Elizabeth and declaring, “And how *dare* you think yourself worthy to wear my grandmother’s tiara!”

Henry caught his daughter’s wrist as she reached up to snatch the golden tiara from Elizabeth’s head.

“Henrietta, do not embarrass yourself, your husband, or me any further,” he growled softly. “Miss Bennet has as much right to be in these rooms as yourself, and she wears my mother’s tiara because your sister extended the offer. Adelaide has accepted Miss Bennet will be in our lives, and it is time you did the same.”

Lord Winterbourne arrived at his wife’s side, a stony expression upon his countenance. “My lady,” he said, taking his wife’s hand from her father, “if you do not wish me to remove you from this hall at once, you will cease this unconscionable behavior.”

“I am terribly sorry, Lady Winterbourne, that you are not pleased by your father’s choice to remarry,” said Elizabeth. “And I would even extend my apologies for his choice of me, but I cannot say that I am sorry for that.”

“Of course, you are not—if he marries you, he raises you from *nothing*. You are *nobody*,” said Lady Winterbourne. “You have *no* fortune, *no* connexions. I am sure you took great advantage of my father during his recovery at your dilapidated old estate. It is absurd that you even made it through the door here.”

The young countess's voice had risen with nearly every word and Elizabeth had no doubt most of the patrons were now watching and listening to the exchange—that likely had been Lady Winterbourne's design. Her own anger was also stirred and increasing, but she managed to speak evenly as she said, "Longbourn may be old, my lady, but it is hardly dilapidated—great care has been taken over the years to ensure the house endures for future generations. And the only advantage I took while your father stayed with us was delighting in having someone other than my sisters to entertain when the weather kept us indoors.

"But you are right—I have no fortune and no connexions among these good people. My uncles may not be rich or titled, but they are no less important to me, for they are men of good character, kind hearts, and they are dedicated to their honest labours."

Elizabeth paused and drew a breath. "I love your father and he loves me—I wonder that you cannot just be happy for him."

Lady Winterbourne leaned closer. "Because my father can do *better* than you! There are at least a dozen women in this room with greater consequence who are more deserving of being elevated to the rank of marchioness than a nobody girl from an obscure village in the country."

"And yet he does not desire any of them," Elizabeth fired back. "With all due respect to those twelve women, they were not God's choice for your father. That choice was me, and your father has accepted it."

"Wholeheartedly, my love," Henry concurred. "Lady Winterbourne, you have made your feelings regarding my marriage to Miss Bennet perfectly loud and clear. There is no need for further disruption to the assembly—you can either stay, and simply avoid our presence, or you can go, and not have to tolerate it at all. The choice is yours."

"Choose your next words carefully, Lady Winterbourne," spoke up Lady Cowper, who appeared as though from nowhere. "For they may be your last uttered in these rooms.

Desist importuning Lord Stashwick and Miss Bennet, that we may continue the dancing—and do not utter another disparaging remark against the lady if you wish to retain the privilege of attending assemblies here.”

Henrietta sneered at her. “I cannot believe even *you* would tolerate the shades of Almack’s being thus polluted by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to my family.”

“I am willing to tolerate any person who conducts his or herself in such a manner as would be expected among good society,” replied Lady Cowper coolly. “And in a matter of weeks, I daresay, Miss Bennet *will* be allied to your family.”

Lady Castlereagh, Lady Sefton, and Lady Jersey all came to stand on either side of Lady Cowper. Henrietta’s color—and her scowl—deepened at the patronesses’ unity in opposition to her cause. Looking to Elizabeth with a sneer, she said, “My father will never love you the way he loved my mother. *Never.*”

“He does not have to,” replied Elizabeth. “I only care that he loves me.”

With an angry growl and a childish stomp of her foot, Lady Winterbourne whirled away and stalked off, uncivilly brushing past anyone who did not move out of her way. Her husband offered his apologies, bowed, and turned away to follow her.

“Well, wasn’t that a pleasant interlude!” chirped Lady Cowper, eliciting soft laughter from the other patrons.

“Come, let us resume the true entertainment of the evening,” spoke up Lady Jersey with an uptilt of her head. The crowd began to disperse, much to Elizabeth’s relief, and a moment later, Lady Sefton called the next dance.

As they took their places, Elizabeth said, “I am so very sorry, my lord, for this evening’s disruption.”

“Do not make yourself uneasy, my love,” Henry replied. “You are not the cause of it. Henrietta’s inexplicable desire to

see me remain a lonely widower for the rest of my life is the cause.”

Elizabeth scoffed. “I do not know that she believes you should remain a lonely widower, sir—she did, after all, point out that there are at least a dozen women here who would rather be standing in my place.”

“And yet I do not desire any of them,” Henry said with a wink, echoing her earlier words.

It was clear to her that he was vexed with his daughter, but as it seemed he was determined to put the incident out of his head, Elizabeth vowed she would endeavour to do the same. In truth she was mortified by the confrontation, and she sensed the scrutiny of those around her even more than before.

The need to concentrate on the steps of the dance drew her out of her melancholy reverie, and by the time it was ended, she felt her dampened spirits lifting. As they applauded the musicians, Colonel Fitzwilliam approached the pair.

“I believe, Miss Bennet, that this next set is mine,” he said with a grin.

Elizabeth offered a teasing grin and made a show of consulting her dance card. “Why yes, Colonel, it does appear you have claimed my second set.”

He grinned again, then turned to his uncle. “My lord uncle, might I be the first to congratulate you on securing yourself a most excellent partner. I watched as you danced together, and Miss Bennet is as graceful as a swan on the water.”

“Thank you, Theodore,” Henry replied. “Just remember that she is to be my wife soon—no attempting to abscond with my lady.”

“And cause another breach in the family? No, Uncle, I think Henrietta’s done that well enough for one evening.”

Elizabeth felt the embarrassment of the confrontation all over again, though she knew he was only attempting to make light of the situation. Henry released her to the colonel’s care as the musicians were playing the first notes of the third song,



and as they danced, Elizabeth was reminded of how perfectly amiable he was. Colonel Fitzwilliam chattered on almost nonsensically, engaging her attention and diverting it away from the mortifying thoughts that had re-entered her head.

“There now,” he said suddenly, and she noted a new sparkle in his eyes.

“Whatever do you mean, Colonel?” Elizabeth asked.

“I am glad to see you smiling again, Miss Bennet,” said her partner. “A frown does not suit you.”

“You are very kind, sir, given I am at the center of the discord between your uncle and his daughter,” she replied.

Fitzwilliam snorted softly. “Pray do not distress yourself over her nonsense,” said he. “Hetty has always been rather high in the instep. It has been her way since childhood to throw a fit in order to get what she wants—when we were younger, I called her Petty Hetty—and unfortunately my aunt and uncle too often gave in to her to make her happy; he more so after my aunt died. And after poor Edmund’s accident, he was so distracted by grief that he let her have her way entirely, even though by then she had already left his house for her husband’s.”

“One would think he had some great difficulty in understanding and managing his daughters, were it not for how very well he has brought up the younger one,” Elizabeth observed. “Lady Adelaide has been everything delightful and charming. She has accepted me with very little reservation.”

“To own the truth, Miss Bennet, I very much believe that to be in large part to her desiring a friend,” the colonel said. “Hetty and Addy have never been close, and while she’s had her nurse, her governess, her maid—even my mother—since Aunt Henrietta passed, Addy’s had no one of her own sex to truly form an intimate acquaintance with.”

“Has Lady Adelaide no friends at all?” Elizabeth asked, feeling quite sorry for the girl.

“Well, there is my uncle Edward’s daughter Diana, though they’re not close—Di seems to think that because she’s three

years older, and a new bride herself last year, she hasn't time for socializing with her youngest cousin. Diana and her husband honestly spend more time with his family than hers, which is why you've yet to meet her. Though I imagine you'll be introduced to Ed soon enough—Ed being Diana's younger brother Edward; he's seventeen and away at school. Adelaide also has something of a friend in Darcy's sister, as they are sort of related through my mother; they are but a year apart in age and correspond regularly, and they've had the occasional visit to one another's house. In fact, Adelaide is very much like Georgiana—very sweet, very kind—but she is, perhaps, rather livelier and more outgoing,” Fitzwilliam said then. “Gigi is, I'm afraid, quite painfully shy. It may be inappropriate for me to say this, given your engagement to Henry, but had not you been so very thoroughly charmed by my uncle—in spite of his being a curmudgeonly old marquess —”

Elizabeth giggled at the jest, which she had heard him say once before.

“—I'd have encouraged Darcy to court you,” the colonel finished.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

“**Mr. Darcy!**” cried Elizabeth. “You cannot be serious. He does not even think my family is worthy of a tradesman’s son—though I own he did apologise to me for his ill-judged interference. Although it absolutely *is* inappropriate for you to have spoken, I must confess you have intrigued me: whatever makes you think we would suit?”

“Miss Bennet, you are lively where he is dour. You are teasing where he is serious. I think you would balance each other most admirably—you would certainly soften that stern mask he always wears, and he could as well guide you in navigating society as my uncle will do. And you would be such a positive influence on Georgiana, I am sure she would discard that shy cloak about her in a trice.”

Fitzwilliam’s unfettered enthusiasm for the idea shocked Elizabeth into silence. Her ... and Mr. Darcy? Impossible! The man was so arrogant and conceited, and he had tried to stop Mr. Bingley marrying Jane. No matter what had led to her sister’s alteration of character, she could not put it out of her mind that he had been wrong to do so.

Drawing a breath, she adopted an insouciant air as she replied, “Well, I am heartily sorry for Mr. Darcy that you had not the chance to persuade him, but it is his own fault, you know. Besides, I rather prefer your uncle’s more lively and flirtatious manner than Darcy’s cold reticence.”

“Miss Bennet, you do my cousin an injustice!” cried Fitzwilliam. “He is reticent, I grant you, but he is not cold. Truly, Darcy just has difficulty making himself agreeable to people he does not know—but if he or they make an effort to get to know each other, and are able to form an intimate acquaintance, he can be very warm and even openly friendly. There’s not a servant or tenant under his care that would give

him a bad name. Besides, do not forget, madam, that I attended Bingley's engagement dinner as well, and you seemed to have no trouble conversing with Darcy then."

"That is only because I sought information," Elizabeth replied archly. "In meeting your uncle—a true gentleman—I could not help comparing his manners to those of other gentlemen I knew, including Darcy and Mr. Wickham. It is to your uncle the credit is truly owed for opening my eyes to the practiced ways of Wickham, for in comparing them, I was able to see the artifice in the latter's engaging demeanor."

"I am glad you did, for the sake of the local young ladies—and we are all of us rid of him for a while, for it was your urging that prompted Darcy to finally have him shipped off to a debtor's prison," Fitzwilliam mused. "I beg you, though, do not discount Darcy entirely for his standoffishness. Should you pursue a closer acquaintance, he'll be one of the steadiest, most trustworthy friends you could ever have."

"I shall take your words under advisement," said Elizabeth. "However, I beg you would not dare tell your uncle you thought Darcy and I would suit. His Lordship already feared I would never consider him with the likes of younger men such as you and Darcy running about. He had nothing to fear, of course. Even had Darcy been agreeable, your uncle still would have been the victor."

"Because he has more money and a title?" Fitzwilliam asked.

Elizabeth scowled, but quickly subdued her irritation and set her features into a neutral expression. "No, sir," she said stiffly. "I'd still have chosen your uncle because I prefer an open temperament over a reserved one."

Fitzwilliam sighed. "Forgive me, Miss Bennet. I meant no offense. Indeed, I have never questioned your motives for marrying my uncle. It's clear he adores you, and your affection for him is plain."

"Then why did you ask me such a question?"

“It was but a question, not an accusation. I was merely curious,” he replied. “Believe me, I would understand if you *had* chosen my uncle for those reasons—for is it not every person’s duty to marry to best advantage? However, I am greatly relieved that Uncle Henry met someone who is entirely unimpressed by the titles or the vastness of his wealth. It means you care about him and not the prestige.”

“Oh, I *am* impressed, Colonel Fitzwilliam, as anyone would be,” Elizabeth corrected him. “However, genuine respect and affection mean a great deal more to me.”

Her partner agreed with her sentiments and the conversation turned to other topics as their set continued. When it was over, he escorted her to the side of his mother; Lady Disley praised her dancing—and how well she had handled herself with Lady Winterbourne. Elizabeth’s next three partners were men that Henry or his sister had introduced her to on arrival, one of them a viscount. They all asked how she had met Lord Stashwick, and she gave what she would later refer to as “the standard answer”—that he had been a guest in her father’s house for a time and had courted her almost from the start of his residence there. When their curiosity was satisfied, they began to talk about themselves and their own acquaintance with Henry, and Elizabeth parted from them all with little doubt of their hoping she might have some influence with the marquess in extending that acquaintance further.

Elizabeth had but a few moments at the side of her chaperone to catch her breath after her fifth partner before the supper set was called. Darcy was almost immediately at her side as the dancers were beginning to take their places.

He bowed, then said, “I believe this is my set, Miss Bennet.”

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. “So it is, Mr. Darcy.”

His smile was tentative as he offered his arm. “Shall we join the others?”

She nodded in silence and slipped her hand around his elbow. As he led her to the floor again, she took the

opportunity to say, in a low voice, “Sir, I feel I owe you an apology. When first we met this evening, my comments, I fear, led to some embarrassment for you. That was not my intention.”

Darcy surprised her by chuckling. “Do not make yourself uneasy, Miss Bennet. Had it not been you to make some remark, I am sure Fitzwilliam would have. Some time ago, he made it a personal mission to force me to engage more with strangers.”

Recalling what his cousin had said about the two of them, she felt warmth in her cheeks and tried her best to stifle the discomfiture. “Colonel Fitzwilliam spoke very highly of you during our set.”

Another soft chuckle escaped him as they took their places. “I am a little surprised—he usually saves the ‘Darcy is an excellent man’ speech for ladies he thinks I might...”

His words trailed off and he colored deeply. Elizabeth understood his embarrassment and quickly changed the subject, and after a few moments he relaxed and they conversed easily on other subjects, though Darcy did lapse into contemplative silence a time or two. A few times her gaze drifted to the other dancers, and each time she brought it back to Darcy, she found him staring; he would then color and blink, then look away from her. It was disconcerting, especially given he had never looked at her before with what her mind could only label as regret. But what did he regret? That he had asked her to dance or...

No. He could not possibly admire her—not in the way Henry did. It was the most ridiculous idea in the world!

Elizabeth dismissed the notion firmly and engaged Darcy in conversation about his sister, a topic he had never been shy about. Conversation throughout supper after their set was easy, though she did feel some return of Darcy’s reticence. Elizabeth also found herself engaged by those sitting nearest to them. It was an effort to try and keep their names straight, for she had met so many people that evening, but she did her best to conduct herself in such a manner as to do her family and

Henry's credit—especially when someone made a comment that belittled tradesmen, and another commented on the “nonsense and folly of people stepping out of their rank.”

After the meal was over, Darcy escorted Elizabeth once again into the custody of her chaperone, who then stood next to her brother. He nodded to his aunt and Lord Stashwick, then looked back to her.

“Allow me to say, Miss Bennet, that I think you will make a most excellent marchioness,” said he, before he bowed again, turned away, and walked off, quickly melting into the crowd. She did not see him again for the rest of the night.

-...-

Lady Disley's idea of having Henry present her to society at Almack's had been, by most accounts, a smashing success. Elizabeth had been both eager to read the Society pages and dreading it at the same time over the following days. She was described as well-mannered, an agreeable conversationalist, and there were those who admitted they would not mind knowing her better. A few “anonymous witnesses” had admitted to thinking her a scheming social climber, and some speculated about the reason for their marriage, wondering if a child would come “early.”

The majority of those spoken to had praised her beauty, her dancing, and her composure when confronted by Lady Winterbourne—and on *that* subject, *everyone* had something to say. If they weren't praising her grace under pressure, they were either calling Henrietta a spoiled, whinging brat or calling Elizabeth “selfish” for causing a rift in the family.

Henry assured her of his belief that she had impressed more people than had been put out and insisted that they must go out among society as though the negative opinions mattered little to them. To that end, he declared his intention of taking her family to a concert on Friday.



The day after the ball, a man knocked on the door at a respectable calling hour and introduced himself as Peter Curtis. He said he was there by order of the Marquess of Stashwick and that there were men watching the front and the back garden that were disguised in such a way as to be dismissed by the casual observer. He himself had been recommended to Lord Stashwick by Colonel Fitzwilliam—having served with him some years—to serve as Elizabeth’s personal guardian, and said he was to disguise himself as a footman. Mr. Curtis further offered to do the work of a footman so as to appear as a newly hired servant to any reporters or gossipmongers watching the house. He was thus welcomed, offered a spare set of livery by Frederick—who was closer to his size than George—and put to work well within hearing distance of a ringing bell should his more specific duties be required.

When Friday came, Bingley and Jane called shortly after breakfast. Peter was the one to open the door to them, and he raised an eyebrow questioningly when, after announcing the visitors, Elizabeth could not keep her countenance and frowned.

Drawing a breath, she expelled it as her aunt said, “Show them in, Peter.”

With a nod of his head, Peter quit the room, giving Elizabeth only seconds before his return to prepare herself. When the bodyguard had gone, Bingley greeted both Elizabeth and her aunt warmly (Mary was away again for her daily lessons). He then looked to Jane, who did appear somewhat embarrassed, and she added her own stilted greeting.

“Shall Mr. Bingley and I leave the two of you alone?” asked Mrs. Gardiner softly.

“No, Aunt,” said Jane. “I imagine you are already well aware of the unfortunate business that I must speak to my sister about—you and Charles might as well remain.”

Mrs. Gardiner nodded, and the two were invited to sit down. Awkward silence fell; Elizabeth knew why her sister had been brought to Gracechurch Street but was hard-pressed

to believe her apology would be genuine, given how she had behaved on Sunday.

She was likely being forced to apologise by Bingley, who was likely a proxy for Henry, who knew Elizabeth would never demand it.

Then again, she reasoned, Jane might just be truly remorseful, if what Henry had suggested was true. Maybe the pressure of being so perfect, of being expected to save all her family from destitution, of planning the wedding breakfast *she* wished for (rather than what her mother did) and having to deal with the false flattery and blatant ambition of Caroline and Louisa really had gotten to her.

Elizabeth decided she would endeavour to give Jane the benefit of the doubt, but she knew she would remain suspicious of her motives and behavior for some time yet.

“Lizzy,” Jane began at last, “I know you will not believe me at the present, but I am truly sorry for what happened between us on Sunday last. My behavior and accusations were unpardonable, but I beg you would consider forgiving me. I can offer you no excuse save that I have been so very overwhelmed of late. What with Mamma’s constant haranguing about why Mr. Bingley left and when was he coming back, then his sudden reappearance and learning the truth about his sisters and Mr. Darcy... Then we were planning a wedding and I was trying to shop for my trousseau, and Mamma was trying to tell me what to do and what to buy as if it was *her* marriage we were shopping for! And then after Charles and I returned from our wedding tour, there was Caroline and Mrs. Hurst all in a flutter over learning you were to marry a marquess and begging me to ensure they’d be introduced. It was all they could talk about!”

With a sigh, Elizabeth replied, “I want to believe you beg forgiveness, Jane, because you truly seek it, because you wish to repair our relationship and not because your husband has forced your hand.”

She held her hand up for silence when Jane opened her mouth to speak. “Pray allow me to finish,” she said. “You hurt

me deeply with your accusations of misconduct and cruelty. By the way you insinuated that had you... that I was not good enough to win the affections of a man of Lord Stashwick's station because I'm not as beautiful as you are. That our sister Mary was not worthy of his notice."

She paused, scoffed, and said, "Do you think you were the only one to feel pressured by our mother? You said I had no idea what it's like to be you, but you also have no idea what it's like to be me. To hear nearly every day that I'll never be as pretty as you or as lively as Lydia. To hear that I shall never get myself a husband with my sharp tongue and pert opinions and unladylike love of the outdoors. That I read too much and argue too much, that I am too quick to take offense. To know that because our father favors me and I only just tolerate her nonsense, I am the least liked of my mother's daughters."

Unable to sit still any longer, Elizabeth stood to pace, after two passes across the parlor coming to a stop and turning to face her sister. "All my life, I have been closer to you than anyone. I have trusted you with so much of my heart, my dreams, my aspirations and my frustrations ... and when you attacked me on Sunday, I felt as though I had no idea who you were—that never had I been so thoroughly wrong in my judgment of a person's character. You were an entirely different creature from the sister I have so loved for the last twenty years, and I could not fathom how I could have been so blind to your true nature."

Jane stood, tears coming to her eyes. "Lizzy, that wasn't me—not the real me, I swear it!" she pleaded with wringing hands. "I cannot rightly explain what made me do it—it was as though someone else controlled my actions from afar. I do not know who it was that came here and said those awful things to you, but I know that I never want to see her—or be her—again. Please, let us not be enemies. We are sisters."

Elizabeth regarded her solemnly for a long, silent moment, wishing rather than believing her to be sincere. Time would tell.

Returning to her place on the sofa, Elizabeth sat and waited for Jane to do the same. "I accept your apology, Jane.

But you must know this—in fact, I must impress upon you both to listen with care—I have it from Lord Stashwick and his sister that they are not, at present, inclined to be introduced to Miss Bingley or the Hursts. I am sorry if this offends you, brother Charles, but it is their decision.”

Bingley sighed. “I suspected such would be the case, given my conversation with His Lordship on Tuesday. I have informed both my sisters that their behavior is unacceptable, and that if they are to have any chance of changing the marquess’s mind, they must stop being so shamelessly ambitious—thank goodness Lord Stashwick does not hold their actions against me. He’s a capital fellow, and I should like to get to know him better.”

Elizabeth doubted very much that Henry or Lady Disley would change their minds—which meant that their relations would follow their lead—and hoped against hope that the sisters would not resort to accosting them in public should they meet. She noted that Bingley refrained from mentioning anything Henry had said about furthering his acquaintance with Jane, whom he had already met once, and surmised that he had taken Lady Disley’s stance on that matter: furthering an acquaintance with Bingley meant furthering an acquaintance with his wife (so long as she apologised to Elizabeth and behaved accordingly).

She drew a breath then, and said, “There is something else, which I know will be a disappointment to you Jane... but I have asked Mary to witness for me at the wedding. You and Mr. Bingley are still invited to attend the service and the breakfast to celebrate with us.”

Jane, Elizabeth could tell, was not pleased, but neither was she surprised. Her sister sighed, then said, “I understand your decision, Lizzy. I no longer deserve the recognition and must make amends for my behavior.”

“I’ve come to realize, Jane, that I do not care if you are mercenary—I believe we must all of us be to some degree, given how important it is to secure a good income for our survival, let alone our comforts,” said Elizabeth. “But what I cannot and will not abide is our relationship being abused for

the connexions and distinction my marriage gives our family. You were right about one thing: it *is* a miracle that Lord Stashwick took notice of me—not because I’m not as pretty or lively as my sisters, but because of our station in life. We are, to put it plainly, far beneath him. Yet he loves my wit, he loves my appreciation for books and culture. He likes to be teased and enjoys teasing me in return—he has even said he likes my impertinent nature. He has called me pretty from the first moment he saw me, and I suspect—much to my dread—that he means to parade me about and show me off to all of London society, because he loves me enough to say that he does not care what they think. A man who has every reason to think absolutely nothing of me *loves* me, Jane. And I love him far too much to see him hurt by someone who should only have supported and celebrated our happiness.”

Jane had the grace to appear chagrined, her cheeks taking on a soft pink hue. “I *am* sorry, Lizzy,” she said. “I should never have allowed myself to give in to my frustration, to all the badgering from Mamma or my new sisters. And I should never have presumed to use your marriage to increase my status or theirs.”

“I appreciate your saying that,” Elizabeth conceded. “Let us now speak no more of it and begin anew.”

For the first time since she had entered the house, Jane smiled. “I should like that, Lizzy. I should like it very much indeed.”



# Chapter Twenty-Six

**Jane and** Bingley's visit to Gracechurch Street yielded an almost immediate result.

Normally, Mary came home from her lessons with Lady Adelaide in one of Lord Stashwick's carriages, but that day Elizabeth and Mrs. Gardiner decided to save him the trouble. Elizabeth was hoping that she might see her beloved while they paid their respects to Adelaide, that she could inform him that Bingley had brought Jane to apologise. Her hope was realized, and as Mrs. Gardiner was receiving a report from Mrs. Wilson as to Mary's progress after her first full week of lessons, Elizabeth took Henry aside and filled him in. He remarked how pleased he was, expressed his hope that Jane was sincere, and said that he would send a note to Bingley inviting him and Jane to join their party at the theatre on Monday.

"Forgive me, my dear, but I should like to see for myself how Mrs. Bingley behaves among us," Henry added. "If she conducts herself properly, I will perhaps forgive her for hurting you myself."

At the play on Monday evening, Jane behaved in the same modest manner as she had before the argument—it was as if she had never been that person, for she was as polite and soft spoken as she had ever been before. She and Bingley were introduced to Lady Adelaide as well as Lord and Lady Disley, who had joined them, but Jane did not put herself forward, instead waiting for both ladies to engage her.

After the first act had ended, Mrs. Gardiner took Elizabeth aside and quietly remarked on her amazement—and pleasure—at Jane's transformation. Elizabeth did not wish to reveal she still had misgivings, but agreed with her aunt that she hoped the incident had been an isolated one. The one time

Bingley's sisters had been brought up was by Mary, who—in her natural way—politely asked if they were well. Bingley replied that they were and had sent with him their kindest regards.

Something about the way his eyes pinched when he spoke told Elizabeth they had had a lot more to say, but she chose not to press the matter.

On Tuesday, they attended a dinner party hosted by Lord and Lady Disley, and on Wednesday they went again to Almack's—Lady Disley said it would be expected. Henry insisted on dancing with Elizabeth twice, and when she joked that people would think he had a more than common interest in her, he had grinned and replied that as the *ton* were already talking about them, they should “give them something to talk about.”

Thursday, they went again to the theatre, this time to see an opera. Each event that week, save the ball, included the Gardiners and Mary; Jane and Bingley they saw again at the opera. Also at each outing, Elizabeth was introduced to many of Henry's friends and relations; during the intermission at the opera, even Mr. Darcy paid his respects to the family and introduced her to his sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy. Elizabeth found her to be a tall, pretty girl, but she spoke very little, reminding her of Colonel Fitzwilliam's claims that the poor creature was very shy. Invitations to dinner were issued, though Henry smilingly told each person that as he and Elizabeth were to be married very soon and spending a fortnight in Berkshire, they could not engage themselves before the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March.

It was now Friday again, and the Bennets and Gardiners were on their way to Stashwick House for dinner. It was to be another intimate family party that included Lord and Lady Edward, the Disleys, the Rowarths, and even the Bingleys.

The Winterbournes had conspicuously not been mentioned in Henry's note to her, written by proxy in the hand of Lady Adelaide and delivered by Mary when she returned from her day of lessons. Elizabeth had observed them at the opera, but no contact between the two parties was made other



than Lord Winterbourne briefly appearing at their box to pay his respects to his father-in-law.

Upon their arrival at Stashwick House that evening—just moments before Jane and Bingley—they found that some alterations had been made to the guest list. Elizabeth stiffened upon seeing that Lord and Lady Winterbourne stood near the lady's father by the fireplace, and a young man none of her own family had met before stood off to the side of the room conversing with Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Henry smiled and came directly toward Elizabeth, who noted that he was not using his walking stick. "My dearest Miss Bennet," said he as he took up her hand and bowed over it. "I am so pleased to see you, as always. Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, Miss Mary, welcome. Mr. and Mrs. Bingley, welcome."

He then turned around, deftly tucking Elizabeth's hand around his arm as he moved. "Come, my dear. I have someone I should like to introduce you to—but first, my eldest daughter has something she wishes to say."

Elizabeth was immediately filled with suspicion but said nothing as they approached where his eldest daughter stood. Lady Winterbourne's expression was as haughty as ever she'd seen it, though a light touch to her back from her husband led to her features relaxing—but only a fraction.

"Miss Bennet," the lady began in an arch tone; again, she was touched by her husband, and she swallowed. When next she spoke, her voice was softer. "I have been much lectured this last se'nnight as to the absurdity of my feelings and the impropriety of my conduct. I should like to offer you my apologies for the offenses I have given."

Elizabeth had been correct to be suspicious: her words were contrite, but insincerity was evident in her gaze. Clearly, by writ of the lectures she'd spoken of, Lady Winterbourne had been forced—either by her husband, her uncle, or her father—to swallow her abominable pride.

A small part of Elizabeth—a very small part, to be sure—wished she could humiliate Lady Winterbourne as terribly as

the lady had attempted to humiliate her at Almack's. However, she knew she had to be the bigger person, to follow God's word and turn the other cheek. To lash out in anger at the countess's insults and the attempt to ruin her debut would bring forth not only censure from Henry and his family or shame from her own, but it would lower her to a level of petty that would make her beneath *any* man's notice.

"I thank you for your apology, Lady Winterbourne, and accept it," said Elizabeth. "If I might speak on the subject of our relationship, you do not have to love me. You do not even have to like me, if that is your wish—but we shall always be family, and that is more important than anything else the world has to offer."

"That is something that my relations have impressed upon me, Miss Bennet—that nothing, and no one, should be allowed to tear a family apart."

Elizabeth met the lady's gaze with an unwavering one of her own. She'd just been issued a challenge, and she meant to meet it head-on.

Her family was then directed to the young man none of them knew. Henry introduced him as Reverend Robert Winstead, vicar of Stashwick Parish. He appeared to be in his late twenties, was tall and well-built, and though not precisely handsome, he had an amiable air that rendered his appearance agreeable, which brought to mind Elizabeth's first impression of Colonel Fitzwilliam. Mr. Winstead had traveled to London on family business but had arrived too late in the day to see his uncle's attorney. Having once been graciously granted an open invitation to stay at Stashwick House by his patron whenever he was in London, Mr. Winstead had called and humbly begged the marquess if he would be willing to put him up for the night.

"He is a wonderful parson," said Henry, which led to Mr. Winstead's cheeks turning a light shade of pink—clearly, the young man was not entirely comfortable being praised. "The people of my parish simply love him, as do I. So attentive to their needs and caring for their souls. I see you blushing, sir, but you know it is true. It is because of how much I truly

admire your ministry that I cannot bear to think of you having to stay in a hotel.”

“It-it is telling of how well you do God’s work, Mr. Winstead,” spoke up Mary tentatively, “that His Lordship thinks so highly of you. I have heard that too many young men join the clergy more for the wages than for the mission of guiding His children to righteousness.”

It was now Mary’s turn to blush as Mr. Winstead’s countenance brightened and he smiled at her. “You are very kind to say so, Miss Mary. I am a second son, you see—”

Colonel Fitzwilliam chuckled and muttered, “I know that feeling.”

“—and knew I would have to take up a profession,” Winstead continued. “I was called to the church early—I’ve known since I was a boy that ministering to my fellow man was what I was meant to do with my life.”

Mary then asked the gentleman if he had any favorite verses of scripture, and the two fell into conversation over which passages of the Bible most inspired them, both in times of ease and times of need.

Mrs. Gardiner drew Elizabeth and Jane aside and said softly, “I begin to think Lady Disley’s prediction of our Mary finding a husband without a debut may just come to pass.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Indeed, Aunt. After all, Mary is to live with His Lordship and I, and Mr. Winstead is the vicar of the parish. However, as they have only been acquainted a whole three minutes, I daresay it is rather too soon to say.”

“Nonsense, Lizzy! Just look at how alive their countenances are—and they are only speaking of Bible verses!” observed Jane.

“I will concede you that point—Mary does seem to be conversing with Mr. Winstead with far more ease than she ever has with a gentleman,” Elizabeth agreed. “And her pious nature has long instilled the idea that she might make an excellent clergyman’s wife. However, I must still urge you

both to caution—we do not even know if the young man is single.”

Simmonds then entered the drawing room and announced dinner. Each married man offered his arm to his wife, Colonel Fitzwilliam gallantly offered his to his younger cousin, and Mr. Winstead offered his to a blushing Mary. Henry, of course, escorted Elizabeth, who took the opportunity of asking if the young vicar was married. Her betrothed flashed a knowing smile and offered the information of Winstead’s being eight-and-twenty years old, that he had been serving as rector for three years (after a year as curate), that his income was an impressive fifteen hundred pounds per annum—for Stashwick Parish was quite populous—and that yes, he was single.

“Not only that, my dear, I happen to know that he hopes to marry soon and provide the vicarage with a mistress.”

Elizabeth smiled up at her escort. “And I happen to know that Mary would not only like a husband but would appreciate not being made the center of attention for a whole Season. Let us hope then that their getting on so well from the start is but a prelude to future happiness for both.”

Upon their entering the dining room, Henry announced a difference in the seating arrangement from the last dinner held there—Elizabeth would sit the hostess’s seat, as she was to be his wife in but three days—and the others could sit where they liked. Though only slightly disappointed to not be sitting next to her betrothed, Elizabeth could not discount the honour he did her, and she was pleased to have Mary on her left with Lady Adelaide on her right. Colonel Fitzwilliam sat next to Adelaide, and Mr. Winstead sat next to Mary, leading to more color coming into her cheeks ... and a smile to come to her lips.

Elizabeth smiled as well and could not stop herself thinking how very pretty Mary looked with a blush and a smile.

Dinner went splendidly. Elizabeth was very pleased to see Jane’s improved demeanor; it seemed her simply being included had satisfied her ambitions, at least for now, and no

one save Lady Winterbourne disdained the presence of a tradesman's son at the table, for Bingley was as lively and engaging as ever. Mary continued to get on well with Mr. Winstead, and Adelaide chatted to Elizabeth about how she was looking forward to the wedding, seeing her father looking dashing and she looking beautiful. At one point during the second course, Elizabeth had sat back and thought, *This is my life now.*

The thought made her smile with contentment.

The sexes separated after dinner as usual, and Elizabeth tried not to tense when Lady Winterbourne approached to say, "I understand that my father intends to take you into Berkshire after the wedding."

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes. I am to see the castle he calls a 'drafty old stone building' at last."

An almost wistful smile, which rather surprised Elizabeth, came to the young countess's face. "I love Stashwick Castle so much. It's a grand, ancient dwelling, deserving of the utmost respect. My family has been born and died in that castle for ten generations."

Elizabeth returned her smile. "I understand that feeling. Longbourn is not worth near so much as Stashwick Castle and is not quite as old, but it has been in my father's family for six generations. I think we all have a special place in our hearts for that place we shall always call home."

Lady Winterbourne nodded, then she excused herself and went to speak to her aunt.

"That was well done, Lizzy," murmured Mary, who came up on her right.

Elizabeth huffed softly. "It is the first time since I met the woman that she has not dripped disdain from every word. Makes me wonder if she's up to something. Like, does she pretend repentance now, only to intend standing up on Monday to disrupt the wedding ceremony?"

"I certainly hope not," murmured Jane.

“Indeed,” agreed Mrs. Gardiner. “Even she must consider the talk that would generate. It really is in her best interests to just accept her father’s choice and move on.”

“Besides which, does she not have her own family to manage?” asked Mary.

Elizabeth nodded. “She does have a daughter, yes. Lady Charlotte is two years, if memory serves. I have yet to meet her.”

She sighed then and looked around her. “I do hope that His Lordship is prepared for the chaos that shall descend upon him tomorrow. Mamma, Papa, and my sisters—staying here for two days and two nights. I do hope they behave themselves, for I cannot stay to manage them, and neither can Jane.”

“I will stay, if you think it will help, Lizzy,” offered Mary. “Lady Adelaide has already asked me if I should like to stay with our family. And you will be dining here again tomorrow and see them at church on Sunday.”

“Thank you, Mary,” said Elizabeth as Lady Adelaide stepped away from her own relations and moved to stand with hers.

“What an exciting weekend we shall be having here at Stashwick House!” said Adelaide.

Elizabeth grinned. “We were just talking about my parents and sisters coming tomorrow. I do not think you and your father are quite aware of what you take upon yourselves by inviting them to stay with you.”

“They cannot be all that bad,” said Adelaide. “I recall your parents were a little ... eccentric, and Mary and I have talked of her younger sisters being a little wild, but surely being in the home of a marquess will instill in them the need to behave properly.”

*You believe that, my lady, if it brings you comfort,* Elizabeth thought.

“I made certain in my last letter to Mr. Bennet that he must impress upon Kitty and Lydia the importance of being on

their best behavior,” said Mrs. Gardiner.

In another quarter of an hour, the gentlemen rejoined the ladies, and it was suggested by Lady Adelaide that they open up the doors to the music room for some entertainment. The idea was approved by all, so into the music room they went. Henry begged that Elizabeth be the first to exhibit, and she indulged him by playing a light Scottish air. Mary followed with a concerto, then Lady Adelaide played a sonata. Near the end of her performance, Hiral and a maid came in carrying trays with tea, coffee, cakes, and biscuits, which they placed on a table.

Waiting until the song had ended, Elizabeth applauded along with the others, then moved to the table to begin serving. Great was her surprise when Lady Winterbourne joined her.

“Do not look so stunned, Miss Bennet,” said the countess in a low voice. “Recall that I was my father’s hostess from the age of fifteen.”

Elizabeth only smiled and said, “I am grateful for the assistance, my lady,” then returned her attention to pouring tea and coffee. The last to be served were themselves and Henry, whom she had remembered insisted on all his guests being served before himself. Her betrothed usually took coffee, but this time he took the tea she had intended to drink herself with a cheeky smile and a wink. Elizabeth returned his smirk and poured another cup.

“Papa!” cried Lady Winterbourne softly. “Do you not wish to drink coffee, as always you do?”

Henry shook his head. “Not tonight, Henrietta. I am expecting important guests tomorrow, and wish to be well-rested,” said he, before lifting the cup to his lips. He frowned as though it tasted bitter, then took another drink. His frown became a grimace.

Turning to the others, he asked, “Anyone else’s tea taste funny?”

Replies to his query were all negative, and as though testing the beverage to be sure he wasn’t mistaken, Henry took

a third drink from his cup, shaking his head when he had. "Must be me, then, or this cup. There's something very odd..."

Holding the cup under his nose, he sniffed it. "Smells of bitter almonds," Henry murmured, before his eyes abruptly rolled back, the cup and saucer fell from his hands, and he fell to the ground, insensate.

"*Henry!*" screamed Elizabeth before she all but flew around the serving table and dropped to her knees at his side.

"Papa!" cried Adelaide at the same moment her sister yelled "What did you do to my father?!"

"*Simmonds!*" bellowed Lord Edward as Henry began to convulse.

Elizabeth slipped her hands under him and rolled him onto his side. "We must get him to vomit," she cried as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Sir," she heard Mrs. Gardiner say. "Fetch brandy at once. And find out if the house medicine chest has any solution of ammonia or hartshorn. Be quick about it!"

"Yes, ma'am," came Colonel Fitzwilliam's voice, then Elizabeth heard the sound of pounding feet leaving the room as Mrs. Gardiner knelt at Elizabeth's side.

"What good will brandy and hartshorn do?" asked Lady Disley tearfully.

"Induce vomiting," said Mrs. Gardiner. "My father is an apothecary in Derbyshire; I learned a lot from him."

More running was heard, then the sound of Lord Edward demanding an apothecary be sent for. "Tell him to bring charcoal, the marquess has been poisoned!"

A hand grabbed Elizabeth by the arm and squeezed hard as she was jerked to her feet. "What did you do to my father?!" Lady Winterbourne demanded.

"I did nothing!" Elizabeth snapped as she wrenched her arm from the other woman's grasp. "He took *my* cup of tea as I was about to pour his coffee, if you remember!"



“That’s right,” said Jane. “I distinctly remember you asking His Lordship if he was going to drink his usual coffee, and he declined it because of my family coming tomorrow. He said he wanted to be rested.”

“Then she must have known, and she is lying!” said Henrietta, her tone sounding desperate.

“Oh, don’t be a fool, Hetty!” said Lord Rowarth. “It would serve no purpose for Miss Bennet to poison your father before they are married!”

In only a minute or two, though the seconds seemed to stretch into infinity, Colonel Fitzwilliam returned, Hiral by his side. While he hurriedly poured some brandy into a glass, the housekeeper poured two teaspoons of something else into the glass he held. She stirred rapidly for a second or two and directed the colonel to lift his uncle’s head. The cup was passed to Mrs. Gardiner.

“We must get him to swallow,” said she as the cup was held up to Henry’s lips. He did not initially open his mouth, so Fitzwilliam pinched his nose together, forcing him to open his jaw to breathe. Mrs. Gardiner poured some of the brandy solution into his mouth and closed it, forcing him to swallow.

“Now, back on his side. It will act fast,” said Mrs. Gardiner.

Henry almost immediately responded and spewed sick onto the carpet, splashing Hiral’s gown. Elizabeth hurriedly took a handkerchief from her reticule and wiped at his mouth as Mrs. Gardiner and Colonel Fitzwilliam rolled him onto his back again. Elizabeth’s aunt dosed him a second time, they rolled him onto his side, he vomited, and they repeated the procedure until the arrival of the apothecary.

“What happened?” the man demanded as Hiral immediately moved to make way for him.

“That fortune-hunting cow poisoned him!” declared Lady Winterbourne, pointing at Elizabeth.

“Oh, do hold your jealous tongue, Hetty!” cried Lady Adelaide angrily as she sniffled. “Elizabeth loves Papa! If you

weren't such a selfish, bitter old shrew over no longer being the center of attention, you'd have seen it as clearly as I!"

"Bravo, Addy!" cried Fitzwilliam with a wink at Adelaide and a smirk at her sister.

"Pray save the petty family squabbling for another time if you've any desire of my saving Lord Stashwick!" snapped the apothecary. "One of you bloody tell me what happened."

"I prepared myself a cup of tea and was about to pour His Lordship a cup of coffee when he took my tea instead," said a tearful Elizabeth, pointing to the broken cup and saucer by Henry's feet. "He made a face, asked if anyone else's tasted funny. He said he smelled almonds, then he fell and began to convulse. He only took three drinks from it!"

"Might have been laurel water, given the rapidity of symptom onset and the smell of almonds," the apothecary muttered.

"That is what I suspected also, sir; I ordered brandy and ammonia or hartshorn, if the remedy chest had either," put in Mrs. Gardiner.

"We had the hartshorn," added Hiral.

The apothecary looked up as he finished checking Henry's pulse. "Very well done, madam. You may have just saved his life."



# Chapter Twenty-Seven

**For the** first time in hours, Stashwick House was quiet.

Henry—conscious but confused—had been carried upstairs by Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lord Rowarth, where his valet helped the apothecary tend him further, as the latter man said that the use of the charcoal would not only absorb the poison and induce more vomiting but would also cause him to temporarily lose control of his bodily functions. Hiral coordinated the constant supply of towels and water the apothecary required.

Mr. Gardiner, intending to be kind and give the marquess's family some privacy, suggested to Bingley and Mrs. Gardiner that they take their leave. Elizabeth adamantly refused to quit the house, declaring that she was as good as married to Lord Stashwick and she would remain there until he was on the mend. Lady Winterbourne threw a fit and once again accused her of being the one to poison the tea, at which time Lord Disley announced that nobody was to leave—a crime had been committed, and he had sent a footman to the nearest office of the Bow Street Runners.

Lady Winterbourne and Elizabeth were taken into separate rooms when the men arrived and questioned about what happened; Mrs. Gardiner accompanied her niece as chaperone. Elizabeth relayed the same version of events as she had shared with the apothecary, adding that she had looked up and smiled at Lord Stashwick after pouring her tea. Lady Winterbourne stood by her accusation that Elizabeth had known her father was going to drink tea instead of coffee and had poisoned him.

Following the two suspects, every person who had been in the drawing room was questioned (Adelaide and Mary were also accompanied by a chaperone), and several of them

recalled Lady Winterbourne's asking Lord Stashwick if he was going to drink his coffee as usual. They all recalled his asking if the tea tasted funny to them, and a few remarked on his expression when he drank it. Those closest to him remembered hearing him say something about almonds.

In private conversation, the two detectives agreed with the apothecary and Mrs. Gardiner's suspicion that the tea in the marquess's cup had likely been poisoned with laurel water, a controversial medication which could easily kill within moments if not taken in precisely measured doses. One of the ladies had to have administered it, but it was a question of which one, and why?

What decided the case for them was Elizabeth's having no real motive and that the tea had been intended for herself, as well as some damning evidence given by Lord Winterbourne: His mother, it so happened, had been prescribed laurel water by her physician for a persistent cough; the mixture soothed the cough enough to enable her to sleep peacefully, and he knew how firmly the doctor had stressed the importance of not taking more than the measured dose—a mere drop on the tongue was enough—as he had been present at that examination. When asked if his wife had access to his mother's rooms, the young earl replied in the affirmative.

Lady Winterbourne was then questioned again. After nearly half an hour's discourse, in which she was reminded that Elizabeth would not benefit from her father's death before they were married and then presented with the evidence given by her husband, she broke down in sobs and confessed. She'd put "a few drops, not half a teaspoonful" of her mother-in-law's medication into the pillbox ring she was wearing, intending to make "that wretched nobody" ill. She'd thought the blame would be cast onto the unknown person or persons who had tried numerous times to kill her father, and that Elizabeth would be frightened into giving up the engagement. She hadn't meant to kill her, just make her sick.

Lord Winterbourne was devastated to have his suspicions confirmed when the news was shared with the rest of the family. He picked up the bottle of brandy brought in by

Colonel Fitzwilliam, which had been left on the floor of the music room in all the chaos and proceeded to get himself very inebriated. Lady Winterbourne was taken away by the policemen—amidst loud and increasingly incoherent sobs begging for help—to stay with the warden of Newgate Prison until a trial could be held, as there were no quarters in the prison itself fit for a lady of her station and her husband had barred her from ever returning to his house.

When the lady had been taken away and Lord Winterbourne seen to a room by Lord Rowarth, Mr. Gardiner suggested again that it might be time to return home. And again, Elizabeth refused to go. Lady Adelaide graciously offered to provide a room for her, but even though Henry was ill, Elizabeth could not remain in the house without a chaperone. Adelaide then reminded the Gardiners that her governess was a widow and the housekeeper was married; surely their presence would enable them to observe the proprieties as well as ease Elizabeth's anxieties.

Mary, concerned over her sister's evident distress, suggested staying also, to keep Elizabeth and Adelaide company. Mr. Gardiner relented at last and said that he would see that their maids and a trunk of clothes were sent over from Gracechurch Street. He also assured Elizabeth that he would send an express to Longbourn, informing her parents of the situation, and emphasizing the need for their residence with him instead of at Stashwick House. Elizabeth and Adelaide both thanked him for the gesture, the former knowing she could not handle her mother in such a state of worry, nor could the latter do her duty and see to the proper comfort of her guests amidst her own concern. Lady Disley then said she would stay also; she was deeply concerned for her brother, but someone needed to run the house and give the servants directions.

Lord and Lady Edward said that they would also stay a little longer, and so Lord Disley, Lord and Lady Rowarth, Colonel Fitzwilliam, the Gardiners and the Bingleys departed. Lady Disley, after seeing that her niece and future sister had each of them taken a cordial for their nerves, sent them up to Adelaide's room after ordering two other guest rooms be

prepared for Elizabeth and Mary. She also ordered the rug in the music room to be pulled up for cleaning.

Now it was quiet. A now-sleeping Henry was being diligently tended by his long-serving valet. Adelaide, Mary, and Lady Disley had at last gone to bed, but Elizabeth could not sleep. She had changed out of her dinner gown after Kiran's arrival, but instead of donning her nightwear, she had opted for a day dress. She wanted to be properly attired should Henry rouse and ask for her. The apothecary had gone, saying the prognosis for the marquess was guarded—the laurel water had acted fast, but so had Mrs. Gardiner's remedy; Henry was weak, and still very ill, and there was, unfortunately, still some slim chance of the worst happening. The next couple of days would tell.

Needing some diversion from the fear that Henry might yet succumb to the poison, Elizabeth left her room and headed down to the ground floor, intending to find a book to read in the library. On approaching the bookroom, she noted candlelight peeking around the door, which stood slightly ajar. She also heard voices—and laughter—and frowned, having thought that those staying were all abed and that there was nothing much to laugh about at the present.

Lifting a hand to push the door open further, she stopped just as she was about to touch the aged wood when she heard Lord Edward's voice say,

“Lord, Lavinia, did you see Henrietta's face when Henry collapsed? ‘Oh no, I've killed my father!’” He laughed again. “It was priceless!”

“If only she had,” replied his wife in a disdainful tone. “Would save us the trouble of having to try again. You've paid out how much money to those low-born, inbred scum to get rid of him—and they've failed how many times?”

Elizabeth froze in absolute shock over what she was hearing ... and who she was hearing it from. Lord and Lady Edward—Henry's own brother and sister—were the ones trying to kill him and *not* his political rivals?!

With the greatest effort at being silent she had ever attempted, Elizabeth backed away from the library door—thanking God with every step that she had come downstairs with only stockings on her feet. Fortune remained with her as she backed across the wide entry hall toward the passage that would take her to a staircase and back up to the first floor—she reached it without Edward or Lavinia even knowing she'd been there to hear their evil words. When she had reached the passage, she turned and fled up the stairs that would take her to her room.

There she paced, wringing her hands and fighting the hot sting of tears, wondering what she could do or who she could talk to—wondering who would believe her. *Wait*, she said to herself, pausing in mid-stride. Was Mr. Winstead not someone she could trust? He was a vicar, after all. Someone Henry had trusted so much that he had offered the young man a place in his home rather than forcing him to stay the night at a hotel.

Of course, he'd trusted his brother and his sister-in-law as well, and look what *they* were up to behind his back, she mused bitterly.

Still, she had to tell *someone*, so left her room to head across the house to Henry's "private wing," as he'd once jokingly referred to it, since the master and mistress chambers took up an entire side of the first floor.

Elizabeth lifted her hand to knock on what once was the mistress's bedroom, but which Henry had confessed to turning into a private drawing room after his first wife had passed away. He'd told her that she could turn it back into a bedroom for herself when they returned from their short stay in Berkshire. She knew Mr. Winstead had taken up residence there, to keep abreast of any change in Henry's condition. He opened the door looking almost as well made-up as he had at dinner, save that he'd discarded his jacket and loosened his cravat.

"Miss Bennet!" he cried softly. "You look as though you're frightened—whatever's the matter? Oh, forgive me, do come in."



He stood back to allow her to pass, then moved away from the door, leaving it standing open.

“No!” Elizabeth cried softly. “You must close the door. Please, I... What I have to say must not be overheard.”

Mr. Winstead’s expression told her he did not wish to breach propriety, but her own must have convinced him to do as she asked, for he turned back and closed the door. Elizabeth released a small sigh of relief that there was yet another barrier between herself and those below.

She took a moment to look at her surroundings; the room was done in shades of green, and the furniture appeared comfortable. Mr. Winstead gestured to a damask chair and urged her to sit. Elizabeth wrapped her arms about herself and tried not to rock as he went to a sideboard where there were bottles of what she assumed were alcohol and several glasses. He poured a little reddish liquid into one and brought it to her.

“Forgive me saying so, madam, but you look like you could use this,” said he.

Elizabeth accepted it without question and took a drink—it was madeira.

After sitting on the end of the sofa adjacent to her chair, Mr. Winstead waited until she had taken another drink before he asked, in a soft voice, “Now what’s happened to put you in such a state? I know it’s nothing to do with Lord Stashwick—”

“Oh, but it is!” Elizabeth said in a soft voice. “I do not know how I can tell you, for I do not know what we can do about it!”

“Why don’t you share it with me? Perhaps I can help you decide what to do.”

She looked at him—*really* looked at him—trying to find something upon which she could base the absolute trust she needed to share the horrible secret she’d learned. Mr. Winstead’s gaze was warm and earnest, and he genuinely seemed as though he wished to bring her comfort.

Drawing a breath—and taking another fortifying sip of the madeira—Elizabeth explained her recent actions and what

they had led her to discover. Mr. Winstead's curious countenance quickly changed to an aghast one.

"I... I can scarce believe it. His own brother?" Winstead mused.

"How can you not, as a clergyman, believe one brother capable of doing evil to another?" Elizabeth countered. "Did not Cain kill Abel because he coveted the favor shewn the latter by God?"

Mr. Winstead grimaced. "That he did, Miss Bennet," the vicar conceded.

"Whatever shall we do now? We can hardly confront them," said Elizabeth. "And going straight to the authorities will only have them labeling me as hysterical, I'm sure."

Her companion nodded. "Aye, confronting them is not the best idea, and given the events which led to their wicked brevity, I daresay you are right about being labeled hysterical."

Elizabeth drank from her glass, trying to decide what she could do with the information she had learned—then she remembered who else was in the house.

"Lady Disley!" she suddenly cried softly. "Could we not tell her? She could send for her husband—surely the earl will know what to do."

Mr. Winstead agreed and went to the door that would lead further into Henry's chambers; he opened it and stepped through but did not close it behind him. Curiosity getting the better of her, Elizabeth rose and walked over to the doorway and saw that it led into a short corridor with two double-candle sconces on the wall to the left, the candles in them giving the space a muted yellow light. There was an opening at the end of the left wall that appeared to be a door. To her right, about a third of the way down, was a closed door; further down on the same side was a second closed door almost directly across from the one on the left, and at the end directly across from her was yet another door. Mr. Winstead was just then knocking on it, and a moment later it opened to reveal a man whose features were obscured by the vicar's shadow.

Elizabeth heard Mr. Winstead speak to the man—Henry’s valet, her overwrought mind told her—who nodded before he stepped out of the room and passed through the door on the left. Winstead then moved into the room before him, turning round and calling to her to join him. When she reached him, he offered a small smile and said, in an understanding tone,

“I did not think it would do a harm to allow you to see him for a moment, as I know how terribly worried you’ve been for Lord Stashwick.”

As her eyes had already fixed on the still, sleeping form in the middle of the four-poster bed across the room, a lump of worry now firmly lodged in her throat, Elizabeth could only nod. Slowly, concentrating on the rise and fall of his chest, she approached the bed, where she picked up his hand and bent to hold the back of it to her cheek, tears slipping from her eyes as she noted how chilly it was. How pallid his face looked.

“You must get well, my love,” she whispered. “We’re to be married on Monday, remember?”

Some minutes later—Elizabeth knew not how many had passed—Lady Disley suddenly appeared beside her. She absently registered some surprise when the countess wrapped an arm about her shoulders.

“He will live, Elizabeth,” she said. “My brother is a stubborn old goat—he’s survived five attempts on his life, so he’ll not allow a little thing like an accidental poisoning take him out now. Not when he has such a happy future waiting for him.”

Elizabeth turned her head to see that the elder woman smiled. There was still some measure of fear in her gaze, but she was also certain of her words.

“He loves you,” Lady Disley went on. “I must own that I have had my doubts on that score, but having seen firsthand how he looks at you—and how you look at him—over the last couple of weeks, even I cannot doubt that there is genuine feeling between you. And I would not deny my brother any measure of happiness after the losses he has suffered.

Knowing as he does the pain of such loss, he will fight tooth and nail to return to you so that you do not suffer the same.”

After giving her shoulder a squeeze, the lady went on. “Now come. Mr. Winstead says you have something important to tell me.”

Elizabeth nodded and allowed herself to be guided back to the sitting room. Mr. Winstead made sure all doors to the room were closed before pouring both ladies a small measure of the madeira and a draught of bourbon for himself. When he had seated himself at last, he offered Elizabeth an encouraging nod.

Drawing a deep breath, she repeated to Lady Disley the awful revelation she had overheard in the library. To say that the countess was stunned would have been far from the mark; she was so shocked that she dropped her glass, spilling the madeira into the carpet. Mr. Winstead hurried to try and clean it up as she sputtered nonsensically for several moments.

“Edward? And Lavinia?” the countess gasped, a hand over her lips. “I am beyond astonished. I-I know there’s been some rivalry between them over the years—some jealousy, even, on Edward’s part... But to go so far as taking the life of his own brother? Can he truly covet the titles and fortune that brought us all up that much?”

“It would seem that he does,” said Elizabeth. “Mr. Winstead and I agreed to tell you so that you might pass some message to your husband. We thought he might know what to do with the information.”

Lady Disley began to nod slowly. “Yes... Yes, we must inform Richard. He will know what to do.”

She rose and went over to the writing desk across the room, where she quickly gathered materials and scrawled out a note. Just as she was folding it, Lord Edward stepped through the door leading from Henry’s room.

It was all Elizabeth could do to keep her countenance when he smiled. Lady Disley, with remarkable self-control, offered a tired smile and welcome in return.

“I didn’t even know you and Lady Edward were still here,” she said casually.

“Lavinia and I have been reminiscing about the past, and the time just got away from us,” said her brother. “I went to your room to take my leave, but you weren’t there, so I stopped in Henry’s room to see if you were checking in on him. I should not be surprised to find both you and Miss Bennet waiting so near him together.”

“I could not sleep,” Elizabeth managed, even while fear shot through her. Had he gone to Henry’s room first to finish what Lady Winterbourne had started? *No*, she told herself firmly. Mr. Owens, the marquess’s valet, would have been there, and surely Lord Edward would not have been so bold as to try something on a man who could not defend himself—especially with a witness present.

“Nor I,” said Lady Disley. “We were just with Henry a few moments ago, Miss Bennet and I. He looks so dreadfully pale, but I know our dear brother, Ed—he will survive this. If those soulless scoundrels who’ve tried in the past weren’t able to do him in with their pistols and swords and knives, I’m sure a little laurel water won’t either.”

If her eyes did not deceive, that almost imperceptible tightening of Lord Edward’s eyes that Elizabeth just witnessed was a sign that he felt affronted at his sister’s words. *The audacity of the man!* she thought as he and Lady Disley exchanged a few more words. *What right has he to be offended?!*

“...and yes, we will be going straight to bed when we return home,” Lord Edward was saying as Elizabeth turned her mind back to the present. “Goodness knows I am not looking forward to telling Edward and Diana what their cousin did.”

Elizabeth started. His children—she’d near forgotten that Lord Edward was a father. Diana she had met only once, at the second Almack’s ball, where Elizabeth had seen for herself the evidence of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s claim from the week before—she did seem more interested in her husband’s relations than her own (which Elizabeth simply could not understand).

Edward the younger she would meet at the wedding breakfast on Monday, for the boy was away at school and would not arrive until that morning. What would happen to seventeen-year-old Edward when his parents' vicious natures were revealed, as surely they would be?

"We have to keep this quiet for as long as is possible, though I have little doubt that it will get out somehow," said Edward then. "Henrietta's mental state is already in question by the *ton*—what will they say of her and our family when they get wind of tonight's fiasco?"

"Not to mention poor Arthur and Charlotte," said Lady Disley. "He'll divorce Hetty, I'm sure, which will also cause a bit of scandal. And for Charlotte to have to grow up without her mother..."

Curiosity getting the better of her, though she detested being in the same room with Lord Edward, Elizabeth asked, "What... What do you think will happen to Lady Winterbourne?"

Lord Edward scoffed. "Soft heart that my brother has, he'll argue for transportation rather than hanging."

Lady Disley frowned. "Now, Edward, you know Henry could not bear to lose another child," said she. "Though I agree he'll plead for her life, I believe sending her off to Scotland or Ireland, with a guardian or two, would be suitable. She'll be alive, but she'll be far enough away as to not do anymore harm."

"Aye, that'll work too," her brother agreed. "Well, Lavinia and I are off. You should get some rest as well, Frances. And you, Miss Bennet."

"I do not know that I shall be able to sleep until my lord awakens," Elizabeth confessed. "But I shall have a go at it in a little while."

Lord Edward offered her a nod, then crossed to Lady Disley and bent to kiss her cheek. "Do try to sleep," he told her, before he bid Mr. Winstead a good night and departed.

Elizabeth let out a breath when the sound of retreating footsteps faded. “Forgive me, Lady Disley, but just being in the same room with him after what I heard was making my skin crawl,” she said, shaking herself.

“I was none too comfortable myself,” the countess confessed. She stood then and picked up the letter she had written and carried it over to the vicar.

“Sir, I know you must be as exhausted as are we, but I would very much appreciate your taking this note to my husband at Disley House personally. Few would question a vicar going out late at night.”

Mr. Winstead took the note and tucked it into the pocket of his waistcoat. “I will ready myself at once and depart as soon as it is certain that Lord Edward and his lady have left.”

He then took a step back and bowed before turning to Elizabeth and doing the same. When he had gone, Lady Disley turned to her and said, “I know that I should encourage you to go to bed, but like me, I suspect you wish to go and sit with Henry a while.”

“I would like to, yes,” Elizabeth replied.

Lady Disley walked over to her and held out her hand. “Then come, my dear. Let us go and keep my brother company together.”





# Chapter Twenty-Eight

A **knock** at the door at eight in the morning was unusual, even for town.

Pounding on the door was even more unusual. Darcy, who kept the country hours of his tenants even in London, was curious enough at the insistent sound to rise from his desk—where he was attending to correspondence—and make his way to the front hall, where he knew Tolliver would be looking severely upon whatever poor soul had seen fit to disturb a house just beginning to stir with such indecent noise.

He heard his cousin Theodore asking for him before he'd even made it to the hall. "I am here, Theo," said Darcy as he rounded the corner. "To what do we owe the pleasure of so early a call?"

"We must speak in private," said his cousin in a clipped tone.

Lifting an eyebrow in curiosity, Darcy nonetheless gave a nod, and turned to lead him back to the study. As soon as Darcy had closed the door, Fitzwilliam asked him,

"Have you any idea what my fool cousin did last night?"

Darcy shook his head. "I can see that you have a great desire to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it," said he as he crossed the room and moved to sit behind his desk.

"Henrietta is apparently so against Miss Bennet marrying her father that she decided to try and poison her," Fitzwilliam said.

Darcy shot to his feet. "She did *what?!*" he bellowed. "Is Elizabeth well? Tell me she wasn't successful!"

Fitzwilliam shot him a queer look, then shook his head. "No, but she did poison Henry instead. Nearly killed him, and

I hear his state of health is still very precarious.”

For a moment, Darcy could not speak through the rage that boiled in his veins. Lady Winterbourne had intended to kill Elizabeth, and that was something he could not understand—or forgive.

Drawing a deep breath intended to still the shaking of his hands, Darcy moved deliberately slowly as he sat down once more. “I think you’d better tell me everything.”

Fitzwilliam huffed and sat himself in the single visitor’s chair before the desk. “I’m sure you remember how Henrietta made a spectacle of herself at Almack’s last week, when she and Arthur arrived after the first dance.”

Darcy nodded. “I remember.”

“Well, you can imagine my surprise when the Winterbournes showed up at Stashwick House for last night’s family dinner,” Fitzwilliam continued. “Apparently, she had been very severely scolded by Arthur and Edward about how her behavior was affecting the family’s reputation and was threatened with an immediate withdrawal from London as well as having her pin money withheld if she didn’t apologize to Miss Bennet and her father and accept that he was to marry again.”

He paused and snorted. “Apparently, this gave her a rather nasty idea. She thought if she made Elizabeth ill that it would be blamed on Henry’s enemies, and that the lady would be frightened into giving up the engagement. Hetty stole some laurel water from Arthur’s mother—she was prescribed it by her doctor for a persistent cough but is only to take exactly measured doses. Henrietta took half a bloody teaspoonful and dumped it all into a cup of tea that Elizabeth had prepared for herself after dinner. Except Henry took the tea instead of his usual coffee because the Bennets are expected to arrive in town today, and they were to stay with him at Stashwick House because there is not room enough for all of them in Gracechurch Street.”

Darcy could not have described the immeasurable relief that Elizabeth had been spared and acknowledged the dash of

guilt and shame he felt at being pleased it had been Henry and not her.

Still, he knew that Lord Stashwick's illness—and possible death—would be devastating to Elizabeth. He would not wish that upon her for all the world.

“How does your uncle fare now?” he asked. “I assume he received treatment in time?”

Fitzwilliam nodded. “Aye, and in no small thanks to the quick thinking of Mrs. Gardiner—Miss Bennet's aunt, if you remember. As it turns out, she is an apothecary's daughter, and learned quite a bit under her father. She knew exactly what to do until an apothecary could be fetched, and the man that came said she may have saved Uncle Henry's life.”

“Then there is still some concern for his recovery?” Darcy asked.

The grim expression that overcame Fitzwilliam's countenance spoke the answer before he did. “Aye, there's some. Poor Miss Bennet refused to leave the house until she knew his fate for certain, and though Mrs. Bakshi and Mrs. Wilson are there, my mother stayed also to protect her reputation, and Miss Mary stayed to be company for her sister as well as Adelaide. And 'tis a good thing Mother was there.”

“And why is that?”

Fitzwilliam's concerned expression shifted into a scowl. “Miss Bennet went down to the library a little before midnight for a book, hoping to distract herself, and when she approached the door, she overheard my uncle Edward and aunt Lavinia discussing...”

He scoffed angrily and stood, moving away from the desk to pace again. “They were discussing Henrietta's foolishness and laughing about it—bloody *laughing* at her reaction—and wishing she had succeeded where ... where they had failed.”

It took but a moment for the implication of his words to register. Darcy stood. “You mean it is Lord and Lady Edward who have been trying to kill Lord Stashwick, and *not* his political rivals?”

Fitzwilliam grimaced. “Seems that way. You can imagine what Miss Bennet felt on hearing that nonsense! First, she shared it with Mr. Winstead, the Stashwick vicar—who is in town on some family business or other and staying with Henry—and then he agreed sharing it with Mother was the next best course. *She* then wrote to Father and had Mr. Winstead deliver the note to him personally. Father went back to Stashwick House to speak to Mother and Miss Bennet, and I with him, and as there was nothing we could really do so late, we did our best to comfort the ladies and get some rest.”

“I see,” said Darcy. “Involving your father is a wise idea, but what has any of this to do with me? Why are you here?”

“It was Miss Bennet’s idea,” said Fitzwilliam. At Darcy’s incredulous expression, he explained, “When we were bandying ideas about for exposing Edward and Lavinia, as we’ve nothing to go on besides Miss Bennet’s word—”

“Your father does not believe her?”

“On the contrary—Father not only believes her, he confessed to harboring a secret suspicion about my uncle Edward for some time. Only he had nothing to base it on but a gut feeling,” Fitzwilliam replied. “Father said there’s no reason at all for Miss Bennet to have fabricated the words she claimed to hear, but her word is not enough to take to the authorities. We need solid evidence.”

“And how does Miss Bennet think I can help?” Darcy pressed.

Fitzwilliam returned to the visitor’s chair. “I admit it was, at first, something of a snide comment on her behalf, but Father thought it a good idea.”

“What?” said Darcy through tightly pressed lips. “Do get to the point, Theo.”

“Miss Bennet said that it was almost too bad the two of you had made peace, as then you could distract Edward at the club by lamenting Henry’s poor choice of bride.”

“I see,” said Darcy, before chuckling ruefully. “We have made peace, yes, but I daresay she has not yet fully forgiven

my initial disdain of her family and my attempt to keep Bingley away from her sister. The man she first thought me to be would assert no scruples in sharing his opinion of the Bennet family or Lord Stashwick's selecting a bride from among the daughters."

His cousin snapped his fingers. "That is exactly—well, almost exactly—what Elizabeth said. Father agreed it was as good an idea as any, that he invite Edward out to the club to distract him and you happen to be there, saying something like what happened last night would not have happened had he not made a poor choice."

Darcy nodded slowly. It would not sit well with him, to disparage Elizabeth or her family even to catch a criminal, but as the idea had been hers, he would do it. If he could in any way help put an end to the attempts on Lord Stashwick's life, he knew it would ease her mind tremendously.

And he would do anything for Elizabeth, even if it meant ensuring her happiness with another man.

"And what of Lady Edward?" he asked. "Not to mention, how will any evidence be uncovered?"

"Mother is to invite Lavinia to Stashwick House to spend the day with her and the other ladies while I go to their house and look for letters or a diary or something," Fitzwilliam replied. "We are hopeful there is *something* at Faulkner House, as otherwise we have nothing."

"Will not the servants be suspicious of you?"

"Hopefully I shall be able to conduct my business without anyone being the wiser," Fitzwilliam said. "I'm to go there knowing my aunt and uncle are out but will ask that I might leave Edward a note on his desk. The servants at Faulkner House know me well enough that the request should not make them suspicious. If we are lucky, all the evidence will be in Edward's study, and I can be in and out in only a few minutes."

Darcy nodded slowly. "My only concern then is that Lord Edward's servants will mention to him that you were there,

and then he will be suspicious.”

“Aye, but by then—God willing—it will already be too late, and any evidence incriminating them will already be in the hands of the authorities.”

“Very well. What time am I to unexpectedly appear at White’s?” Darcy asked.

“About noon, or a little after. Mother is to send a letter to Edward’s house inviting him and Lavinia to take breakfast with us at Stashwick about half-ten, and from there, Father is to take him to White’s,” said Fitzwilliam.

With another incline of his head, Darcy replied, “I will be there.”

The hours after Fitzwilliam’s departure passed slower than Darcy would have wished. Georgiana noticed his distraction at breakfast and asked him what was wrong; not wishing to lie to her—for he certainly could not tell her of the scheme he was to take part in later—he said only that he had a great deal on his mind.

“You always seem to have a great deal on your mind lately, brother,” said Georgiana. “I know that I have been the cause of some of your concerns, and—”

Darcy reached over and laid his hand atop hers. “Dearest, enough of that,” said he softly. “We’ve been over this—Wickham took advantage of your fond memories, your kindness, and your tender heart. You are not to blame for what happened in Ramsgate.”

“But I must learn from it,” Georgiana said, repeating the advice he had given her.

With a nod, Darcy replied, “Yes, and I am sure you have. You are an intelligent young lady, and the next suitor you have you know not to commit to without having consulted myself and Theodore, and perhaps even Lord and Lady Disley.”

“Now you mention Aunt Frances, I must say I am looking forward to her brother’s wedding. Lord Stashwick has suffered so much in the loss of his wife and then his son, has he not?”

Given his inappropriate feelings towards the bride, it was difficult for Darcy to answer with a simple “Yes, he has.”

Georgiana smiled tentatively. “I know I only met with her a few moments at the opera, but I was delighted with Miss Bennet. Lady Adelaide says that she and her sister Mary are so very kind and amiable, and that Miss Bennet has made her father so happy that she cannot lament her lower status or her age at all.”

After clearing his throat to force back those feelings which just would not lie dormant, Darcy said, “As you know, I am acquainted with Miss Bennet and her family. I can assure you and anyone who should ever ask that while the Bennets may lack fortune and connexions, Miss Elizabeth Bennet is in all other ways very well suited to being a lady of rank. She has a grace and maturity about her that is unmatched.”

“It sounds as though you admire her yourself,” Georgiana observed.

“I do, but not as your words suggest,” said Darcy, telling the first—and hopefully only—lie he would ever tell his sister. He could not confess the truth to her, or to anyone. He wished he could have kept it even from himself, but it was too late for that. He could no more deny his feelings for Elizabeth than he could stop breathing.

If only he had allowed himself to admit it *before* Lord Stashwick’s fateful trip through Meryton—he would not now be battling his conscience for coveting another man’s wife.

“Miss Bennet is everything that is charming and amiable in a young lady of genteel birth, dearest,” Darcy continued. “I admire her for her kindness, her wit, and her patience with the more difficult members of her family. We are not quite friends, as there was an unfortunate misunderstanding between us, but I can say with certainty that I believe that will change. After all, Lord Stashwick is our aunt’s brother, so we may see them at family parties at Disley House.”

“Why do you not invite them here, after they are married? Is it not a duty to have a dinner party to welcome a new bride into the family?” Georgiana queried.

“It is, yes,” her brother replied, quelling the urge to fidget at the idea of hosting the couple in his home. “But as we are not technically related to Lord Stashwick himself, we are not bound to follow that tradition. I do not doubt that Aunt Frances will see to the duty for us.”

“But Adelaide said when last I saw her that there was a dinner at Disley House this week, and we were not invited to it!”

Shame flooded his veins then, and with great reluctance, Darcy confessed, “We were invited, Georgiana, but I declined to attend as I had another engagement that evening, and I could not in good conscience send you alone among so many when you have so much difficulty with strangers.”

“I see,” his sister replied, her countenance crestfallen as she looked down at her plate.

“I am sorry, dearest. I see I have disappointed you,” said Darcy as he looked at her. He’d already broken his vow and lied again—he’d not been otherwise engaged but had declined as he had wished to avoid seeing the happy couple together. It had been difficult enough on his heart to watch them dancing together at Almack’s, or to watch them between dances when Elizabeth would smile up at Stashwick or laugh at something he said. Darcy could tell when she was teasing him and when she was being teased by the expression on her face and had found himself wishing he were standing in the marquess’s place.

His sister’s expression, however, impressed upon him that it was unfair to punish her for the desires of his sinful heart.

“Would it please you to host a dinner for our aunt’s brother and his wife?” he asked.

Georgiana looked up. “Oh, it would! I-I must get over this wretched shyness, after all, and how better to do that than invite people to our home? I am sure Mrs. Annesley will be pleased as well, for it will give me an opportunity to practice the hosting skills she has been teaching me.”



She paused, swallowed, then said, “And would it not also be a kindness to do so, and acknowledge your acquaintance with Miss Bennet?”

Darcy forced a smile. “You are correct, my dearest sister. It would indeed.”

Georgiana brightened then and chattered with growing excitement about hosting her first dinner party—who to invite, what to serve—and he listened with half an ear as he battled within himself. He needed to conquer his attachment to Elizabeth—to defeat it utterly—for she was engaged to another man and could never be his. It was inevitable that he would see the Stashwicks together while he remained in town, and he had no desire to appear uncivil, or uncomfortable, in their presence.

As he was preparing to depart for White’s shortly after breakfast, there came another knock on his door. This time it was Bingley, who came to ask him if he had yet heard what had happened at Stashwick House the night before.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam was here this morning to inform me,” Darcy replied. “So, you were there?”

Bingley nodded as they stood together in the hall, waiting for Darcy’s carriage to be brought around. “Aye—Jane and I were very much honoured by the invitation to dine with His Lordship and his family. Oh, Darcy—poor Elizabeth! My sister was so terribly frightened when the marquess collapsed, but how righteous was her anger when Lady Winterbourne accused her of poisoning him!”

Darcy snorted. “Lady Winterbourne is a fool,” he muttered, just barely keeping the sudden flash of anger he felt in check. “From what Theo told me, Elizabeth’s was the only tea that was off flavor—it makes no sense that she would poison her own cup. The blame could hardly fall to Lord Stashwick’s enemies if only one of the party suffered—clearly, Her Ladyship did not think things through.”

“And laurel water!” cried Bingley with a shake of his head. “She claimed she only wanted to make Elizabeth ill, not kill her, but she also does not appear to understand how very

deadly the stuff is—it nearly killed a man twice my sister’s size, and he had but three sips from the cup!”

He huffed, then drew a breath. “As it is, I’ve just come from Stashwick House—dear Jane insisted on condoling with her sister. Lord and Lady Disley were there as well. Stashwick’s condition is still guarded, according to your good aunt, and he had yet to waken this morning, which concerns everyone.”

“Understandably,” said Darcy as he heard the carriage draw up outside. “I am sorry, Charles, that I cannot stay to visit with you. I am going out on an errand for my uncle.”

Bingley, he quickly surmised, had not been made aware of the allegations against Lord Edward and his wife. It was for the best, he thought—the fewer that knew the better, as then it could not accidentally get back to Edward that he was under suspicion.

“That’s quite all right, I understand,” said Bingley.

The two men went out together after Darcy had put on his greatcoat, gloves, and hat. As the footman was opening the door for him, a man on a horse drew up behind Bingley’s own carriage and hopped quickly off. Darcy’s eyebrow rose in curiosity as the man jogged toward him.

“One o’ you gents Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy?” he asked.

Darcy nodded. “I am Mr. Darcy.”

The man, who was about Bingley’s age, reached into an inside pocket of his coat and pulled out a letter. “I bring this message on behalf of Mr. George Wickham.”

Darcy fought the urge to scowl as he took the letter in one hand and fished in a pocket with the other for a few coins to compensate the messenger—wondering what the devil Wickham could possibly want now.

He waited until after the messenger had thanked him and departed before opening the letter. Beside him, Bingley said, “Mr. Wickham? I thought he was a resident at Marshalsea for the foreseeable future?”

“He is,” Darcy muttered as he scanned the short missive.

*Darcy,*

*I know I'm the last person you wish to hear from, but a report of a most alarming nature has reached me—that the warden has agreed to allow the army to come in and claim whatever able-bodied men there are to go to the front in France. I know you could care less about my well-being, but frankly, I've no wish to die for King and country. Call me a coward if you like—I call it self-preservation.*

*That said, I confess I was content to bide away some time here at old Marshalsea while I worked out a plan to revenge myself on you once and for all, but knowing for certain I will be culled from the herd, as they say, has given me reason to call our differences settled if you will but consider aiding me. I know you are rolling your eyes over there, Darcy, but I can assure you I have information for which you will be willing to pay. I know who has been trying—and failing—to murder the Marquess of Stashwick, to whom I know you are related by marriage.*

*Have your attention now, do I? Come to Marshalsea to see me. Agree to pay my way out of this cesspool, and I will tell you everything.*

*G.W.*

The temptation to crumple the letter and ignore it was great, but how could he? For Wickham to have claimed to know the identity of Lord Stashwick's would-be assassin, when he could have told any number of lies to try and garner attention? How could he have possibly chosen *that* particular issue about which to claim knowledge if he did not have something of relevance to say? It was too particular. Did he dare ignore him, or did he go and chance being late arriving at White's to play his part there?

“Darcy? Is everything all right?” Bingley asked.

Darcy drew a breath and released it slowly as he folded the letter. "I do not know," said he. "But I shall soon find out."

"So, you are for Marshalsea, then?"

"Yes, though first I am for Stashwick House—Fitzwilliam was to return there after his visit here; I hope to catch him before he goes out again, as I should like him to hear Wickham with me."

Darcy stepped into his carriage then, but stopped the footman closing the door as he leaned forward to say, "I will see you again soon, I do not doubt," before giving his destination to the footman, who then closed the carriage door. When the man had climbed up on the back of the carriage, he tapped the roof with the top of his walking stick. He wondered again as the carriage pulled away from the pavement:

*What does he know, and how does he know it?*



# Chapter Twenty-Nine

**Marshalsea Prison** was a place he had never thought to look upon himself.

*And yet*, Darcy thought as he stepped out of his carriage, *here I am*. With a disdainful look around, he noted the dreary aspect of the building and its environs. He also noted a rather pungent odor that threatened to have his stomach casting up its accounts.

“Dreary, is it not?” Fitzwilliam mused.

Darcy snorted. “Indeed.”

Fortune had been with him on his arrival at Stashwick House—Fitzwilliam was just starting off on his own part of the scheme. Upon hearing the reason for Darcy’s arrival—and reading Wickham’s letter for himself—he’d agreed that the alleged evidence in the rogue’s possession was too great a coincidence to be ignored.

“I will be glad to go with you,” said he, and off together they had gone.

Drawing a breath, Darcy said, “Let us get this unsettling business over with.”

A nod was Fitzwilliam’s only reply, and they headed inside. Though he disliked using his name and connexions to advantage, preferring to get by on his own merits, Darcy did not hesitate to introduce his cousin as “the son of the Earl of Disley” and himself as the earl’s nephew. Their credentials garnered them an audience with the warden in minutes, a corpulent man whose profits at the prison business had clearly seen him far better fed than the inmates.

“What can I do for you fine gentlemen?” he asked when they had been shown into his office.

“First, tell me how a man within your oversight would get a message out?” Darcy asked.

The warden blinked. “If he is amiable and charming enough, or promises payment, he may easily convince one of those who have day privileges to deliver a letter for him.”

“Day privileges?” queried Fitzwilliam.

“Some of our inmates—very few, mind—when repaying their debts also pay a fee for the bar and shop here, as well as for the freedom to leave the confines of Marshalsea during certain hours of the day,” the warden replied.

“We are come to speak to a man in residence here who had a message delivered to me not an hour ago,” said Darcy then. “I must ask you to have George Wickham fetched at once.”

“Certainly, Mr. Darcy,” said the man, who then picked up a bell on his desk and rang it. The young man who sat at a desk in the outer office stepped inside, and to him was given instruction to fetch Wickham from his cell. Several minutes passed, in which refreshments were offered to them; Darcy and Fitzwilliam declined.

When at last Wickham appeared, Darcy was a little surprised to find him looking rather unkempt. His old friend’s clothes, face, and hands were dirty, his hair uncombed, his cravat hanging loose. He sported several days’ growth of facial hair, and his face and form were thinner than when last he’d seen him. Never had Darcy observed him in such a state of dishabille, and it was a moment until he could look away.

“Will you give us privacy, sir?” Fitzwilliam asked the warden.

“Of course, Colonel,” said he, and a moment later the three were alone.

“I note you took a good look at me, Darcy,” said Wickham. “This is what your cruelty has reduced me to.”

Darcy scowled and scoffed. “*My* cruelty? You abuse innocent young ladies and leave them with no hope of relief; you run up debts you have no means or intention of paying,

leaving merchants to take a loss in their profits and your friends to go about with lighter pockets—you toyed with the affections of my sister, whom you once claimed to consider as your own, all for the sake of getting your hands on her fortune—and you have the audacity to call *me* cruel?”

With every word he had stepped closer to Wickham, who at first feigned nonchalance but was eventually forced by Darcy’s proximity to take a step back. He swallowed, then said, “Well, as I told you in my letter, all that is neither here nor there if you will get me out of this madhouse.”

Now Fitzwilliam took a step toward him. “What could you possibly know about the attempts on my uncle’s life?” he demanded.

Wickham flicked his eyes to the colonel. “I could possibly know who is behind it because I was approached by this person—based on my alleged reputation as a reprobate—to take part in the last attempt on his life.”

“Someone asked you to try and kill the Marquess of Stashwick?” Darcy asked, his tone belying the dubiousness he felt. “How are we to know you did not simply make this up, having read about the previous attempts in the papers?”

Fitzwilliam took another menacing step, a scowl on his face as he asked, “And how are we to know you didn’t accept the offer?”

Wickham scoffed. “I may be a cad, Fitzwilliam, but I’m no murderer. I turned him down,” said he. “Later that same day, I received this note.”

He then bent and fiddled with the cuff on the left leg of his knee breeches, pulling out a small square of paper from the fold. Holding the square up, he said, “In the afternoon of the day that this gentleman approached me in Hyde Park, I received this ... warning. If I didn’t do as I had been told, I would face the same fate as the man whose life I was to assist in ending. It was just my good fortune that I happened to only be in town for the day and was able to return to Hertfordshire and my regiment, with he none the wiser as to my whereabouts.”



Fitzwilliam held out his hand even as Darcy said, “The note could come from anyone, or it could be forged.”

“Come now Darcy,” said Wickham with a knowing smile and a shake of his head. “Surely you know that even I would not make such a claim without something genuine to back it up,” he said as he slowly lowered his hand, leading Fitzwilliam to emit an impatient huff before snatching it from him.

Unfolding it, he scanned it quickly before handing it to Darcy with an astonished expression. “It ... It *is* my uncle Edward’s handwriting,” he said.

Darcy grimaced as he read the letter; the moment he lifted his head, Wickham snatched it back from him. “Can’t have you walking out with my only ticket out of here, now can I?”

Ignoring the jibe, Darcy looked to his cousin. “I am surprised he sent such a damning piece of evidence in his own hand,” said he. “Did he never consider that Wickham could blackmail him with it?”

“You know, I *had* considered that, especially when word began to circulate in Meryton that the Bennets were hosting a poor carriage driver whose employer and footman had been killed in an attack on the road north,” piped up Wickham. “I recognized the name Henry Faulkner at once as that of the Marquess of Stashwick—but at the same time, I did not wish to give his younger brother knowledge of my location, thereby giving him the means of carrying out his threat.”

“Why did you not take this information to the magistrate when he returned to Meryton?” Darcy demanded.

“Simple: I knew that one day I would need leverage against you, and that day is here. I’d have bided my time longer in this rathole in order to take you for what I could get and then some, but I haven’t the time to waste any longer,” Wickham said. “I told you, I’ve no wish to be enlisted to serve King and country—no offense, Fitz, it just isn’t the life for me.”

Fitzwilliam snorted. “Afraid of harming that pretty face of yours, eh, Wicky?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. That, and I’ve simply no desire to risk my life for little to no reward.”

“What is it you want, Wickham?” Darcy asked tersely.

“I told you: out of here,” Wickham replied. “I’ve no wish to be here when the army comes calling for recruits, and my informant says it’ll happen any day now. You pay the money to settle the debts requiring my residence, I give you the letter.”

“I don’t trust him, Will,” said Fitzwilliam. “He wants more than his freedom, I guarantee it.”

“Of course, I do,” Wickham retorted, “and I should certainly negotiate for it if I thought it would do me any good. But I know Darcy as well if not better than you—he’ll consent to no more than paying the debts.”

Darcy, who had been staring at Wickham with a scowl on his face during the exchange, crossed his arms, then said, “I’ll do it—I’ll pay the debts and even give you a little more to send you on your way.”

Wickham smirked. “How magnanimous of you, Darcy.”

“On *one* condition,” Darcy continued. “I never want to see you again, or even hear your name spoken. You will stay away from me, from my sister, and from anyone of my intimate acquaintance. To put it succinctly, you will never bother me or mine again.”

“Blimey,” said Wickham in a mocking tone as he snapped his fingers. “That means I shan’t be able to drop in at the wedding breakfast of our dear friend Miss Elizabeth Bennet—whom, as the papers say, is soon to be the aunt of ol’ Fitzwilliam here. Must be very discomfiting for you, Fitz, to have a lady nine years your junior for an aunt.”

“Miss Bennet and I are good friends,” Fitzwilliam said sharply. “That she is to also be my aunt does not signify to either of us.”

“One other thing, Wickham,” said Darcy. “Before you disappear, you must give witness to the authorities as to Lord Edward’s approaching you to murder his brother. Otherwise, the letter may be declared a forgery.”

“But where shall I have gotten a sample of his handwriting in order to copy it?”

“You’re a handsome, charming cad,” said Fitzwilliam, with a smirk. “You could easily have seduced a maid in his house into slipping some letter or other out of his study.”

The colonel’s countenance then lit up and he snapped his fingers. “As a matter of fact, I’ve another idea how you can earn your freedom—I may even speak to my father about further weighing down your pockets.”

Wickham grinned and crossed his arms, his nonchalant air giving Darcy the distinct feeling that he and his cousin had been manipulated into offering more than he deserved.

“I am all astonishment, Colonel,” Wickham was saying. “Pray tell me what else you think I may be able to do for you?”

“We’ll get you cleaned up and take you with us to White’s—my father is there with Edward now,” said Fitzwilliam. “I think, perhaps, that seeing you might possibly trigger him in some way. His mask of infinite concern might just slip.”

Darcy had to admit it was worth a try, and hoped Wickham would consent so that he wouldn’t have to carry out the original task he’d been assigned.

“Do we have a deal, Wickham?” he asked. “I pay the debts, you assist us in getting Lord Edward arrested, then you go away forever.”

Wickham’s gaze drifted between them, then he held out his hand. “Deal.”

After arranging for Wickham's debts to be paid and securing his release, the three men departed from Marshalsea eagerly. Darcy's footman was quick to open the door for them, but before allowing Wickham to get in, Darcy held out his hand for the incriminating letter; his old friend smirked as he laid it into his palm before climbing into the carriage. Fitzwilliam leaned close and whispered, "Just say the word, Darcy, and I'll shoot him."

Darcy stifled a snort. "Wait until after this dreadful mess is over," he muttered back.

Fitzwilliam chuckled, then climbed into the carriage and sat across from Wickham in the rear-facing seat; Darcy instructed the driver to take them to Disley House, then climbed in and took the spot next to his cousin.

"Disley House, eh?" said Wickham. "Why do we go there?"

"My sister is at home, and I'll not have you anywhere near her," Darcy said, his voice near to a growl. "Beyond that, Theodore is closer to your size than I am."

Wickham's gaze flickered, for half a second showing something akin to regret. "How does Gigi do?"

Fitzwilliam kicked him in the shin. "Do not call my cousin by that name," he snapped. "You long ago lost that privilege."

Grimacing in pain, Wickham reached down to rub the spot where he'd been kicked. "How does *Miss Darcy* do?" he asked.

Darcy narrowed his eyes. "Do you truly wish to know the damage you caused last summer?" he asked. "Because I'll be glad to appeal to that last vestige of decency—if there is any left in you, that is—and tell you that you destroyed her confidence in herself and her judgment of others. Georgiana didn't leave her rooms for *months*, and as shy a girl as she was before, she is now almost terrified of leaving the house."

The last part was not entirely true—though it had taken time to get his sister to begin going out again, she wasn't truly

terrified. She just refused to speak unless directly spoken to or prompted to by a member of the family and rarely looked anyone in the eye.

Of course, Wickham did not need to know his words were a slight exaggeration.

For the first time in years, Wickham looked as though he truly regretted his reprehensible behavior. “Then I am truly sorry,” he said. “It was not my intention to do her harm. I care about Georgiana—”

Darcy snorted with derision. “Balderdash!” he snapped. “You only cared about revenging yourself on me because you were knee-deep in debt and desperate for relief, and I refused to appoint you to the living that *you gave up*. Besides the fact that it had already been given over to another, we both know you’ve no business being a clergyman, given your propensity for profligacy.”

Fitzwilliam scoffed and said, “That’s the problem with you, Wickham—you don’t think about anybody but yourself. Always looking for a handout instead of truly earning your fortune.”

“What, like you?” retorted Wickham with a sneer. “When have you, the second son of an earl, ever wanted for money?”

“It’s not about being in want of money, it’s about managing it wisely when you have it,” returned Fitzwilliam. “Like it or not, Wickham, you are *not* a gentleman. You don’t have the fortune of a landed gentleman and you never will because you can’t control yourself. You think just because your godfather showed you favor that you deserve the same rights and privileges as his legitimate children, but you don’t. You want a fortune handed to you because you want the easy life, but that’s not the way it works for the son of a steward. The sphere into which you were born means you’ll have to *earn* it, but you’re too lazy for that. You’ve never cared to work, to save, to invest, and instead have sought only to satisfy your perverse pleasures for women, drink, and games of chance. You always spend more than you can afford and run up accounts and debts of honor you cannot repay because

you've spent all your money. You're always in trouble because of your own mistakes and no one else's and you're looking for the easy way out instead of taking accountability for your actions."

He paused for breath, then snorted in disgust. "It's no wonder Edward heard enough about you to think you'd be willing to go mercenary and take a man's life for coin."

"You're only helping us bring him to justice now to save your own skin," added Darcy. "And because we've promised you money in return."

Wickham crossed his arms and glared at them. "Gracious me, old friends, tell me how you *really* feel about me."

Fitzwilliam smirked. "You don't want to know how I *really* feel."

Wickham fell silent and turned his sullen gaze out the window. When at last they had reached Disley House, Darcy ordered the coachmen to wait at the pavement, then the three men hurried inside, where Fitzwilliam instructed the butler to have a large bucket of hot water brought to his room as soon as possible.

"We haven't time for a full bath, Wickham, the bucket will have to do," he said as they made for the stairs.

"Am I at least to be allowed a sliver of soap to wash away the grime of the poor house?" Wickham asked in a petulant tone.

"Perhaps," Fitzwilliam replied as they entered his rooms. "And don't touch anything."

Wickham scowled as Fitzwilliam's valet came into the room by way of the dressing room. The man was told to select the oldest ensemble still in a condition to be presentable at White's; this earned Wickham a disdainful once-over with a lifted brow, but he nonetheless complied with his master's order and dipped into the dressing room again. When the water was brought, Fitzwilliam told the footman to carry it into the dressing room, then advised Wickham to make quick work of cleaning himself up if he wanted a shave as well.

About half an hour passed before Wickham emerged from the dressing room, clean shaven and dressed in clean clothes that were just slightly too big for him.

“Am I presentable now?” he asked.

Darcy ignored him and turned to Fitzwilliam. “We should go at once,” said he.

Fitzwilliam nodded. “Aye. I’m sure Father is already wondering where you are.”

“Will you go with us?”

His cousin shook his head. “No, I still mean to go to Edward’s house. There may yet be further evidence there, and even should there not be, I can find a sample of his handwriting to present to the courts with that letter, to prove they were written by the same hand.”

Darcy nodded. “Do try not to make your search too obvious.”

Fitzwilliam grinned, then the three made their way outside once more, going in opposite directions on the pavement. Wickham was uncharacteristically silent the first couple of blocks Darcy’s carriage carried them across town, before he asked, “How do you intend we should confront His Lordship?”

“I gave it some thought while you were bathing,” said Darcy. “I can see no alternative to simply confronting him directly. You may not even have to speak right away—just sit down and grin in that annoyingly arrogant way of yours.”

“And what will you do?”

“First, I shall present the letter to Lord Disley. He can then take the lead.”

To his surprise, Wickham nodded. “Aye. Sounds like the way to go.”

It wasn’t long before they arrived at White’s, the most prestigious gentleman’s club in the city. Darcy reflected on how Wickham had always wanted to be a member of the elite set that made up its membership, and though he could never

achieve that goal, he was at least about to see what he had coveted for so many years.

After signing himself in and listing Wickham as a guest, Darcy led the way from the entry hall deeper into the building. A polite inquiry of a steward told him where he could find his uncle and Lord Edward, so the two took the stairs to the first floor. The lounge in which the two elder gentlemen sat was sparsely populated, but there were more than enough witnesses should testimony of outsiders be needed.

Lord Disley saw them first; he frowned on noticing Wickham but quickly schooled his expression as he stood to greet him.

“Darcy, there you are,” he said, though his eyes were on Wickham as the rogue rounded the table and pulled out a chair next to Edward, that devilish smile which had led to the ruin of too many young ladies firmly in place.

“Lord Edward, how do you do?” said Wickham, ignoring Darcy’s edict of not speaking. “Do you remember me? We met oh... what was it, about two months and a half ago? About the 26<sup>th</sup> of November, in Hyde Park.”

“Darcy, what is the meaning of this?” asked Lord Disley.

Darcy wordlessly handed him the threatening note as Edward sat back with a supercilious expression. “Young man, I do not know who you are, but I would advise you to address me with the respect I am due. You know my name; therefore, you know I am the brother of—”

“The Marquess of Stashwick, I remember,” Wickham finished for him. “Well, I did not know when first we met that you were his brother—I had to do a little research to find that out—but when I did, you can imagine my astonishment when it became clear to me that the stranger who had approached me in the park, offering to pay me—and I quote—handsomely, to kill the marquess was his very own brother.”

Lord Edward’s gaze narrowed, and his color heightened as he stood slowly to his full height. “Boy, I will have you



arrested for slander for that scurrilous insult. How dare you impugn my honor!”

Wickham leaned back and draped his arm across the back of his chair as though he had not a care in the world, and in his peripheral vision, Darcy noted that every gentleman in the room was now looking at them.

“’Tis not slander if it’s the truth, sir,” he said. “You came up to me while I was walking along Rotten Row, said you had heard a great deal about me and knew I was more often than is comfortable in debt, and that you could ease my circumstances a great deal if I would but do you ‘this one job’. ‘I will pay you handsomely, Mr. Wickham, to join a small party of mercenary men whom I have enlisted to kill the Marquess of Stashwick.’ That’s another direct quote, by the way. And when I asked you why you wanted such a prominent member of society dead, your exact words were that he was ‘in the way.’”

“How dare you!” cried Lord Edward, pounding his fist on the table. “I would never—he is my brother, for goodness’ sake! How could a nobody like you make up such a filthy lie?!”

Wickham laughed. “That’s not even all! When I adamantly refused your offer—admitting that I may be a cad, but I’m no murderer—you got in my face and said it would be wise for me to reconsider. That afternoon, I received the note that is even now in the hands of His Lordship the Earl of Disley. In it, you threatened my life if I did not do as you had asked. There is an address at which I was told to be at noon the next day, but how convenient for me that I was in town on business for the commanding officer of my militia regiment and left with the next morning to return to my duties and escape whatever devious plot you had to silence me.”

Edward turned slowly toward where Darcy and Lord Disley stood next to one another. “It’s a lie, Richard,” said he to the earl. “I don’t know who the bloody hell this boy thinks he is, to have the audacity to make such a scandalous claim, but it’s a lie. I *love* my brother. Henry has been the model on which I base my own conduct!”

Lord Disley lifted the letter in his hand. “This letter is in your handwriting, Edward. It does as he says—threatens him if he does not comply with your demand and gives an address where he is to meet the compatriots who will help him carry out your instructions.”

“Those instructions being,” spoke up Darcy, “to make sure the marquess dies this time.”

The angry puce color of Edward’s face paled a little. “It must be a forgery. It has to be!” he declared.

“And where would I have gotten a sample of your handwriting, my lord, if we have never met?” needed Wickham.

“There is also the matter, Edward, of your having been overheard last evening laughing at the misfortune caused by Lady Winterbourne’s irrational jealousy of Miss Bennet,” offered Lord Disley. “After which, your own wife was heard to say that had she been successful, it would ‘save us the trouble of having to try again.’ As I understand what was said, it seems you’ve paid a great deal of money to ‘low-born, inbred scum to get rid of him.’”

Lord Edward began to breathe in shallow pants. Many of the club patrons were now looking at him with varying degrees of incredulity and disgust.

He suddenly bellowed in rage and lunged for Wickham, aiming his hands for his throat. “*You little bastard!*”

Wickham, who had always been a slick fighter, was able to jump to his feet and step out of the way; Edward’s forward momentum caused him to stumble, giving Wickham the opportunity to land a punch that knocked him to the floor.

“I may be many things, my dear Lord Edward,” he said as he shook the hand he’d hit him with, “but I am no bastard.”



# Chapter Thirty

**Surprises were** something that Elizabeth did not think herself capable of handling at the present, not when she had to feign civility to the woman who had been plotting to kill the man she loved.

But the day after the worst night of her life, there came more than one.

First was the news that Mr. Winstead shared with herself, her sisters, Lady Disley, Lady Adelaide, and Lady Edward when he returned from the call he made to his uncle's attorney.

He walked into the drawing room with a rather stunned expression upon his countenance, causing all the ladies to look at him with some concern. Mary stood and took a step toward him, asking if he was well.

"I... I am a baronet."

This revelation led to more than one of the ladies gasping. "Do come and sit down, Mr. Winstead," Lady Disley encouraged him. "You look as though a feather could tip you over."

The vicar blinked as though just realizing where he was. He moved further into the drawing room and took a seat in the only empty chair by the ladies while Mary poured him a cup of tea from the pot on the table before them. Mr. Winstead took it with hands that shook slightly, staring at it for a moment before he took a drink.

"Now, sir, perhaps you might explain that rather startling comment you just made," prompted Lady Edward.

Mr. Winstead took another drink of the tea, then said, "I've just come from the temporary office of my uncle's attorney. He is come down from Aberdeen on business that would take several days, he said, or he would have arranged to

meet me in Stashwick. He—he told me my uncle had died, and as he had no son, only two daughters, his baronetcy passes to me. I am also to receive a legacy of ten thousand pounds.”

“Pray forgive me, Mr. Winstead, but did you not say last night that you were a second son?” asked Elizabeth.

He nodded slowly. “I did, yes, but I meant that I am my father’s second son. I am my mother’s firstborn child, as she is my father’s second wife. My mother is Scottish, and I’ve always known she was the daughter of a baronet, but I have not met her brother since childhood. There was no great discord in the family, they just fell out of touch—as sometimes happens—because they lived so far from one another. I had no idea that his wife had never born him a son until today, which is why the title has passed to me.”

“Forgive my ignorance, sir, but how is it you are able to inherit your uncle’s title?” asked Mary. “Do not titles always pass through the male line?”

“Most do, Miss Mary,” said Lady Disley. “It all depends on the details and remainders of the letters patent written upon the title’s creation. Some Scottish baronetcies, it so happens—though males are still the preferred inheritor—were purposely structured to allow inheritance through the female line in order to keep the titles from reverting to the Crown and possibly becoming extinct. There are even some, though very few, peerage titles created in the same fashion.”

Mr. Winstead nodded. “Yes, my lady—that is exactly how Mr. Hobbs explained it to me. He told me the letters patent for my family’s baronetcy were written ‘with remainder to the sons of the grantee’s daughters, and the heirs male of their bodies.’ Meaning if the title holder had no male issue, but his sister did—such as in my own case—then her eldest legitimate son would inherit the title. A secondary remainder stated that in the absence of a legitimate male heir, the title holder’s eldest daughter could then inherit. If I had not been born, my cousin Rebecca would be a baronetess. I am, as I am certain you’ve gathered, very much astonished by this unexpected change in circumstances.”

“Will you be relocating to Scotland, then?” asked Mary softly.

“Oh no, Miss Mary—I’ve no reason to do that,” Mr. Winstead replied, offering her a small smile. Mary looked down at her hands and blushed as he continued with, “Fortunately for my cousins—and my parishioners—my uncle’s estate was not bound to his title, nor was it entailed; thus, he was free to leave it to his eldest daughter. And even were the title bound to the land, I would not go, for my life is in Berkshire—I would stay on as vicar of Stashwick Parish because that is what I wish to do.”

Elizabeth observed Mary’s blush and smile at hearing this news, and felt her heart lighten just a little to see her sister made happy. She genuinely hoped there might be another wedding in the near future, for though they had known one another not even a full day, it was clear to her that Mary admired Mr. Winstead very much, and he seemed to be equally interested in her.

“So, you are a baronet now, Mr. Winstead,” spoke up Jane. “What is your new—and proper—address?”

The young clergyman softly cleared his throat, color coming to his cheeks as he replied, “I am now Sir Robert Winstead, 4<sup>th</sup> Baronet, so the verbal address would be Sir Robert, I suppose, instead of Mr. Winstead. Formally, because I am also a clergyman, I believe I would be announced as The Reverend Sir Robert Winstead?”

Lady Disley and Lady Edward inclined their heads in unison. “While I offer you my sincerest condolences on the loss of your uncle,” said Lady Disley, “I also offer you congratulations on your elevation in rank, Sir Robert.”

“I do not doubt that you will make as fine a baronet as you have been a vicar to our parish,” added Lady Adelaide.

Sir Robert’s color deepened. “You are very kind, my lady,” said he, before gently clearing his throat again and changing the subject to ask after the condition of his patron.

“He was awake briefly, while you were gone,” replied Elizabeth. “But confused. He could not remember how he got to his room or even why he was so ill—the apothecary was here and said that the confusion was normal and usually passes within a day or two. He cautioned us, however, that Henry may have trouble with his memory for the rest of his life because laurel water can have so adverse an effect on the brain. Even though he consumed very little of the poison, it was very potent—apparently Lord Winterbourne sent him a sample of the Dowager Lady’s medication this morning, and from his tests he learned that my aunt literally saved His Lordship’s life.”

She shuddered and wrapped her shawl tighter around herself, horrified by how close they had come to losing him.

“I simply cannot imagine what Henrietta was thinking,” said Lady Edward. “She’s not an unintelligent girl, she had to know that the laurel water had the potential to kill. What I cannot understand is why she allowed her father to drink the tea, knowing she had poisoned it? Why did she not do more to stop him?”

It was a great effort for Elizabeth not to castigate the woman for her effrontery—to lament that Lady Winterbourne had not stopped her father drinking the poisoned tea when only hours before she had been wishing it had killed him was beyond the pale. Truly, though she knew it was necessary, it had taken all her willpower not to confront Lady Edward when she’d arrived for her part in the plot to kill Henry so that her husband could take his place, thereby making her a marchioness.

*God, please let the gentlemen be successful, for I cannot wait for this nightmare to be over,* Elizabeth prayed silently.

The appearance of Mr. Bennet at Stashwick House, alongside Mr. Gardiner, was the second surprise of the day. They arrived shortly after noon, and the moment she laid eyes on her father, Elizabeth ran to him and threw her arms about his waist as she choked back sobs. An indolent father he may have been, but he was still her father and she had longed for his comfort.

“There, there now, my Lizzy,” said Mr. Bennet as he embraced her and kissed the top of her head. “All will be well, my dear.”

“Oh, Papa, I was so frightened,” she replied as the tears broke free of her hold on them and began to slip down her cheeks, wetting his waistcoat. “And he is still so dreadfully ill.”

After giving her another squeeze, Elizabeth’s father held her back from him. “My child, I cannot believe that God would make you a widow before you are a bride. Your happiness is but delayed a little while, that is all.”

He guided her back over to the sofa and they sat down together. He asked her to fill him in on the marquess’s condition, and when he had heard it, he again encouraged her to remain positive. Mary then asked after her mother and sisters.

Mr. Bennet chuckled ruefully. “It is only because you are here that my poor brother Gardiner was able to house us without relegating the girls to the nursery, as I understand you and Lizzy each have your own maid now,” he said. “Mrs. Bennet and her daughters were, naturally, vastly disappointed to not be staying the weekend in the home of a marquess, but they understand the reason why they cannot. Your mother is in high hopes of a speedy recovery for your betrothed, Lizzy, as she still very much desires to see you become—and I quote—‘a great marchioness.’”

Elizabeth chuckled. “I told Mamma that I did not know if I would become a ‘great’ marchioness, and that I only wished to be Henry’s wife.”

“You really are a singular creature, Miss Bennet,” spoke up Lady Edward. “As indelicately as my niece broached the subject at Almack’s, there really are quite a number of women amongst our circle—widows and maidens alike—who would give anything to become a marchioness. And yet to you, it almost means nothing. Truly astonishing.”

Elizabeth was hard-pressed to keep her expression neutral as she turned her attention to the lady and said, “On the



contrary, madam, it means a great deal. I look forward to having the means to do good in the world which my elevation in rank will give me. But even were Henry only a landed gentleman and not a marquess, I would love him the same. Our genuine affection for one another means more to me than the title.”

“Space will not be so much a premium soon enough, brother,” said Mr. Gardiner with a chuckle. “Mrs. Gardiner and I have been discussing buying a larger home to accommodate guests and will begin looking soon.”

“If my husband had not the lease for Netherfield, you might have leased that estate,” suggested Jane.

He grinned. “It’s funny you should say that, Jane, as I have been thinking it is time I settled down to an estate—if I can find one not too far from London that is within my price range.”

“That would be wonderful, Uncle,” said Mary. “I think my cousins would enjoy life in the country very much.”

“They do enjoy their visits to Longbourn, though your mother does not,” Mr. Gardiner observed.

Mr. Bennet scoffed. “Mrs. Bennet never did care for the natural noise of children—which to this day makes me wonder why she was so against retaining a governess when our girls were younger.”

“Or why she is in such a rage for her daughters to give her grandchildren,” Jane muttered.

Mr. Winstead—*Sir Robert*, Elizabeth reminded herself—came into the room then, and paused when he took notice of the new arrivals. She stood and introduced the vicar to her father, who lifted an eyebrow when he heard that the younger man was both a clergyman and a baronet.

“However did you manage that, if I may ask?”

Sir Robert chuckled as an embarrassed flush filled his cheeks. “Well, I was already a vicar, sir, but found out just today that my uncle passed away last week. He did not have a son, so... I became heir to his title. I’ve just come from

posting a letter to my mother to tell her what's happened, as an express will reach her before I can—though our Lord knows I should rather break the news of her brother's death in person."

"Aye, such sad news is always best heard and not read," agreed Mr. Bennet.

Sir Robert was then invited to sit, but before the conversation could resume, a maid entered, curtsied, and said, "Begging your pardon my ladies, sirs, but Mr. Owens says that His Lordship is awake again and asking for Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth rose at once. "Pray excuse me," she said, barely making a perfunctory curtsy before hurrying from the room.

"I think I will accompany her," said Lady Disley, who rose and followed at a more sedate pace.

Henry was awake and asking for her—that was all Elizabeth could think about as she raced up the stairs to the first floor, where she threw open the door to Henry's bedchamber without bothering to knock.

"My pretty nurse has come again," he said weakly. "Do you see her, Owens, or am I dreaming?"

Owens smiled indulgently at his master. "She is very real, my lord."

Elizabeth stepped up to the side of the bed and grasped Henry's hand. "I am so relieved to see you awake again, my love," said she. "It must mean you are on the mend."

"I hope so," replied Henry. "Though truth be told, I feel bloody awful."

"Henry, language," admonished Lady Disley as she entered the room.

"You should not be so censorious of the deathly ill, Frances," Henry retorted. "My condition excuses me from propriety for the foreseeable future."

"Poppycock," his sister retorted, but she said it with a smile.

“Owens, I may be as improper as I like, but you are not excused,” said Henry then. “Why have you not brought my visitors chairs to sit upon?”

Owens lifted his eyebrow, and Elizabeth was certain he was fighting a smile as he said, “I beg your every pardon, my lord. I merely thought you would wish to embarrass yourself without interruption, but if the ladies desire chairs, I shall bring them at once.”

Lady Disley nodded as Henry grumbled, “If you were anyone else, Owens, I’d have you out on the street before you could say you were sorry.”

Owens carried two chairs over and sat them beside the bed. He waited until the two ladies had seated themselves before he said, “If I were anyone else, sir, you would not have anyone willing to listen to your complaints about everyone else.”

“Listening to my complaints about everyone else is in your job description.”

The valet sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. “Unfortunately, sir.”

Elizabeth looked at Lady Disley. “They sound like an old married couple,” she said as she fought the urge to laugh.

Lady Disley smiled. “Owens *has* been Henry’s valet since he was fifteen—”

“And after thirty years of service, Miss Bennet, I might as well be married to His Lordship, as I’ve seen him undressed more than you ever will.”

Owens bowed and left the room. Elizabeth stared after him in shock at the boldness of his speech, then looked back at Henry, who said,

“If Owens’ manner offends you, I’ll have a word with him.”

She shook her head. “No, not at all—what right has an impertinent miss like myself to be offended by the

impertinence of another? I must own, however, to being a little surprised by how bluntly he speaks.”

“Nevertheless, I do think you ought to set boundaries with him, Miss Bennet,” said Lady Disley. “How Henry allows Owens to speak to him when it is only the two of them is not an appropriate manner in which a valet ought to speak to his master’s lady.”

“Of course,” said Elizabeth with a nod.

She had just drawn her breath to talk about something else when a loud screech was heard coming from below.

“What the devil?” muttered Henry.

The first noise was followed by a scuffling sound, breaking glass, more screaming, and male voices shouting. Both ladies stood and stared at the bedroom door in shock at the commotion, which carried on with a lady’s voice screaming incoherently until the sound faded away.

Then there was silence, but they did not yet dare to move; Elizabeth and Lady Disley gasped in unison when a knock sounded at the door. “Frances? Miss Bennet?”

“Richard!” Lady Disley called out, taking a step toward the door as her husband opened it. “What on Earth was all that noise just now? It almost sounded as though a brawl had broken out.”

Lord Disley rubbed his chin. “One very nearly did. Lavinia, as you might imagine, was none too pleased with being confronted with evidence of hers and Edward’s guilt. Her arrest did not go as smoothly as the constables imagined it would—poor Darcy got a scratch to the cheek when he tried to stop her running out the door.”

“Wait just a moment,” said Henry, drawing the attention of all three to the patient in the bed. “What do you mean by evidence of hers and Edward’s guilt? Why was Lavinia arrested?”

Lord Disley’s eyebrows rose. “You’ve not told him anything?”

“Well, Richard, he *has* been asleep most of the morning, and when he was awake earlier, he wasn’t very coherent,” his wife replied.

“*Excuse me,*” said Henry, clearly irritated by being ignored. “*He* can hear you. Kindly do me the courtesy of speaking *to* me and not about me as though I am not in the room.”

Elizabeth whirled to face him and took up his hand as she sat down again. “Do forgive us, my love, we don’t mean to be rude. Do you not remember anything of last night?”

Henry lifted his free hand to scratch his head even as he shook it. “Only so far as our going into the music room. I believe I asked you to exhibit first, but after that I’m afraid it’s all rather a blur.”

Elizabeth sighed, then took a deep breath and began to recount the events of the evening before, from Henrietta’s attempt to poison her—but getting him instead—to what she had overheard between Lord and Lady Edward and their subsequent summoning of Lord Disley back to Stashwick House after midnight. Lord Disley then took up the narrative and described the plan he and the other gentlemen, with input from Lady Disley and Elizabeth, had put together for seeking hard evidence against Edward and Lavinia. Elizabeth was stunned when she heard him tell of the part that Wickham had played in the scheme, though not altogether surprised by his manipulation of Darcy to gain his freedom.

“Theodore found diaries in Edward’s study that cover the last few years—” the earl was saying when suddenly Henry, who had listened in stony-faced silence until that point, sat up straight as though he was not an invalid, an expression of deep anguish upon his countenance.

“He didn’t—tell me he didn’t—not my boy—”

“No!” Lord Disley was quick to say. He moved closer to the bed and looked down at his brother-in-law imploringly. “I read some of the entries, Henry, from that time—I had that terrible thought as well, but I feel confident in assuring you that Edward is *not* responsible for Edmund’s accident. He did

mention it, stating how tragic it was that you had lost both of your sons. It was *after* Edmund passed that the entries began to talk of wishing you out of the way—it seems Lavinia put the idea into Edward’s head that with Edmund’s death, it made him heir presumptive.”

Henry sighed and fell back onto his pillow heavily, lifting both hands to cover his face. Elizabeth’s heart broke for him, unable to even imagine what he must be feeling to have learned what he had about his daughter and his brother.

His hands abruptly dropped, and he looked at Lord Disley. “Edward wasn’t responsible for all the attempts on my life—if what you say is true, and he didn’t start his campaign against me until after Edmund’s death, then the first attempt was definitely the work of someone else.”

Lord Disley nodded. “Aye, the diary actually mentions that—his theory was that the first attack was just someone’s attempt to scare you, but once Lavinia had convinced him to resort to murder, that incident gave them the idea to make it seem as though your politics were the reason behind your death.”

“They didn’t hire very efficient killers,” Henry muttered.

He sighed then, the sigh morphing into a wide yawn. Elizabeth stood slowly, saying, “We should go.”

The marquess looked at her with a tired smile. “I wish you would stay—you are one of the brightest lights in the seeming perpetual darkness my life has become in the last six years and a half. I wonder if I shouldn’t give it all up to hide away in the country for the rest of my life.”

“I would not say no to spending all our life in Berkshire in the drafty old stone building,” she said teasingly, “but you would not really wish to live there the whole year round. You must be here at least part of the year to do all the good you mean to do for women and the working classes and the poor.”

Elizabeth picked up his hand again and pressed it between her own. “Now, Henry, you need to rest, so that you will be well enough to marry me on Monday. I am terribly sorry that

so much has happened to weigh down your heart, but you must remember there are many years ahead of us in which we will be so ridiculously happy it will be lifted entirely away.”

“I hope you are right, my dear,” said Henry. “I hope you are right.”





# Chapter Thirty-One

**Later in** the afternoon, a detective came to speak to Henry about the attempts on his life, both accidental and intended.

They spoke, alone, for well over an hour. When the detective had gone, the marquess sent word via Mr. Owens that he did not wish to be disturbed and he would see them all at dinner, which he was determined to attend even though his body was still very weak and his stomach not yet able to handle solid foods. All members of both families were to attend, even Darcy and his sister. The latter, Elizabeth learned, had been invited by his aunt to join them, and she was glad for it—he'd quit the house before she had a chance to thank him, and she owed him her gratitude.

Also attending the gathering—much to Elizabeth's surprise—was Edward's daughter Diana and her husband, as well as Edward the younger, whom she had thought she would not see until Monday. Their manner was subdued, and they spoke little to anyone but Lady Disley and Henry, but the former did take Elizabeth aside to tell her the reason for Diana's reticence to associate with her father's family.

"I tell you this in the strictest confidence, so that you will understand her manner, Elizabeth," said Lady Disley in a low voice. "Have I your word you will not share it with anyone in your family?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Of course, my lady."

Lady Disley took a breath, glanced across the room to where Diana stood with her husband talking to Henry, Lord Disley, and her brother, then looked back to Elizabeth and said, "Diana is not Edward's biological child, which no one besides Lavinia and her parents knew when they married—though it explains why her father was so eager to see her married quickly."

Elizabeth briefly flicked her eyes in Diana's direction, then said, "I believe it also explains why your brother hardly ever spoke of his daughter, is that not so?"

The countess nodded. "You are very astute, my dear. Yes, once Edward found out, he grew indifferent to Diana almost to an extreme degree, sending her away to school rather than hiring a governess and imposing severe rules when she was at home. Poor girl married the first man to show her any interest just to escape Edward's coldness, though thankfully young Mr. Parker seems to genuinely care for her. Henrietta the elder and I, and Henry, of course, did what we could to remind her that she would always be family to us, but she withdrew from Henry and I after her marriage to avoid her father."

"I can understand why, though it does make one wonder why he took his anger out on her and not his wife—or why he agreed to the match in the first place," Elizabeth observed.

Lady Disley smiled ruefully. "My father arranged the match—arranged all his children's marriages, in fact. We none of us had much choice, though Henry and I were fortunate in that we were eventually able to form a genuine connexion of affection and respect with our spouses. Though in light of what we learned of them recently, I do have to wonder why Edward allowed himself to be so taken in by Lavinia."

Suppressing a shudder—and a flash of anger—Elizabeth plastered on a smile and said, "In any case, I am so very pleased to see that your family still welcomes Diana as part of it, and I hope she will see that she is wanted by you all. I do not believe she should be held accountable for the faults of her parents."

Lady Disley smiled. "That is precisely our thoughts on the matter, Elizabeth."

The pair walked over to join the small gathering around Henry, which was joined by Kitty and Lydia—whose awe over being in the home of a marquess had, at least for the time being, subdued their usual insipid giggling. The volume of Mrs. Bennet's voice was also rather lower than was typical,

and though it pained her to think ill of anyone in her family, Elizabeth prayed that they continued to behave themselves.

When Simmonds announced the arrival of Lord Winterbourne, the drawing room fell quiet. The young earl looked as though he wished to be anywhere other than among them, though he stood tall as he approached where Henry sat and bowed.

“My lord,” said he as he straightened. “It gladdens my heart to see you looking well.”

“Thank you, Arthur,” said Henry. “My lady and my sister insist I should still be abed, but I am awake and alert and I wish to be surrounded by my family. I want you to know that I bear you no ill will over the actions of my daughter. It would be an unkindness to hold you responsible for her behavior—she made her choices, now she must reap what she has sown.”

“I... I cannot stay married to her, sir,” said Winterbourne. “Forgive me, I know that is a matter best spoken of in private \_\_\_”

Henry silenced him with a wave of his hand. “Normally I would agree with you, but there have been too many secrets and too much hidden among the members of this family. I desire that from this day forward, we are all of us open and honest with one another. And I understand that you have an obligation to your title, your fortune, and your family that Henrietta is no longer in a position to fulfil, given the reprehensible thing she did. I will not contest your petition for divorce, and genuinely hope that one day in future, you will find happiness again as I have.”

The last he said with a smile at Elizabeth, to whom he held out his hand. She smiled as she placed hers in it and moved to stand at his side. “I also hope, Arthur, that you will not hold your ill will toward Henrietta against me and deny me a relationship with my granddaughter.”

Lord Winterbourne shook his head. “Of course not, sir. Charlotte does not deserve to be punished for her mother’s sins. I... I wonder, my lord... Have you any idea what is to become of her?”

Henry sighed and glanced around at his family. “As my daughter, Henrietta may always count on me for her comfort and protection, but further than that I cannot go—she can no more return to my house than she can yours, for the sake of my lady’s safety and Adelaide’s chances of a good match. As both Elizabeth and I have declined to press charges against her, I have arranged via letters with my man of business to have her escorted to a property in Ireland that I own. It is far smaller than she is used to, she will be of no consequence there, and she will be under the supervision of an experienced nurse and security staff. We will none of us have to see her again if we do not choose to.”

Adelaide, who stood on his other side, took up her father’s hand with a sorrowful expression. “Oh, Papa. I am so sorry that you must go to such lengths to protect my reputation.”

“Or to keep me safe,” added Elizabeth. “It pains me deeply that your—that our—family is to be broken up in this manner. I feel responsible—”

“Responsible?” said Mrs. Bennet. “Whyever should you feel responsible, Lizzy?”

“Mamma, had I not consented to marry Lord Stashwick, his daughter would not then have tried to poison me, and she would not be facing exile from her family and her child.”

“Elizabeth,” said Henry as he tugged on her hand. When she looked down at him, she noted a sad, resigned countenance looking back at her. “My love, you are not responsible for the choices my eldest daughter has made. You are not the cause of the divide between us; rather, she blames you because she refuses to acknowledge her own guilt. Remember, my dear, what I told you when first I spoke of wishing to know you better—my heart had been longing for companionship again. It was but a matter of time before God led me to my reward.”

“Basically, Miss Bennet,” spoke up Colonel Fitzwilliam, “had it not been you, it would have been someone. And Henrietta’s irrational jealousy would have reared its ugly head just the same.”

“Theodore is right, my dear. And Adelaide, my dearest, your sister’s exile is a just punishment, as I could not bring myself to subject her to the other. I’ve already lost two children—I cannot bear the idea of losing another, however the law sees it.”

“And what of what the law says must be done with your brother, my lord?” asked Mr. Bennet. “Forgive my indelicacy, Mrs. Parker, Mr. Faulkner, but your parents present as much a threat to my daughter as they do to your uncle—such people as they are precisely the reason I have such an intense dislike of the city, which far more often breeds their like than the country.”

Young Mr. Faulkner cleared his throat and looked at his uncle. “What *is* to become of my mother and father, sir? Have you any idea?”

Henry drew a breath and looked at his nephew squarely. “Given the evidence against them, it is very likely that they will both hang. Even giving up the names of the men they hired to see to my demise does them little good, for they are the orchestrators of the scheme. It pains me, Eddie, Diana, that you will suffer for their treachery—the gossips of the *ton* will not be kind to you, and even your schoolmates, Ed, may cause you grief.”

His nephew drew himself up to his full height. “Let them talk, Uncle. I should be glad to follow your example and not give two figs what society thinks of me.”

The knocker was heard then, and moments later Simmonds announced the arrival of the last of their guests. Darcy and his sister stepped into the drawing room looking almost as uncomfortable as Lord Winterbourne had moments before, and in an effort to help them feel more at ease, Elizabeth moved forward to greet them.

“Mr. Darcy, Miss Darcy, you are most welcome—our family party is now complete,” said she with a warm smile.

Darcy bowed his head. “You are very kind to say so, Miss Bennet. We hope to return the honor very soon and have you to dine at Darcy House when you are returned from your

wedding trip. It was my sister, in fact, who reminded me of our duty in that respect.”

Miss Darcy blushed and looked down at her feet. Elizabeth turned so that she faced the larger family party as well as the new arrivals. “I am sure that Lord Stashwick and I should be delighted to accept, is that not so, my lord?”

“Indeed, my love. The least we can do to repay Darcy for his part in solving the mystery of my would-be assassins is go to his house and eat his food,” Henry replied, his jest eliciting chuckles from the whole group.

Elizabeth then turned back to Darcy and said, “Speaking of that, sir... I wish to offer you my deepest, most heartfelt gratitude for the part you played. I know that it cannot have been pleasant for you, especially as you were forced to involve Mr. Wickham.”

The last she said with a glance of concern at Miss Darcy, for she had long suspected her to be the young lady he had spoken of that Wickham had tried to seduce. Both Darcys colored, and Mr. Darcy replied with, “You owe me no thanks, madam. I was quite happy to do my part.”

“I thought Mr. Wickham went away to a debtor’s prison?” spoke up Lydia. “I heard from John Lucas that he owed a *lot* of money to the shopkeepers in Meryton.”

“He was—for a time—a resident at Marshalsea, Miss Lydia,” said Darcy. “But he had evidence in his possession which led to the arrest of Lord Edward, and he was rewarded with his freedom for presenting that evidence. But you need not fear for the profits of Meryton’s shopkeepers, as Colonel Fitzwilliam and I personally escorted him to the docks this afternoon.”

“Aye, we did,” offered Fitzwilliam. “Mr. Wickham is even now on a ship bound for America. He’s their problem now.”

Henry clapped his hands together for attention. “And now that we have laid bare every open wound this family suffers, let us begin to cleanse and heal them by thinking no more of

that unpleasantness tonight. I desire that we should all of us simply enjoy being together as one large, loving family.”

Elizabeth returned to his side and took up his hand again. “I agree with you wholeheartedly, my love.”

-...-

Darcy was in the midst of giving last-minute instructions to the housekeeper when the butler knocked on his study door and announced the arrival of Colonel Fitzwilliam. As he had been expecting his cousin to appear, the servants were dismissed as Fitzwilliam stepped into his study.

When the door was shut, Darcy asked, “To what do I owe the pleasure, Theo?”

“I believe you know exactly why I have come,” said Fitzwilliam. “You sent Georgiana to my father’s house.”

Darcy nodded. “I did, yes. She is eager to spend some time with Lady Adelaide and is looking forward to attending your uncle’s wedding, and the breakfast after. I could not deny her the pleasure of either simply because I have unexpected business in the north.”

Fitzwilliam approached the desk. “What sort of business cannot wait for another two days?” he queried.

“There are issues with the tenants at Pemberley which require my personal attention,” Darcy replied.

“Really? When was the last time that anything so dire as could not be handled by your steward happened?”

He moved to sit in one of the visitors’ chairs and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. “What is really going on, Darcy?”

For a moment, Darcy did not answer, instead reflecting on the last eleven days. Aside from the unfortunate debacles that had happened on Friday and Saturday—which had yet to spread far, though it was but a matter of time—Elizabeth had

been the talk of the *ton*, her debut at Almack's declared a resounding success in the Society pages of all the papers the following day. Her beauty, grace, and skill at dancing were all praised as well as her composure in the face of Lady Winterbourne's verbal assault. Lord Stashwick had been called a lucky man and she a most fortunate young lady.

Elizabeth did, naturally, have some detractors; Darcy had also heard some of the less flattering talk going around. She had been labeled an upstart, a scheming social climber, and a disruptive influence on a respectable nobleman's family—more than one person believed her responsible for the breach between Lord Stashwick and his eldest daughter, instead of setting the blame entirely at Lady Winterbourne's feet where it belonged.

Some of this had also made it into the papers. When it did, the marquess made something of a point of showing Elizabeth off to advantage—the papers had reported them attending a concert, a play, and an opera together. Even his aunt and uncle had hosted a dinner party for them at Disley House and had been so kind as to include the Gardiners and Miss Mary among the guests. Darcy and Georgiana had been at the same theatre for the opera, and Lady Disley had insisted he come to the dinner at Disley House to make an even number of guests.

He had declined, of course, citing a prior engagement. It was a lie, over which he felt guilty enough, as he despised deception.

Each time he witnessed Stashwick and Elizabeth's genuine affection for one another, Darcy was in agony. He loved a woman who could never be his, and it was time—well past time, really—that he removed himself from her sphere for his own peace of mind. The dinner last night had been torture and was proof enough that he needed to get away. He did not hold Elizabeth accountable for his distress; he blamed himself entirely for his suffering. Had he not been too proud to simply allow his feelings to guide him for once—had he only seen that with his wealth, he could do as the marquess had and arranged for Elizabeth's younger sisters to go to school for proper instruction, they might well have been engaged by the



time she had found His Lordship dying on the side of the road. It would have taken but a simple declaration of her being betrothed for the elder man to curb his enthusiasm for her and respect Darcy's prior claim.

But it was all for naught. He had quit Hertfordshire to avoid the temptation of Elizabeth Bennet, having foolishly believed her to be an improper match for himself, and by the time he'd realized he no longer wished to avoid her, her heart had been given over to another.

"Darcy!"

Blinking at the sharpness of his cousin's tone, Darcy frowned. "What?"

"You were woolgathering just now and not listening to a word I've said," Fitzwilliam scolded him.

"Forgive me, Theo. I happen to have a lot on my mind. What were you saying?"

Fitzwilliam sighed and said, "I asked you if you were certain you could not put off your journey for another day or two? The wedding is tomorrow—"

"I'm aware of that!" Darcy snapped—and instantly regretted it, for it was in that moment that understanding dawned in his cousin's eyes.

"Upon my word," he said softly. "You're in love with the bride. That's why you're running away, isn't it?"

Darcy scoffed. "I am not running away, Theodore."

"Balderdash! What else would you call it?" Fitzwilliam countered.

"Self-preservation," Darcy replied. "I quit Netherfield along with Bingley and his sisters to avoid her when I sensed myself in danger. I believed her situation and her lack of connexions made her an improper choice for a wife. But what does your bloody uncle do? He showed me what I fool I was to allow the strictures of society to guide my heart. He has far more reason than I to avoid connecting himself with tradesmen and vulgar females, and yet he does not care! He welcomed

the joy that Elizabeth's pert opinions and fine eyes and teasing ways gave him with open arms. He allowed himself to love her in spite of the inevitable censure, because she was worth it."

"Why did you never pursue her yourself if you felt this way?" Fitzwilliam asked.

Darcy sighed and looked away from the pity in his cousin's gaze. "Because by the time I realized my efforts to forget her had been for naught, your uncle had come along. I knew that I could never compete with a peer."

Fitzwilliam scoffed. "Will, if you really think that his title and fortune are what attracted Miss Bennet, then you really don't know her very well at all. While she is certainly aware that they give her consequence beyond her imagining, it is Henry's genuine affection and devotion to her that she loves best."

"I have come to realize that Theo, having seen them in company a number of times," said Darcy. "It has proved to me even more what a fool I was to think her beneath me. Elizabeth is such a woman as deserves every possible happiness in the world, and I am happy for her that she has found herself to be genuinely in love. But I'll be hanged if I stand by and watch her give the love that I covet to another man. At this point, a gentleman in my situation should do the honourable thing and absent himself, and that is what I intend to do."

Standing, Darcy asked, "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Fitzwilliam stood with a sigh. "You will not at least come to the wedding and wish them joy?"

"I will not," said Darcy. "I ... cannot. It would pain me too much. I beg you would act on my behalf and convey my best wishes."

"Very well. They'll not be going into Berkshire until Friday, to give Henry more time to recover from the poisoning before they travel. You have no need to remove from town,

Will, as they'll be gone for three weeks—my uncle and his wife do not plan to return to London until the 30th. You have until then to sort yourself out, as you have pledged to host a dinner here when they are returned to the city, remember?"

Darcy grimaced. "Yes. I remember."



# Chapter Thirty-Two

**Henry tapped** his cane on the roof of the carriage. “Stop the coach.”

Elizabeth looked at him. “My love, why do we stop?”

“Look there, my pretty nurse,” said her husband, pointing out the window of the carriage.

She turned her head; the carriage had stopped between two trees, and the sight which greeted her eyes caused her to gasp in wonder. In the distance, atop a hill well dotted with trees, stood a sandy-colored stone building with crenelated battlements and several towers, which was surrounded by guard wall. A dozen or so yards to the right was a river that wound out of sight beyond the castle ahead.

Elizabeth looked to Henry. “My lord, it is stunning! And you call it a drafty old stone building?”

Henry chuckled, then tapped the roof again. As the carriage moved forward along the road, he said, “Just wait until you’ve spent a long winter’s night in the place, my dear. Then you will understand.”

“I think I shall lose myself in exploring every room, every corner,” Elizabeth said excitedly as the carriage drew nearer.

“There will be a tour after we meet the staff. I hear the owner of the castle is a knowledgeable guide.”

Elizabeth swatted his arm playfully before looking out the window again. She was mesmerized by the castle and its surroundings; the grounds were simply beautiful, the lush green lawns and wooded foothills almost begging her to explore them.

“I bet the gardens are delightful,” she said as they drew nearer the gate.

“In the spring and summer months they are exquisite,” Henry said with a smile. “I’m afraid they won’t be much to look at now, though.”

“Then I shall look forward to the end of the Season even more, that when we return in the summer, the beautiful blooms will be waiting to greet us,” she returned.

Henry lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “Oh, my dear Elizabeth—how happy it makes me to see you so eager for our lives here. The castle has been rather dreary without a mistress, and the people of the parish will adore you once they get to know you.”

Elizabeth was hopeful that he was right. Certainly, the people of Stashwick Parish knew their patron had married again and that his wife was young. Had they not read about it in the papers, surely Sir Robert would have mentioned it on his return a few days before.

And they would certainly know it come Sunday when she and Henry attended morning services at church. Tonight and tomorrow, she mused, they would spend alone together. After the morning service on Sunday, Henry would introduce her to some of the parish’s most prominent citizens, and she knew he intended to ask Sir Robert to dine with them in the evening. Monday she would begin the duty of receiving callers offering their congratulations—who no doubt would be more interested in getting a better look at the young girl their lord had wed. By the end of their first week, they would likely be attending a dinner party.

Elizabeth would rather have spent the entire three weeks in Berkshire simply exploring her new home and its lovely grounds, but... Duty was duty. She was not only a new bride, but the wife of a peer—the title “Marchioness of Stashwick” came with its own set of obligations, which she had agreed to fulfil when she said “I do.”

The long road that led through the gate at the wall, to Elizabeth’s surprise, culminated in a curved stone coachway that rose over the servants’ entrance to the lower ground floor. Her eyes widened at the number of maids and footmen that

stood in two long lines waiting to greet their master, and she glanced at Henry with astonishment.

“Just how many servants do you have here?” she asked.

Henry chuckled as the carriage came at last to a stop. “*We* have sixty, last I recall.”

“Sixty?!” Elizabeth exclaimed.

Her husband chuckled again. “My dear, recall that our country home is a genuine castle—there are something like thirty rooms on the ground floor alone.”

Elizabeth’s astonishment grew. As the footman opened the door and lowered the step. Henry stepped out and then turned back to her, holding out his hand. Drawing a breath and putting on her warmest smile, she placed her hand into his and alighted from the carriage.

The servants all bowed or curtsied as soon as both her feet were on the ground. “Ladies and gentlemen,” began Henry in the voice which Elizabeth had come to note demanded the listener pay attention; indeed, each of the servants now turned their eyes to him. “It is with great joy that I introduce you to your new mistress. I trust that each of you will show Lady Stashwick the same respect and deference as you showed my first dear lady.”

He then lifted a hand and gestured; the three figures in the middle of the front row—two men and a woman, all of whom were middle-aged—stepped forward, then bowed and curtsied a second time. “My lady, may I present to you Mr. Albert Hammond, our steward; Mr. Octavian Quincy, our butler; and Mrs. Dorothea Abbot, our housekeeper.”

“How do you do, Mr. Hammond, Mr. Quincy? Mrs. Abbot?” Elizabeth asked.

“Very well, Your Ladyship,” said Hammond.

“Very well, my lady,” replied Quincy.

“Very well indeed, my lady,” said Mrs. Abbot.

Elizabeth smiled and relaxed a little. She had been nervous that the servants here would not be as welcoming as

those in London had been. They were not required to like her, of course, but they did need to show her respect—which she knew she would, to a degree, also have to earn, given she was following in the footsteps of a much-beloved mistress.

“I will do my very best to learn everyone’s names quickly,” said Elizabeth then, her gaze roaming over the whole group. “It may take me some time, however, as there are far more servants here than at my father’s estate!”

“Come, my dear, let us go inside that I may show you your new home,” said Henry. Elizabeth nodded, and at that moment the two lines of servants parted to make way for them; they filed inside behind the pair and went silently back to their duties after a softly uttered “Dismissed” by Quincy.

The entry hall floor was made of white stone marbled with black and gold. There were wide pocket doors on each side of the hall, on either side of which stood a marble column of the same stone. Each wall also had two small alcoves, in which stood large candles backed by mirrors that would give the area even more light when they were lit. Ahead of her, just before a grand wooden staircase with a blue and silver runner in the middle were four more marble columns.

Henry leaned down and whispered in her ear. “What do you think of your new home?”

“I have seen but little, my lord,” Elizabeth replied. “Though what I have seen, I already adore.”

As she took a moment to admire the shafts of sunlight playing over the staircase and the landing above, Elizabeth recalled a long-forgotten dream of her future husband’s home having such a stair, and the vision of herself walking slowly down the middle, dressed for a ball, made her smile.

“Come, my love,” said Henry. “Allow me to show you the rest of the house.”

Elizabeth nodded, and after passing their outerwear to a footman and a maid who waited nearby, they proceeded on a clockwise tour of the ground floor. Immediately to the left was the music room, which in one corner led to a small room in the



turret that had been set up as a water closet. The morning room was connected to a study that Henry informed her was for her use, which also was connected to a private water closet in a turret, and from there they went into a grand parlor that was clearly the formal drawing room.

“Heavens above,” murmured Elizabeth when she took in the size of the room. “You could almost hold a small ball in here.”

Henry chuckled. “A number of parties have led to dancing in this room,” he replied.

From the drawing room they passed through Henry’s own study and from there to the billiard room, which also had a private water closet as well as access to a winding staircase in the two turrets to which the room was connected. Also on the ground floor were the bedchambers of the butler and housekeeper, the still room, the kitchens and butler’s pantry, a breakfast room and a formal dining room. From the breakfast room and the still room, one could enter vestibules in the turrets there that led out onto a wide balcony over the servants’ entrance that faced the east gardens.

Up on the first floor, the entire south wing was comprised of the master and mistress chambers. At the east and west ends were the bed chambers, each with a private water closet in a turret room; then there were the dressing rooms, and in the middle was a private sitting room. Henry also showed her other family bedrooms, such as Adelaide’s room and the room he thought to make over to Mary, pointed out the rooms where their maidservants and his valet slept, the schoolroom, and at last—perhaps her favorite room in the castle—was the massive library.

Elizabeth gasped when first her eyes set upon the sheer number of books lining the walls. “There must be thousands of books in here!”

Henry nodded. “Aye, something like eleven thousand or so.”

Elizabeth whirled to face him. “Eleven thousand?! Good heavens, Henry! How can you have so many?”

“For the same reason as any ancient family—it has been the work of many generations.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “It’s funny you should put it that way. When once Miss Bingley spoke of the library at Pemberley, Mr. Darcy said much the same thing.”

Her husband nodded again. “I’ve been to Pemberley, though it’s been some years since the last time—I do believe Darcy’s father was still alive then. Their library is about fifty feet shorter than this room, give or take a foot, and they have a few thousand less than we have.”

At this remark, Elizabeth laughed. “How casually you say ‘a few thousand less than we have.’ My father’s library only has a few hundred.”

“Ah, but your father does not live in a palace, my dear Lady Stashwick, and you do now.”

Looking around her, Elizabeth replied, “I am beginning to realize that. Just as I am beginning to get used to hearing myself addressed as ‘Lady Stashwick’ and ‘my lady.’ It has really taken some getting used to, the now irrefutable fact that I am the wife of a marquess.”

Henry smiled down at her, then took a step toward her and lifted his hands to her waist, drawing her closer. Elizabeth anticipated the kiss before he’d even lowered his head to touch his lips to hers, and she responded enthusiastically. They were both of them a little breathless when they parted some moments later.

Touching his brow to hers, Henry whispered, “Speaking of being my wife, my dear Elizabeth, I am reminded that we have yet to consummate our marriage.”

Elizabeth’s already shallow breathing became more rapid as nervous tingles suddenly danced along her spine. Though they had married on Monday as planned—at Henry’s insistence—they had not yet shared a bed. He had been too weak still even to walk about much for the first few days after the poisoning (he could not at present bring himself to drink tea) and had only since Wednesday shown any real recovery of

strength. Thus, they had agreed she would continue to sleep in her guest room and wait until they had journeyed into Berkshire to complete their union.

“Y-yes, my lord,” said she. “I am afraid we have not.”

“Let us now go and correct that oversight,” said Henry, his voice husky. Elizabeth found she could only nod; Henry kissed her again, smiled, and led her into the hall and around to her bedroom. Once the door had been closed, he took his time with tender kisses and caresses as he helped her out of her gown and underclothes.

Elizabeth was, at first, embarrassed to be so naked and vulnerable—until she noted the flare of desire in Henry’s expression as he took in her smooth skin and slight curves. Knowing that he was attracted to her, *wanted* her, bolstered her confidence and she found herself emboldened enough to look him in the eye. When their gazes met, she suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to see him just the same way and reached for the lapels of his jacket with trembling hands. As he had done to her, she removed his clothing one piece at a time, and when she had finished, Henry suddenly scooped her up and carried her to the bed.

“I love you so very much, Elizabeth,” he said in a soft, emotion-filled whisper as he settled himself next to her.

Elizabeth reached up and caressed his cheek. “And I love you, Henry.”

Their lips met again, and for the next few hours, the newlyweds allowed their mutual passion to consume them.

-...-

“Are you certain we cannot just turn around and go back?”

Elizabeth laughed softly and took Henry’s hand as the carriage trundled into the outskirts of London. “Now, now, my lord. Much as we enjoyed our almost entirely private time

together in the country, you know very well that you cannot afford to be away any longer. You have duties to fulfill here in town, as do I.”

It had been the most wonderful three weeks of her life. Elizabeth and Henry had toured the castle a second time the day after their arrival, and he had allowed her more time to appreciate the artwork his family had gathered over the centuries over the centuries that made up the gallery and which decorated many of the rooms. The memory of shared intimacy in more than one room (and even a secluded spot out of doors) set a blush to her cheeks just thinking of it. They had gone horseback riding several times and had taken many long walks over the three weeks, giving Elizabeth a much better idea of all that she had been given by her marriage.

She also met with many people in the parish over those twenty-one days, including the members of the local ladies’ charitable society. With them she had managed to discuss her idea of opening a school and a food pantry for the laborers and poorer families. She and Henry had attended about half a dozen dinners and had hosted two of their own. Elizabeth had also, or so she hoped, made a couple of friends among the young women of the area, with whom she hoped to become better acquainted when they returned in the summer.

But alas, duty and honor had called them back to London, and so they had departed early that morning to return to the city for the rest of the Season.

Henry chuckled, drawing her from her reverie. “Aye, you have to prepare our sister Mary for a proper courtship.”

Sir Robert, when he had been their dinner guest that first Sunday, confessed to having been unable to cease thinking of Mary. He very much missed conversing with her—even when they debated good-naturedly over their interpretations of scripture. They had also talked of books, history, and philosophy during his weekend stay at Stashwick House, and the more time he had spent with her, the more she had ingrained herself in his memory.

“I know that we were in each other’s company but a few days,” he’d said, “but I cannot think of anyone else who understands me so well. Might I be so bold as to ask you to speak to her on my behalf, to determine if there is any reason for me to hope she returns my regard?”

Elizabeth, overjoyed for the new baronet and even more so for her sister, had agreed to make discreet inquiries. Mary’s response to the letter Elizabeth sent was exactly what they all had hoped for. She wrote mostly of other things, such as her schoolwork, her growing friendship with Adelaide, and visits from both Lady Disley and Georgiana Darcy, whom she hoped would also become a friend. It was her closing, just a single line—which Elizabeth was certain had been written with both trepidation and overwhelming joy—that gave them all equal happiness:

*Oh, and please tell Sir Robert that I, too, enjoyed our debates and I would very much like to know him better.*

When the news had been shared with the vicar, he had immediately requested permission to write to Mary. Henry, having the authority as Mary was now under his protection, heartily granted it, and future letters Elizabeth received over the three weeks told her of her sister’s growing affection for Sir Robert, who not only wrote to her while managing his duties, but was arranging for a curate to come to Stashwick to perform services in his stead for at least a month’s time, as he wished to return to London in order to court Mary properly.

Henry and Elizabeth were greeted warmly, with embraces and kisses to the cheek, by both Mary and Adelaide when they entered Stashwick House at last.

“Oh, Papa, how very happy and healthy you look now!” said the younger girl to her father.

Henry flashed a grin at Elizabeth, then said, “Thank you, dearest—I certainly feel both. You and Miss Mary are looking well yourselves.”

The girls thanked him for the compliment and Adelaide chattered away as she linked arms with her father and led the

way into the drawing room. Elizabeth stayed back a little with Mary to ask her,

“When do you expect Sir Robert to return to town? I believe he mentioned he would return at near the same time we did.”

Mary blushed prettily as she replied, “He expects to be here tomorrow. Oh, Lizzy, I... Is it too soon, do you think, to say that I think I may be in love?”

It was an effort for Elizabeth not to cry out her joy; she opted instead for a wide smile as she reached for her sister’s hand to press it warmly between her own. “Not at all. You have known each other nearly a whole month, and you have been corresponding regularly. Mamma, I am sure, will think that quite long enough—she thought Mr. Bingley would propose to Jane after only two weeks!”

“I have enjoyed exchanging letters with Sir Robert very much,” said Mary, “as I find it easier to express my feelings in writing, but I am very much looking forward to his return to London. I think it very sweet and gentlemanly that he wishes to court me properly.”

“As do I,” agreed Elizabeth, before turning, linking their arms together, and proceeding at last into the drawing room.

There she learned from Adelaide that the letters received in their absence had been studiously divided between them. “I am fairly certain that I can tell which are letters of business for Papa, and which are dinner invitations,” she said with a grin.

“And those are within *your* purview, my dear,” said Henry with a roll of his eyes.

“You do not wish me to consult you on which invitations to accept and which to decline?” asked Elizabeth with a raised eyebrow.

Henry laughed. “You are a smart woman, Elizabeth. I am certain you will have some idea who not to offend.”

“So, invitations from nobility get first priority of acceptance.”

“Not quite—invitations from family get first priority,” Henry corrected her with a grin. “Then the nobility.”

“But what if the invitation comes from one of your Parliament rivals? I really should have you write up a list of whom to accept, and whom to politely decline,” quipped Elizabeth.

“I will do that,” Henry agreed. “There are a few of my fellow peers whose homes I have vowed never to enter, though it would be the polite thing to do on occasion.”

Refreshments were called for, and the little family of four chatted amiably together for some time, until Elizabeth announced she was a little tired and wished to lie down before dinner. Henry seconded the idea, and so Adelaide and Mary went back to their lessons with Mrs. Wilson while the newlyweds went to their rooms.

Of course, as the sitting room had not yet been made over into a bedchamber for Elizabeth, their climbing into the same bed led to a very enjoyable delay to the rest that she had been after. Henry didn’t complain, either.





# Chapter Thirty-Three

**The following** morning saw Elizabeth making her way to her private study for the first time.

She hadn't thought she would have one in their London home, but Henry had explained that since Mrs. Wilson preferred to conduct her lessons in the library when they were in town, the designated schoolroom had been abandoned—at least until Simmonds and Hiral had started holding staff meetings there. The butler and housekeeper had eventually decided to make it their workspace as well rather than having to move back and forth from the office that had been provided for their use. Thus, the mistress of the house now had her own study both in the country and in town—and like so many other rooms in the house (and the castle), she had been given leave to redecorate it as she pleased.

On first entering the room, she found it rather spartan, and decided that her study would be the first room she decorated. Elizabeth pushed the thought aside as she sat down at the desk and prepared her writing materials, then drew the stack of unopened letters waiting there toward her. The first was an invitation from Lady Cowper to attend a dinner party she was holding that very Thursday. Knowing that she could not afford to offend the young countess—even if she did now outrank her—Elizabeth penned a letter of acceptance and officially signed her first piece of correspondence as *Elizabeth Stashwick*.

The next letter, addressed in a more masculine hand, surprised her as to the identity of the writer when she opened it—it was from Darcy. She recalled his having spoken of hosting a dinner at his town house on their return, but he had then two days later not joined his sister in attending her wedding. Of course, she could hardly blame him for seeing to tenant issues on his estate. Missing the wedding and the breakfast after was excusable for a man seeing to the concerns

of others, and his relations had all of them extolled Darcy's diligence as a landlord.

The proposed date for the dinner was the following Monday, and Elizabeth saw no reason not to attend—even if it was likely that Bingley's sisters would also be there—so wrote back to express pleasure on behalf of herself and Henry in accepting.

Two more dinner invitations were read and accepted before a maid knocked on the door and announced a caller. “The Countess of Disley is come to see you, my lady,” said she. “Mr. Simmonds instructed me to tell you she will be in the morning room.”

“Thank you, Agnes,” Elizabeth replied as she stood. Taking up the letters that needed to go to the post, she held them out to the girl and told her to see that they were sent out. Agnes acknowledged her instructions with a softly spoken “At once, my lady,” curtsied, and departed.

Elizabeth then made her way across the house to the morning room, where she found not only Lady Disley but also Henry, who appeared rather grim upon her entrance. She walked over to where he sat and knelt down, taking his hand in hers.

“My love, what is wrong?” she asked.

“I've just told him that justice, for once, was very swift,” said Lady Disley in a somber voice. “Edward and Lavinia met their fates last week, on Thursday. I... Forgive me, but I took the advice of my husband and did not write to tell you of it, as we did not wish to spoil your private time together.”

It was then that she noticed her new sister by marriage was wearing black. Elizabeth stood slowly. “Adelaide doesn't know her uncle is dead, does she?”

Lady Disley shook her head. “No. Richard and I thought the news should come from Henry. When we spoke to Diana and little Edward, they both agreed not to tell her. Addy doesn't read the papers and I assume her governess does not either. They must not have gone out these last few days as my

niece is yet still unaware, and since we had not heard from either of you at Disley House, the earl and I assumed you were also avoiding the papers.”

“I wonder that no one else has written to us,” said Elizabeth.

“Perhaps your other friends and relations also wished to avoid spoiling your honeymoon.”

“I...” Elizabeth paused and looked down at Henry, who still held her hand but had yet to look at her. “My lady, what do I do about all the invitations on my desk awaiting a response? What about the four that I have already accepted?”

“Accept them, unless they conflict with those you’ve already accepted,” said Henry, speaking up for the first time. He encompassed both of them in his gaze as he said next, “Wear black if it pleases you to acknowledge their deaths, but I will not put my house into mourning. Not for a man who betrayed the bonds of family for selfishness and greed.”

He stood suddenly, forcing Elizabeth to take a step back. “Pray forgive me, ladies. I need some time alone.”

Elizabeth’s heart ached for him as he abruptly turned and stalked out of the room. It was clear that despite the betrayal of his brother, Edward’s execution still affected him deeply.

She turned back to Lady Disley when she heard her snuffle and moved to sit in the chair Henry had just vacated. “For what it is worth, I offer you my sincerest condolences, Lady Disley,” Elizabeth said softly. “Even though he did a terrible thing, he was still your brother, and I can only imagine how much it pains you to have lost him.”

Lady Disley smiled weakly even as she wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. “Thank you for saying so, Lady Stashwick. It... It does hurt to acknowledge he is dead. I know it pains Henry as well, though I believe he is more deeply wounded by Edward’s betrayal than his death.”

“I do not doubt you are right,” Elizabeth agreed.

Her visitor then drew a deep breath, blew it out, and plastered a weak smile on her face. “Let us speak of more

pleasant things—you said you've already accepted four dinner invitations. May I ask who sent them?"

"Henry put me in charge of accepting any invitations to dinners and parties," said Elizabeth with a smile. "The most illustrious personages to invite us into their homes thus far were Lady Cowper and Lady Castlereagh—the latter of which surprised me, as I did not think she approved of me."

"I believe you are right, but remember what I told you, my lady," began Lady Disley. "Even those who do not approve will make a point of playing nice. Castlereagh is being civil and doing what is expected of her, because for all your lack of fortune and connexions, you *do* outrank her. She would be wise not to offend you."

"And I must do the same and invite her here in the near future, even if I cannot change her mind about me?" Elizabeth surmised.

Lady Disley nodded. "That is correct. For you would also be wise not to offend her. Now, who else did you accept?"

"My aunt and uncle Gardiner, whom I could never say no to, and Mr. Darcy."

"Oh yes! I recall Darcy's mentioning Georgiana wished to host a dinner for you," said the countess. "I believe we are also to be of the party now that I think of it. I really must thank you —"

"Whatever for?" Elizabeth broke in.

"Well, I know you have only met Georgiana twice, but you've clearly made quite the impression on her, for it to be *her* idea to acknowledge your marriage simply because of your acquaintance with her brother."

"Colonel Fitzwilliam did tell me once that she is painfully shy," Elizabeth said.

Lady Disley nodded. "And she is. Last summer was very difficult for her, and it made her already natural shyness even worse. Poor thing has the most dreadful time conversing with strangers—she's even more reticent than Darcy! I remember now that she visited here once before the wedding, and I

believe she met your sister Mary then; she liked her as well, as they share an interest in music. And she honestly spoke more with you and your sister and Adelaide at the family dinner here the Saturday before the wedding than I've seen her talk in ages!"

Elizabeth laughed softly. "Well, I am glad to have been of service then, and will look forward to the dinner with even more pleasure."

Later that morning Sir Robert called to inform Mary that he had arrived safely in town and had secured a room at a hotel not far away. Henry drew Elizabeth aside to both give the couple a moment of private conversation as well as to tell her he was glad the vicar had come, as he felt it only right that a clergyman be present when he told Adelaide of her uncle's death. Elizabeth agreed that Sir Robert's presence during the difficult duty might be useful.

Their supposition proved insightful—when her father told her that his brother and his lady had been executed, the vicar spoke to her very kindly.

Adelaide burst into tears at the news, then wiped her eyes almost angrily with her handkerchief as she said, "I do not know why I cry for him. He wanted to kill my father."

"Lady Adelaide, it is perfectly natural that you grieve for your uncle, in spite of the terrible things he did," said Sir Robert in a comforting tone. "After all, he was a kind and doting uncle to you, was he not?"

At her reluctant nod, he smiled and continued with, "Then I suspect that you mourn for *that* man—the one that loved you. The man you believed him to be. And when your heart is ready, I am sure you will forgive the other one."

Adelaide frowned. "Why should I forgive a man who wanted my father dead so that he could steal all that is his?" she asked, her voice full of bitterness.

Mary, who sat to one side of her, reached over to take her hand. "My lady, we must forgive because it is God's command to do so. Remember that in the Lord's prayer, we ask him to

forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those that trespass against us.”

Sir Robert, for a moment, looked at Mary with a countenance full of pride and admiration, then schooled his expression before he returned his gaze to Adelaide and said, “Miss Bennet is correct, my lady. You must find it in your heart to forgive your uncle, or you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Adelaide looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, “Not now. Someday, perhaps, but I cannot do so now—I am still too angry when I think of how he betrayed Papa. How he betrayed all of us, pretending to love and respect my father when secretly he coveted his titles and wealth and wanted to murder him.”

She stood then and looked to her father. “Please excuse me, Papa. I think I need to go and be alone for a while.”

Henry stepped up to her and took her hands in his, a sad smile upon his face and his voice soft as he said, “I understand, dearest. I will speak to Mrs. Wilson about your missing lessons today.”

Adelaide sniffled. “Thank you, Papa,” said she, then she turned away and went out of the room.

Henry sighed, and Elizabeth rose to take his hand. He looked down at her with a sad smile, then lifted his gaze to Sir Robert. “Thank you, sir—and you, Miss Mary—for your kindness to Adelaide. And for your insight. I must admit that I’ve had a difficult time reconciling my own feelings about Edward.”

“Being conflicted is perfectly natural, my lord,” said Sir Robert. “When a person we love and admire betrays us, it can be difficult to understand their motivations, let alone reconcile the person we thought they were with who they shew themselves to be.”

Elizabeth, unable to stop herself thinking the same maxim might be applied to Jane’s recent behavior, said, “Especially

when they behave as if nothing is amiss, and hide their true feelings beneath a mask.”

Henry gave her hand a squeeze, and when she looked up at him, Elizabeth saw understanding in his eyes.

When she returned to her study to finish going through the pile of invitations, she noted that some of the letters were notes from those who had sent invitations, expressing their understanding if they should choose to decline accepting “in light of the deaths in your family.” She made sure in her replies to inform each person that given the circumstances surrounding those deaths, *His Lordship does not intend to observe a period of mourning.*

It might cause some little bit of talk, she mused, but it was unlikely anyone would censure Henry for choosing to disregard the custom in this instance. He and Adelaide spoke little of the matter that evening and Elizabeth chose not to press them, though she made sure they knew she would listen if ever they needed to talk. Mary and Sir Robert also offered to lend an ear if desired, as did Lady Disley.

Elizabeth and Henry received some curious looks at the first couple of dinner engagements they attended, but their hosts engaging them as though naught had occurred led others to follow their example. No one brought the executions up, at least not in Elizabeth’s hearing. She thought it possible that when the sexes separated after dinner each night, the men might be bold enough to venture a few questions, but Henry never told her if they did, and the ladies proved too polite to broach the subject.

The intimate family dinner at Gracechurch Street on Saturday was a welcome relief from the pressure of appearing unaffected by recent events. Elizabeth was glad that the only person other than herself, Henry, Adelaide, and Mary to have been invited to the dinner was Sir Robert—she knew that her husband and his daughter would be far more relaxed in a more private environment. Indeed, Henry seemed to rather enjoy his time there more than he had any of the other dinners they’d attended that week.

On Sunday, Henry elected to stay home from church, though when Sir Robert arrived to break his fast with them, he was invited to give a short sermon to the family. About half an hour after breakfast, the four members of the family and the servants who had not attended morning services gathered in the drawing room to hear him. Sir Robert spoke of fellowship and friendship, citing several examples from scripture where man and woman had supported each other in times of need. His subtle message was understood by Elizabeth: Just be there for them, for their hearts and souls are weighed down in grief and anger.

Her love and support, she mused, her family would always be able to count on.

Through Monday morning and afternoon, while Adelaide and Mary were at their lessons, and Henry was away from the house dealing with Parliament matters, Elizabeth received several callers, more than one of them the wife of Henry's political rivals. She'd only met those two ladies at Almack's and had spoken to them briefly; she knew that they had come to make a better determination of her character. She made use of all the advice that Lady Disley had given her regarding composure and suspected that the ladies departed feeling rather unsure what to make of her, or perhaps simply confused as to how a fortuneless country squire's daughter could be so well-spoken and well-educated.

That evening, as she sat having her hair done by her maid, Elizabeth reflected on the entirety of her association with Mr. Darcy. She had started out admiring his looks, then despised him for his pride and conceit. When she had pressed the matter of Mr. Wickham, he had been surprisingly candid—and afterward had been nothing but gentlemanly, though he had returned somewhat to that reticence which had made him seem so proud. He was a conundrum, that one.

Mary and Sir Robert had also received an invitation to dine at Darcy House, so the four rode over together in the very comfortable carriage that Elizabeth and Henry had taken into Berkshire—it had been a wedding present from her husband, and some of the manufacturing had been handled personally



by her uncle. Though it was beginning to get dark and street men were out lighting the oil lanterns along the pavements, when they pulled up to the pavement outside of Darcy's home, Elizabeth could not help but admire it, and from the outside she believed it almost as impressive as Stashwick House.

When the butler had opened the door and Henry had given their names, the servant informed him they were expected and led them directly to the drawing room. Darcy and Georgiana stepped forward as the butler announced them, bowing and curtsying.

"Lord and Lady Stashwick, Miss Bennet, Sir Robert," said Darcy. "Welcome to Darcy House."

"Thank you for inviting us, Mr. Darcy," said Henry.

"Indeed, we are very pleased to be here among friends," added Elizabeth, who noted that Bingley and Jane were already there, and that Bingley's sisters had—as she had suspected—been invited. She suppressed a sigh and realized that it really was only a matter of time before she'd have been forced to present them to her husband for one reason or another.

"Not just friends, Lady Stashwick," spoke up Miss Darcy in a hesitant voice. "We are some of us family."

Elizabeth smiled. "Some of us, yes," she agreed, placing subtle emphasis on her words in the hope that Bingley's sisters would understand that "family" did not include them. She would be civil, as they were all of them guests in Darcy's house, but he owed them no further courtesy and had no intention of raising their expectations.

She was not surprised that the dinner served was of the finest quality—Darcy's cook was a master at her craft. Darcy himself was mostly quiet, save for when those nearest him engaged him in conversation, or when he—or Colonel Fitzwilliam, who was also a guest—diverted the over-reaching attentions of Caroline and Louisa away from Elizabeth and Henry, who were the highest-ranked persons at the table. Elizabeth made a point of looking to each man and offering a smile of gratitude for their interference.

After dinner, when the ladies left the men to their port, they had hardly been in the drawing room a minute before Bingley's sisters approached.

"My dear Lady Stashwick," Caroline simpered. "How very lovely you look this evening."

"Quite so, my dear," agreed Mrs. Hurst. "Married life certainly agrees with you."

"Thank you, Miss Bingley, Mrs. Hurst," Elizabeth replied. "I am obliged to you for the kindness."

"What is it like, my lady? Living in a genuine castle?" asked Miss Bingley. "I imagine it must be quite romantic."

This observation she could not help but reply to honestly. With a smile Elizabeth said, "There was a fair amount of romance in the setting, I must own. Stashwick Castle is so very large that even after three weeks, I do not think I saw every room. Pray excuse me now, I really must speak with our hostess."

The sisters curtsied and she turned away and went over to Miss Darcy to compliment her on the dinner. Georgiana blushed as she accepted the praise, then tentatively asked her what she thought of Darcy House.

"I-I cannot imagine our house compares to that of a marquess—certainly not to a castle!"

Elizabeth grinned. "Both of my new homes are lovely, to be sure, but yours is equally so. I rather like the understated elegance of this drawing room, in fact."

Miss Darcy's expression brightened. "My brother once told me it is unchanged since our mother decorated it many years ago."

"Well, your mamma had *very* good taste, and so does your brother for not changing anything."

"I also wanted to take a moment to thank you, again, for the kindness of hosting a dinner in our honour, Miss Darcy," Elizabeth continued. "As you and your brother are not directly related to my husband, it was not necessary for you to do so,

but I can assure you that His Lordship and I appreciate the gesture.”

“W-we are not directly related, no,” stammered Miss Darcy. “But our aunt Lady Disley is Lord Stashwick’s sister, so we are related by marriage. My brother and I are not close with him, but we are with her. And you are friends with Fitzwilliam, are you not Lady Stashwick? Is it not the duty of one friend to celebrate the wedding of another friend with a dinner in their honor?”

Elizabeth’s smile widened. “That is the custom, Miss Darcy,” said she, all the while suspecting that had her companion not suggested it, Darcy would not have arranged the dinner. She supposed they were friends, of a sort, but they weren’t exactly close. Truth be told, she’d rather he’d invited her to his home because of that friendship, not because he felt it was his duty.

When the men rejoined them about twenty minutes later, Henry made for her side at once. He bent and kissed her cheek as Darcy, at a more sedate pace, came to stand by his sister.

Elizabeth looked up at him, and once again noted a flicker in his gaze as though he worked to suppress some emotion. She could not imagine what disturbed him unless that fact that there were so many people in his house was making him uncomfortable.

“Your sister and I were just discussing friendship and customs, Mr. Darcy,” said she.

His brow rose. “Indeed? May I inquire as to the particulars?”

Elizabeth smiled. “Certainly. We have agreed that even if you are not close, one friend is obligated to host a dinner for another when they marry. But as I recall, you are not of a mind to pursue matrimony at present, so I suppose His Lordship and I will just have to repay your kindness by having you to dinner without a bride by your side.”

Darcy colored. “It is not necessary, Lady Stashwick—”

He fell silent when Henry laughed. “Just give in, Darcy. I can tell you now, my lady will not take no for an answer.”

The corners of Darcy’s lips twitched. “I am familiar with Her Ladyship’s tenacity.”

Elizabeth grinned. “Well then, prepare yourself to receive, in the next fortnight, an invitation to dine with us, Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy inclined his head. “I look forward to receiving your invitation with pleasure, my lady.”



# Epilogue

**Elizabeth's first** year as the Marchioness of Stashwick was full of many surprises and challenges.

First was a most pleasant surprise—though one that was hardly unexpected. After only three weeks of courtship, Sir Robert asked Mary to be his wife. He proposed to her after dinner one evening, informing them all that he had already called on Mr. Bennet and received his blessing. Mary was overjoyed at having met someone who truly appreciated her for who she was, who admired her intelligence and did not mind that she would “never be as pretty as Jane or as lively as Lydia,” as her mother had so often lamented.

When she said this, Sir Robert had smiled and caressed her cheek, and declared that to him, she was the most beautiful woman in all the world.

A month later, when Mary had resigned the name of Bennet to become Lady Winstead and went into Berkshire with her new husband, Jane had another episode like the row she'd had with Elizabeth—this time witnessed by her husband. Bingley called on Elizabeth the day after the incident looking more melancholy than she had ever seen him. When he explained the reason for his present disposition, she'd felt nothing but sympathy.

“I just don't understand it,” said he. “Why should Jane be so angry that her sister married a baronet? Is she... Do you think she is jealous? Do you think Jane regrets her match with me?”

Bingley had paled then, and said in a near-whisper, “Do you think Darcy and my sisters were right about her, and she doesn't care for me at all?”

Elizabeth, who had given the matter of Jane's first uncharacteristic outburst much thought, took her brother's

hand and pressed it warmly. “No, I do not think they are. I am certain that Jane does love you very much, Charles. However, I have come to suspect that there is something wrong with her—that the pressure of being so perfect, of being expected to save the family by marrying as well as she could that our mother unwittingly put upon her—I think that somehow damaged her mind. She has made a splendid match with a man that she adores, but it is as though she is still seeking our mother’s approval and fears that Mamma will censure her for not marrying as well as myself or Mary.”

“But that is nonsense!” cried Bingley. “How could your mother do such a thing to her—to all of you? I remember what you said to Jane when I brought her to Gracechurch Street to apologize to you—how you suffered as well with being told you weren’t every bit as good as she. I just don’t understand how Mrs. Bennet could put so much pressure and expectations on her daughters.”

“I do not believe she did so on purpose, or even considered that she was doing harm,” said Elizabeth. “My mother was guided by an unfortunate lack of understanding and a great deal of fear. She confessed to me before I came to London for my own courtship that she was very afraid for our futures should my father die without one or more of us marrying well.”

Bingley considered her words in silence for a few moments, then said, “I think, perhaps, that it would be best that I give up Netherfield. I shall send out inquiries today to my friends to ask if any have knowledge of an estate nearby that I might lease or purchase. I think—forgive me, dear sister—that it would be best to put some distance between your mother and Jane. All due respect to Mrs. Bennet, but I won’t have her nearness doing anymore harm to my wife.”

Elizabeth did not hesitate to agree with his plan. She loved her mother in spite of everything and knew that she would be very disappointed to have one of her favorite daughters live far away, but like Bingley, she believed it would be best to remove Jane from Mrs. Bennet’s influence. Perhaps,

in time, the distance between them would relax Jane enough to eliminate any further distress.

Letters from Kitty and Lydia, who were now away at school, began arriving almost immediately. Lydia expressed an intense dislike of the rules at Mrs. Boyd's School for Young Gentlewomen—no surprise there. She got no special treatment for being the sister of a marchioness (some of the students, Elizabeth knew, were the daughters of nobles, and they received no special treatment, either). The students could not come and go as they pleased as they were not considered out, their spending habits were strictly monitored to teach them the wisdom of economy, and they were *...forced to learn to act in such a dull manner*—that is, they were taught proper behavior and social etiquette, which Lydia had long considered boring and insipid.

Elizabeth could not help but laugh at the absurdity of her sister calling proper manners dull, boring, and insipid.

Kitty was rather the opposite, which pleased Elizabeth enormously. She had discovered it was more than acceptable to *want* to be a proper lady, a feeling she had long suppressed because Lydia had once made fun of her for it. Though she, too, complained at first that the students were not considered out and couldn't go into the nearby village as often and when they liked, over time she gave up those lamentations and wrote only of joys. She'd found she rather liked her art class—painting was actually fun, though drawing was less enjoyable. Her sewing was improving, as was her horsemanship, and etiquette class was fun because she could *...pretend to be a titled lady, like you, Lizzy*.

For the most part, Elizabeth's acceptance among the ladies of the *ton* went exceptionally well. She was invited to many teas and luncheons, and she and Henry attended many dinner parties and balls. She was not ignorant of the fact that not everyone she met with liked her, but for the most part they were all of them adept at being civil. The only real opposition she met with was when she found a charitable cause to support and attempted to raise funds for it. The mental and emotional damage that she had begun to suspect afflicted her sister had



prompted her to support mental asylums and treatment for patients with mental and emotional disorders. After visiting one such hospital, Elizabeth had found herself deeply affected by the poor living conditions and lack of proper care she had observed even though she knew the staff were on their best behavior because of her rank.

Few of the *ton* seemed to care about those that suffered from mental and emotional damage. They seemed to prefer just locking such poor creatures away from all “good society” to be ignored and forgotten. But Elizabeth would not give up, and a ball she organized required a donation in order to even be invited. Henry had called it a bold, radical move, but it had worked—many of those who had dismissed her requests previously gave in, if only to receive an invitation to the first grand ball hosted by the new Marchioness of Stashwick that they could judge her ability to even properly organize such an event.

Even Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst had made small but acceptable donations—through their brother—in order to receive the sought-after invite. Elizabeth told Charles to make sure they paid him back, to which he replied, “I made them give me the money first!”

Much to the great joy of the happy couple and their relations, Elizabeth found herself to be with child within a few months of her wedding. When she began to increase, the midwife frightened her by commenting that she seemed to be growing larger than was normal for a first child, but a later examination led to her declaring she believed that “there might just be more than one in there.”

Elizabeth’s initial thought was to tell Henry right away what the midwife suspected, but then she thought of what a wonderful surprise it would be for him to learn there were two babies on the day they were born. Still, she was bursting with wanting to tell someone, so when she had invited Lady Disley, Lady Rowarth, and Diana Parker to join her and Adelaide for a luncheon one afternoon shortly after she’d received the news, she told the ladies she wanted their opinion on a surprise for her husband.

“I should be delighted to help,” said Lady Disley. “What sort of surprise do you intend?”

Elizabeth drew a fortifying breath, then told the ladies what her midwife suspected. Lady Disley and Lady Rowarth gasped, Mrs. Parker looked shocked, and Adelaide squealed with delight—and as they were sitting next to each other on a sofa, turned and threw her arms around Elizabeth in a tight embrace.

“I am so very, very happy for you and Papa! I can hardly wait to meet them!” Adelaide cried. “Do you think they will be boys or girls? Or one of each?”

“That is a very good question, Addy,” said Lady Rowarth. “What do you think, Lady Stashwick?”

Elizabeth laughed. “I cannot say—we will have whatever God has chosen to give us. But I think I would like to have a boy and a girl. No son of mine could ever take the place of the sons my husband lost, but I believe he would very much like to have another to pass his name and legacy to.

“My idea for surprising His Lordship was to keep the possibility of there being twins to myself until they are born,” she continued. “We won’t know the sex until then, so why not keep the number a mystery as well?”

“What a shock Papa will get if you wait another four months to reveal the news!” said Adelaide with a giggle.

“I think it a very clever idea, my lady,” said Lady Disley with a grin. “You absolutely must be sure to have some message sent to me so that I can be here to see my brother’s face.”

She then looked to her niece. “Addy, do you think yourself capable of keeping this to yourself for four months?”

Adelaide, who had only a few weeks before turned seventeen, nodded solemnly. “Oh, absolutely, Aunt. I am just as eager as you to see Papa’s face when the day comes!”

“Will you tell your family?” Lady Disley asked then.

“Not all of them,” replied Elizabeth. “I intend to share the news with Lady Winstead, but no one else. I love them all dearly, but they could not all of them hold their tongues that long. When the time comes, all my family but Mary will be just as surprised as Henry.”

The time did come, and about four weeks earlier than expected—which, when summoned, the midwife informed Elizabeth was not uncommon in multiple births (she had delivered enough of them, she said, to confidently judge that twins almost always came early). Henry fretted with worry through the hours of Elizabeth’s labour and no amount of comfort could be found with his nephews, brothers-in-law, or father-in-law—for Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had been sent an express as soon as Elizabeth’s waters had broken, and his wife had labored so long that her parents had arrived and it was still not over.

At long last, nearly a full day since her waters broke, the men heard the lusty wail of an infant. Henry’s shoulders relaxed and he breathed a sigh of relief—listening to Elizabeth’s cries of pain and being unable to help her had been torture. His companions congratulated him, offering handshakes and hearty embraces.

“I wonder what it is?” he mused. “When do you think they will allow me to see Elizabeth and the babe?”

“It will not be long, I am sure,” Mr. Bennet assured him. “’Twas about a quarter of an hour after each of my girls were born—though once or twice longer—before the midwife granted me leave to enter my wife’s bedchamber.”

Lord Rowarth and Lord Disley both nodded. “Aye, I think it was about the same when Philip and Theodore were born,” said the latter.

His elder son nodded. “I believe it was twenty when Julian was born,” said he. “As I understand it, midwives prefer the afterbirth to be passed first, as they can then properly clean the mother up to make her presentable.”

“Do you not recall how long you waited when your other children were born?” Mr. Bennet asked.

Henry shook his head and chuckled. “Right now, I honestly cannot. I can only assume that is because I have been so very worried about Elizabeth.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam clapped a hand to his shoulder. “I’m sure you’ve nothing to worry about. Your lady is a strong, healthy lass. She and the babe will be fine.”

Sir Robert nodded his agreement. “The colonel is right. Lady Stashwick and your little one are sure to be well.”

About ten minutes later, sometime after the baby had quieted, they heard it suddenly cry out again with the same sharp sound as when it had first been born, followed by a squeal that was clearly identified as coming from Mrs. Bennet. Henry shot to his feet and started for the door. “What in heaven’s name are they doing to the poor thing? Why do I not hear Elizabeth chastising them?”

Mr. Bennet laughed softly. “My son, it is probably because Lizzy is exhausted. She has just produced an entire new human, after all. It’s a difficult task, so I’ve been told.”

His brevity made the others laugh; Henry could only shake his head and pace impatiently, wondering when one of the ladies assisting his wife would come to get him.

Just over half an hour since that first cry passed before a soft knock sounded at the door; it opened to reveal a smiling Adelaide. “We are ready for you, Papa.”

Henry followed her eagerly into the hall and up the stairs—he’d been banished to the ground floor hours ago, when Elizabeth’s screams had him threatening to break her chamber door down. The other gentlemen trailed behind, pausing in the Stashwicks’ private sitting room while Henry followed his daughter into Elizabeth’s room.

Frances stood on the far side of the bed grinning like a fool, with Mrs. Bingley next to her. Mary and Mrs. Bennet stood on the closer side, blocking his view of Elizabeth. They wore wide smiles on their faces as well, which brought him

some relief. Upon his entrance, mother and daughter slowly stepped apart and his eyes met Elizabeth's tired ones at last. He looked down at the squirming bundles in her arms—

Wait—bundles? There were *two* babies?!

“My lord,” said Elizabeth. “You have a daughter ... and a son.”

Henry did not know how he reached the side of the bed without falling over, so stunned was he to learn that Elizabeth had given birth not only to twins, but both a girl *and* a boy. As he sat down carefully on the edge of the bed, he slowly reached for the baby cradled in her left arm.

“Hello, my dear little one,” he said softly as tears of profound joy slipped down his cheeks. Glancing at Elizabeth, he asked, “Which is this?”

She smiled. “You hold your third son, my lord. I... I have been thinking of what to name a boy for some time, and I should like to name him after you, but also honour his brothers.”

“Oh, Elizabeth,” said Henry, emotion swelling in his chest. “I should be most pleased to have our child bear Charles and Edmund's names.”

He looked down at the baby in his arms. “Welcome to our family, Henry Charles Edmund Faulkner, Earl of Greymoor.”

Looking up again, he asked, “What of our little girl? What shall you name our daughter?”

“I have always liked the name Isabella,” said Elizabeth. She then glanced up at his elder daughter. “I want to call her Isabella Adelaide.”

Adelaide gasped. “You would name my sister after *me*?”

Elizabeth smiled. “I would. When I first came into your family, even before your father and I married, you welcomed me with no hesitation. I cannot express what your acceptance has meant to me. I would also like for you to be Isabella's godmother.”

“Oh, Elizabeth!” cried Adelaide softly, as tears now spilled from her eyes as well. “I should be so very honoured!”

Mr. Bennet then knocked on the doorframe and poked his head around it. “May I know now if I have a granddaughter or a grandson?”

“Oh, Mr. Bennet!” cried his wife as she clapped her hands together. “We have both!”

## About the Author

Christine, like many a JAFF author before her, is a long-time admirer of Jane Austen's work, and she hopes that her alternate versions are as enjoyable as the originals. She has plans to one day visit England and take a tour of all the grand country estates which have featured in film adaptations, and often dreams of owning one. Christine lives in Ohio and is already at work on her next book.

-...-

Want to let Christine know what you think? Then be awesome and go post a review on the purchase page at the retailer where you bought your book! Reviews don't have to be long—just a few words will do—and they can totally make an author's day. You can also contact her on Facebook, visit her website, or send her an email. She would love to hear from you!

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