

Think of Me

ELIZABETH ADAMS

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A Highly Irregular Pride & Prejudice Variation

Elizabeth Adams

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CHAPTER ONE

Darcy



London, Spring 1811

I hate parties. I hate the noise, and the overwhelming odors, and the false smiles. Why did I allow Fitzwilliam to drag me here? I did not want to go out, but he showed up at Darcy House begging me to accompany him. There was a young lady he was interested in and he wished for my opinion of her.

I could not turn him away. I would have done anyone else, but Fitzwilliam is like a brother to me, and after the protection he has afforded me over the years, I would be an ungrateful cad to deny him something so simple.

I followed my cousin through the throng of people, doing my best to ignore the avarice that bombarded me as I walked past.

“...as if he owned the room! It is not as if he has a title. Damn cheek...”

“...would be perfectly natural were I to sit near him and start a conversation...”

“...I could tug my gown a little lower to draw his eye...”

“...Pemberley! Ten thousand a year!”

“...might be willing to invest with me...”

“...perhaps if he were in his cups, he might lose at cards and then...”

“...we danced last week! Why has he not called?”

“...he could slip in after the household was abed. I imagine he is quite...”

It was endless. The men wanted my money and the women wanted me. Or rather, would take me to get to my money. A handful wanted me for my person, which had been flattering when I was younger, but as the years went on, invitations from lonely widows and lonelier wives made me feel cheap and base, regardless of whether or not I accepted them.

“This way, Darcy,” called Fitzwilliam.

I nodded and moved closer to my cousin, his steady presence always a balm to my overstimulated senses.

“Lady Elvira, may I present my cousin, Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley?”

I bowed, she curtsied, and we talked for a time. Her emotions seemed very tightly contained. Some might call her cold, but I had learned that people who felt thus were very strong and guarded. Some were the sort you would not want to get into a dispute with for they would never concede and never compromise. In others it concealed some dark secret, or a deep

pain they could not acknowledge. Occasionally, those with immense self-control exuded the same energy, but it came with a feeling of dignity and safety, and Lady Elvira did not excite either feeling in me.

We eventually left her presence and Fitzwilliam looked to me expectantly. “Well?”

“She is not for you, Fitz.”

He sighed.

“Besides that she is rather guarded and I suspect stubborn, her thoughts were not what you should wish in a potential bride.” I would not tell my cousin that she had wondered if I would take a liking to her as I was the greater prize between the two of us, and what she could do to capture my notice.

Fitzwilliam looked at me shrewdly for a moment, but he knew I would not tell him if I had made up my mind not to, and no amount of scowling or cajoling would convince me.

“Very well. It was only an idea.”

I grasped his shoulder in support. “The right lady will come along, Fitzwilliam. Have faith.”

He scoffed. “In what? Your ability to sense emotions and read minds? Or my lack of independent fortune?”

I gave him a dark look and he returned it with an expression that spoke eloquently of his lack of concern. Thankfully we were in a crowded room where one could barely hear oneself speak, and no one was standing near us. But he knew I did not like my gift to be spoken of in public.

Gift. Ha!

I had ceased thinking of it as such a long time ago. Sensing the feelings of those around me could make any dinner party excruciating, and hearing the thoughts of others—only those pertaining to myself, which I did not always feel was a good thing—often left me exhausted and taciturn.

Why must everyone be thinking so often? And ladies were the worst of all! They were always thinking about one thing or another. I could not hear every thought, but the way they dipped in and out of thoughts about myself, their energy moving from calm to worried to excited and back to serenity was dizzying.

Was it any wonder I had few friends?

Thankfully, I had learned to control my ability somewhat. If I kept my mind occupied on other things, I could dampen the volume of a voice. It was easiest to do in smaller groups of only four or five people—the other reason balls and routs were such a nightmare for me. Colonel Fitzwilliam has known of my affliction since we were children, and he has learned to lower the volume of his own thoughts, which makes my efforts significantly more effective. But I could hardly tell all of London to think about me softly for they were hurting my ears with their daydreams. I would be taken to Bedlam immediately!

Thankfully, not all voices were the same, in volume and intensity. The stronger the emotion, the stronger the thoughts. Thus I was well aware of when someone was angry with me—

I heard them shouting in my mind. But if I did not know the person, I could only hear them if I was nearby; yet another reason I kept my distance from strangers. People I was close with or shared blood with could be heard from a much greater distance.

Fitzwilliam and I used to make a game of it. He would call me from the other end of his father's house and tell me to meet him in the ballroom or the entrance hall. None of our other cousins knew, so they did not understand why I always won hiding games. If they had only stopped thinking about whether or not I would find them, I would not have been so successful.

"What about Lady Mary Carstairs? I have never heard anything objectionable about her and she is a peaceable sort," I suggested.

"You mean heard anything objectionable *from* her," he replied with a look.

I shrugged. Fitzwilliam was clearly in a mood and I had no desire to argue with him.

"Shall we leave then?"

He sighed and moved towards the door. "Very well. Do you have any decent brandy?"

I scoffed. "What sort of question is that?"

Soon, we were ensconced in the library at Darcy House—a favorite of us both—and nursing our drinks before a fire.

"What is this sudden urge to find a wife? You did not care at all only a few months ago."

Fitzwilliam sighed. "I have been considering it for some time. Before, it always felt like there was more time. I was young, there was no pressing need to marry."

"But?"

"But I am tired, Darcy. I have spent more summers on horseback and sleeping in tents than I care to remember. I have had several near escapes, and I am still not entirely healed from the last one."

He rubbed his upper arm where a bullet had torn directly through him. A few inches to the left and it would have gone into his heart.

"I understand why you tire of war. Is a wife the only way out? Can you not sell your commission? Or be transferred elsewhere? You could be useful in training recruits, I would think."

"I would, but there is no glory in that, and my father wants to see his son's name in the Times."

"Oh, Fitz. I am sorry. I had not realized he was so demanding."

"Yes, well, he was not always thus. He was disappointed that I was shot and no one wrote of it. Nor did they write of the cannon fire we outran or of the long marches we endured. They do not write of such things, and I would not want to read of them if they did. He does not understand that and wants me to put myself forward with the major general."

“Does he not realize that will make you more likely to get killed?” I cried.

He looked away, unwilling to meet my eye. “Sometimes I think he would not mind if it brought prestige to the family name.”

I was flooded with anger and sadness and helplessness, none of which would help my cousin.

“Fitz, I do not know what to say.”

“There is no need to say anything, Darcy. It is not your problem to solve.”

“You are my cousin and my friend. It is most assuredly my concern, if not my problem.”

“I thank you, but I do not know what you can do here.”

“You could sell your commission and come to Pemberley for the summer.”

“Darcy—”

“Georgiana would love it. And you know I am always glad to have you there.”

“I appreciate that, but it is a temporary solution to a larger problem. I need to set myself up for my lifetime.”

“That lifetime will be considerably shorter if you continue making your living at war.”

He sunk back into his seat. “I know. That is why I thought to find a wife this Season.”

“How much time do you have before you ship out again?”

“I could not say. There was some talk of training recruits, but I cannot imagine I will still be in England come July.”

I stared at the glass in my hand, wishing I could change things. If he were a woman and not a man, I could hire a companion and invite my cousin to live with me and it would not be too out of the ordinary. There would be some talk, but it was not unheard of. But Fitzwilliam had his pride and he could not live as my guest forever.

“How may I assist you in your search for a wife?” I finally said.

Even had I not been able to feel his gratitude, the look on his face would have told me all I needed to know.

“Point me in the direction of any ladies of good character you are aware of.”

“With large dowries,” I added.

“Preferably, yes, but I begin to think I could live on less than I originally imagined.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “I hate to say it, but have you considered Anne?”

“Our cousin?”

“Yes.”

He stared at me in horror for a moment. “Are you out of your senses? I do not need your gift to know she is insipid and ill-tempered, not to mention the fact that her mother wants you for her daughter, not me.”

“But Anne does not want me, as you well know.”

Fitzwilliam laughed. I knew what he was remembering. We had gone to Rosings at Easter as we often did and Anne had shown her true colors; well, in her mind at least. She did not care for me, not even a little, and she was utterly disgusted by the idea of me touching her in any way. She thought me dull and overbearing and immovable, and whoever was unlucky enough to be my wife would certainly be in for a trial.

I had been surprised my quiet cousin had such intense feelings behind her outward appearance of diffidence, but I was happy to discover she did in fact have thoughts of her own. And strangely, a little proud.

“Anne’s feelings for me are neither here nor there.”

He chortled.

“She is not altogether bad, and you could move Lady Catherine to the dower house. Anne has a large dowry and comes with Rosings. You could even live apart for most of the year.”

“And most importantly, I do not require an heir,” he said quietly, referring to our cousin’s ill health and the likelihood that she could not carry a babe.

“Even if she were healthy, I could never marry a woman who despised me so. Could you imagine? How would we even conceive a child?” I shuddered at the thought. I could never touch a woman who did not wish me to, and my cousin was right. I needed an heir. And I wished for my wife to at least

like me, if not care deeply for me. With my abilities being what they were, anything less would be excruciating.

Fitzwilliam was laughing quietly and shaking his head. “You know, Darcy, when we were young, I had moments of envying you.”

“You never said.”

He shrugged. “But once I understood your gift for what it is,” he paused and looked at the fire. “I do not know how you manage it.”

“I have never known anything else.”

“Nevertheless. You must not help me if it is too difficult for you. I know mixing with crowds can be painful.”

“Perhaps you could mix in larger circles and I in smaller.”

“How would you organize that?”

“I could accompany your sister on some calls.”

His eyes widened. “Do not involve Maryann in this! She will have me married off within the week.”

“I thought that was what you wanted?”

“Not to one of her friends!”

I laughed. “Her friends are all married by now. She is my age, if you recall. But her friends have younger sisters.”

“Do not look at me like that. It is a terrible idea and you know it.”

“You do not think it possible she knows at least one decent young lady who would marry you?”

“Glad to know you think I could attract someone decent.”

It was my turn to laugh. “Fitzwilliam, you know the problem as well as I do.”

He stared at me in silence. “Well? Are you going to enlighten me?”

“You do not truly wish to marry. You wish to leave the army, and those are not one and the same.”

He worked his jaw and studied the floor. “You are correct, I know. But I know no other way.”

“If you truly wish to sell your commission, we will find a way.”

“My father,” his voice caught, and I knew what he could not say. If he resigned his commission for what appeared to be insufficient reason, his father would lose respect for him.

“Is it truly so important what your father thinks?”

“If your father were alive, would you care what he thought of you?”

“Of course!” I did not even need to think about my answer. “But my father—” I stopped myself. I could not say that my father had been a great man, a good man. Kind, affable, generous. He had been filled with pride when he looked at me. My existence was a great joy to him. Richard was his father’s

spare in the event his elder brother died without a son. It was not quite the same.

“You do not have to say it,” said Fitzwilliam wearily. “I know.”

He leaned back in the chair and rested his head against the leather.

“I will go with Maryann on a few calls. Just a few. To see who is available. She is capable of being discreet.”

“I know. I had merely hoped to avoid involving my family if at all possible.”

I refrained from pointing out that I was also his family.

“Will you stay here tonight?” I asked instead.

“Yes, if you do not mind.”

“You know I do not. In fact, I would like you to join me for the remainder of the Season, if you are willing. You know you are one of the few people I can stand for more than half an hour.”

He placed his hand over his heart and said mockingly, “You flatter me, Darcy. Truly, you do.”

“Then it is settled,” I said, standing. “I will tell Mrs. Landry to have your room made up.”

CHAPTER TWO

Darcy



I could not stop thinking about my cousin's situation, so the next morning, I made my way to Lady Maryann's home. Thankfully, no other callers had arrived and she was happy to see me.

"Darcy! It has been an age. What brings you here?"

My cousin was all pink cheeks and cheerful plumpness. She had an unfailingly happy aura about her that I appreciated and she rarely thought of me at all, so I was gloriously unaware of the inner workings of her mind.

"I wondered if I might enlist you in a little project. It will require discretion."

Her brow rose in interest. "I see. What is the project?"

"A wife for your brother Richard."

Her eyes went wide and she leaned back. "For Richard? Not Stephen?"

"No, is Stephen looking for a wife? I had not heard." Stephen was Richard's younger brother. He was a barrister in Town, but I thought he was some years away from being able

to marry. He did not even have a house yet, though I suppose his parents might purchase one for him if they thought he would settle down.

“I believe he is, though he would hardly confide in me. Why is Richard suddenly eager to marry? And more importantly, why has he said nothing to me of it? I saw him only yesterday.”

I should have thought this through more carefully. “It is important you keep this conversation between us.”

“Of course.”

“You cannot even tell your husband.” I would normally not ask such a thing of spouses, but her husband was a notorious gossip and everybody knew it.

“Oh, tosh! I never tell Gerald anything and you know very well why. Now, why is my big brother suddenly wishing to join the married state?”

“I do not want him to go back to war.” I decided at the last moment to frame the concern as my own in an attempt to preserve what I could of Fitzwilliam’s dignity.

“I can’t say that I blame you. I am not keen on him returning either. He gave me quite a fright when he was shot. And you know he is my favorite brother.”

“I know.”

She sighed. “Very well. What sort of wife would he like, do you think?”

“Not too young. He would be bored with a girl of nineteen.”

“Of course. I should think four or five and twenty would suit best.”

I nodded. “Kind, enjoys conversation, intelligent enough.”

“I think he would like an unintelligent woman if she were sweet natured.”

I nodded. “You are likely right.”

“Pretty, I assume.”

“That would certainly help.”

“What does he like? Dark hair? Light? Tall, short?”

I was suddenly very uncomfortable. “I cannot say. I will ask him when I see him next.”

“He flirts with every woman between twenty and fifty, so I could hardly say either.” She sighed and toyed with her bracelet. “I should think a dowry of thirty-thousand pounds would keep them quite comfortably. Or an heiress with an estate.”

“He could go down to twenty-thousand pounds.”

“Do you really think so?”

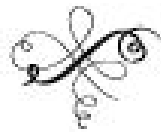
“I think he could be persuaded to be more frugal if he truly liked the lady.”

She pursed her lips in thought. “I do know of one lady who would be perfect, but she is not in Town. I am a friend of her cousin’s. I will write and see when she will arrive this Season.”

“Wonderful. Thank you, Maryann. I appreciate your assistance,” I said as I rose from the settee.

“You are welcome, Darcy. You know I would do anything to help Richard. I will write when I know more.”

I thanked her and kissed her cheek, then made my way back to Darcy House. That had not been as hard as I thought it would be.



The following week, I walked into my London house with a light step. I had just run into my cousin, Lady Maryann, and she had told me her friend’s cousin—the one she thought would be a good match for Fitzwilliam—would be in Town the following week. She seemed perfect. Pretty, kind, well-dowered and of good family. She was rather young at only two and twenty (Richard was nearing thirty), but my cousin assured me that she was intelligent and well-spoken beyond her years.

I gave my things to the footman and went to find my cousin.

“Fitzwilliam! I have news!” I cried as I entered the library.

He turned to face me and I stopped in my tracks. “Whatever is the matter?”

He held up a letter. “I must report to my regiment.”

“When?”

“In two days.”

I felt my jaw hanging loosely but I could not close it. “Two days? I thought you were safe until the summer?”

“There is training, and then we are to the Peninsula.”

“Where is the training? If it is nearby, we might still see you at least a little.”

“It is in Kent, near the coast.”

My spirits sank. So that was that. All our efforts, all our searching, my scheming with his sister, was all for naught. Fitzwilliam would fight another campaign and we would spend the next months praying for his safe return.

“My father spoke to Whitehall,” he said, his voice strained.

“What?”

“They wish to give me more responsibility. Put me in a more forward position.”

“What?” I was repeating myself, but I did not care. What sort of father put his own child in active danger? I was furious with my uncle and filled with impotent rage. There was nothing I could do. No strings I could pull, no influence I could yield. I knew few men in the halls of government, and fewer still in the military. I was a landowner, a farmer. I knew crop yields and rents. I understood war on an academic level. I was no help to my cousin in reality, and I hated it.

“Who will make the final decision?”

“The major-general, though it sounds as if the decision has already been made.” He held up the letter.

“Who is the major-general again? I cannot recall his name.” I was grasping at straws, but I could not stand by and do nothing.

“Lewiston. Why?”

I looked up in surprise. “Is he married to Martha Lewiston?”

“Yes. Do you know her?”

“I will be back shortly. Don’t do anything stupid while I am away.”

He called after me as I strode to the door, but I ignored him. Of all the luck, he was married to Martha. Let us hope she was still as fond of me as she had been three years ago.

I sat in my carriage at the park, watching out the window for Martha. I had sent a note asking her to come, but I could not even be certain she was in Town, let alone at home to receive it. Thankfully, I did not have to wait long for her carriage to pull up behind mine. She alighted and headed for a bench in the park, looking over her shoulder as she went. I followed shortly behind her and took a seat on the far side of the bench. I waited a moment to sense her mood. She was anxious, concerned. Likely because I had requested this meeting. But I sensed no ill will or animosity towards myself, and her thoughts were all curiosity, tinged with a little wariness.

“How have you been, Mrs. Lewiston?”

“It is odd to hear you call me that. I think I prefer it when you call me Martha.”

I smiled. Everything would be well. “Martha. How have you been?”

“Very well, thank you. Marriage agrees with me. I had a son last year. Did you hear?”

“I did. Congratulations. Are you well? You didn’t suffer overmuch?” It was a personal question, but considering I had once been intimate with every part of her body, it was not so unusual.

“It was painful, but not overly long, thank heaven. I am not eager to have another.” She smiled and gave me a look that I well remembered.

“You must be wondering why I asked you to meet me.”

“It had crossed my mind, yes.”

“I need a favor.”

“Oh?” She was intrigued. That could only bode well for my cause.

“Your husband is in a great position of power.” She looked at me warily. “Do you wield any influence over him?”

“Some, though not generally in matters relating to the war.”

I smiled. “Do not worry, I am not asking you to be a spy for the French.”

She laughed lightly, but I could tell she was relieved.

“My cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, has just been called back to his regiment, much earlier than any of us thought he would. He said his father has spoken to Whitehall and they intend to put him forward more.”

“I see. I remember your cousin. He always struck me as a jovial man.”

“He is.”

“He should not go to war, then,” she said, her expression serious. “It has the tendency to remove the joy from a person.”

“That is what I am trying to prevent.”

“You want me to ask my husband to change his assignment?” she asked, her brows rising in surprise.

“Yes.” I gauged her thoughts, and when they were not too shocked, I continued, “I know it is a lot to ask, but I have to believe that the army has organized the regiments the way they have for a reason. Richard has been used to hold before now, generally coming in at the tail of the battles. If they wished him to do something different, they would have used him elsewhere.”

“Or someone did not want to have to tell an earl his son had died.”

I flinched. “That may be the case. I cannot say. What I do know is that my cousin has lost the heart for war.”

She looked at me in surprise and wondered why I had told her something so personal.

“I know I can trust you, Martha. I know you are clever enough to find a way to suggest your husband keep Colonel Fitzwilliam back without saying anything untoward.” I was flattering her, but I also had not said anything that was not true. I did trust her, and she was uncommonly clever. That was why I had liked her in the first place, and why I suspect the major general had wished to marry her. Well, that and the fact that she was exceptionally pretty.

She sighed. “I know what you are about, Fitz, but because it is you, and because I know what happens to men who go to war when they are not prepared for it, I will do as you ask. If I am not successful, I must ask you not to blame me.” She gave me a look and I listened to her thoughts for a moment. Thankfully, she had a calm mind and I was not bombarded by her anxieties every moment I was near her, but her uneasiness was impossible to miss.

“I would never betray your trust, even if you refused my request.”

She smiled. “I thought so, but it bore repeating.”

“Does he not know about me?”

“He knows there was someone, but he does not know it was you specifically. I was a widow and free to do as I liked. You were a bachelor. No one was harmed,” she said defensively.

“Yes, I know,” I said with a smile. “I would not have engaged in an affair with you if there had been anyone to hurt.”

She rearranged her skirts and looked into the distance. “Harry is not the most attractive man, and he is quite a bit older than me. It would be best if he did not know my former lover was...” she gestured at me and made a face.

I could not help but laugh. “Are you saying I am so handsome that your husband—the war hero, whose son you bore and whose ring you wear—would be jealous of a relationship that ended more than three years ago and was never particularly serious anyway?”

She pursed her lips and looked away to stop herself from smiling. “Fitzwilliam Darcy, you are a rascal.”

“I am not, and you know it.”

She sighed, then looked at me thoughtfully. Oh dear. She was about to ask me something personal.

“Have you found anyone else?”

“To replace you, do you mean?”

She nodded.

I sighed. “Not truly. We were friends, you and I. It is difficult to trade that for a simple exchange.”

“I know,” she said sympathetically.

“Are you happy with your husband? Does he treat you well?” I asked earnestly. My mind was instantly flooded with images of a smiling man bring her flowers and touching her face. I could feel her joy and contentment settle over me like a warm blanket.

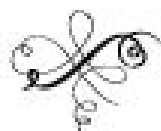
“I am more than content, and he treats me very well indeed.”

“I am glad to hear it.” I rose from the bench. “I must be going now. Good afternoon, Mrs. Lewiston,” I bowed. “It was good to see you again, and I am glad to know you are doing well.”

She smiled warmly at me, but there was no desire in it like there had been in the past, no romantic intrigue or mischief. “I will send a note after I talk to Harry.”

“I thank you.”

I made my way back to the carriage feeling satisfied that I had accomplished what I set out to do. Now I could only wait and see.



Martha was true to her word and the next day, I received a note from her before I had finished my breakfast. She truly had been a good friend to me, and seeing her had brought back a wealth of memories. Years ago, when I was learning to manage Pemberley on my own and overwhelmed by the sheer breadth of my responsibilities, it had been natural to turn from friends to lovers. Martha had been kind and compassionate, and a solace when I had most needed one.

Many of my contemporaries frequented bawdy houses, especially when we were younger or after a night of revelry,

but I had never liked the idea of such a thing.

I particularly remembered that when I was at Cambridge, I had accompanied a friend to a gaming night and there had been half a dozen women for hire present. I had nearly been choked with the weight of their feelings. One of them enjoyed the way she earned her living, but the others were awash in despair and desperation. They were frightened of the men there, or they hated them, or they were disgusted by the entire enterprise. I understood the feeling all too well.

I was nauseated from the combination, and when someone shoved a young girl in my lap, her fear clawed its way into my gullet and squeezed my heart. She could not have been more than seventeen, and her mind was rapidly running through scenarios. She was afraid I would hit her and hoped I would not, and she really hoped I had no unusual requests for her, the details of which I will not repeat as they turned my stomach.

“How old are you?” I had whispered in her ear.

She had looked at me in surprise, then whispered back, “Eighteen, sir.”

I looked at her doubtfully and she swallowed. “I am sixteen,” she finally said.

“Come with me,” I said as I rose and displaced her.

She looked at me with wide eyes and I ignored the cheering from the men near me.

I squeezed her hand and led her out of the room and across the corridor to a quiet parlor that had seen better days. The

smell of stale cigar smoke tickled my nose.

“What would you like, sir?” she asked timidly, sending a smile my way. It was at odds with her feelings, which told me she did not wish to be there, and her thoughts, which were racing through one bad scenario after another.

“What is your name? Your real name?” I asked, using as stern a voice as I could manage at nineteen.

“Amanda.”

“Miss Amanda, do you have any family?” I could tell by her accent that she was from the north, and she did not sound uneducated. Not a gentleman’s daughter but perhaps her father had a prosperous shop, enough to send his children to school for a time.

She nodded.

“Did you run away from home?”

She looked at me in surprise, and her thoughts told me all I needed to know.

“Be at ease, Miss Amanda, I mean you no harm and I wish nothing from you. Now, where does your family live?”

“In Derby, sir.”

“And would they take you back?”

“I do not know.” Her eyes welled with tears and I handed her my handkerchief.

“Have they been searching for you? Do they know where you are now?”

Tears rushed down her face. “I do not know. I ran off with a man. He said he loved me! We were to be married. And then,” she broke off into sobs.

“I understand. You mustn’t tell me anymore. Would you like to return to your family if you could?”

She nodded.

“Are you with child?” I asked gently. It was a delicate question, but it must be asked.

“I should not be.”

“Very well.” I would not push for particulars. “Now, tell me your father’s name and direction.”

She gave me the information and I asked her to gather her things. This gaming hell was not where she usually conducted business—if it could rightfully be called that—and after speaking to someone, she collected what meager belongings she had and climbed into my carriage. Why she trusted me, I do not know. Perhaps I was not the only one who could sense the intentions of others?

It took a week to hear back from her father, during which time I put Amanda up in a moderate inn. Her father had been desperately searching for her for six months and they had feared the worst. He was glad to know she was alive and promised to come and get her as soon as he could organize someone to watch his shop. I wrote back that it was not necessary, and I hired a carriage and a maid and sent Amanda back to her family.

I never told anyone of my misadventure, and when the woman in charge of the bawdy house had come looking for the girl, I told her in no uncertain terms that Amanda would not be returning, and that she ought to make a business out of willing women, not terrified girls with no other options. She did not take kindly to my reproofs and after a few choice words, was on her way.

That was why I did not engage courtesans, or visit brothels, or set up a mistress in a little house in Kensington. Such women generally hated the men who kept them and only put up with him for the money he provided her. It was insupportable.

I also would not meddle with married women—I would not be the father to another man's legal child, and I was hard pressed to think of a circumstance in which I would consider being the means of someone breaking their vows.

If one did not wish to be a monk, this left willing widows. They knew what they were about and there was no one to hurt. A widow was free to make her own choices, had no need for my money or anyone else's, and I found they were kinder as a whole. Potentially due to the grief they had suffered, but I imagined it was also a byproduct of the autonomy they had finally achieved in life. Any sensible person would be happier with their own choices than being forced to live according to someone else's.

That is how I had ended up in an affair with Martha. We were friends and moving on to lovers had been no great leap.

We were careful and discreet, and when she decided she wished to marry again and would allow men to call on her for that purpose, we said goodbye with no animosity between us. I had not seen her in more than three years when I met her in the park yesterday. Now, her letter burned in my hand.

Her husband, god bless him, was sympathetic to whatever she had told him and had promised to use Colonel Fitzwilliam to hold the seized ground, as he had always done. It still came with an element of danger—he had already been shot once—but it was nothing like those men on the front lines of battle would face. I quickly penned a note of gratitude and offered the couple my box at the theatre any night they wished it.

Richard would still go to war, but he had a much better chance at survival.

CHAPTER THREE

Elizabeth



Hertfordshire, 3 Years Earlier

“Are you excited for the ball tomorrow?” I asked Cassandra.

“I suppose. It is hardly my first ball. It seems silly to call it a coming out.”

I squeezed her arm for support. “Yes, but you did not attend many before you went into mourning. Your aunt is excited and wishes to introduce you to Hertfordshire society.”

She sighed. “I know, but I cannot help but wish the entire thing were already over. I will only know your family and Charlotte’s. Everyone else will be a stranger to me.”

“And nobody can be introduced in a ballroom,” I teased.

She shoved her shoulder into mine and I laughed. We were walking in the gardens of Netherfield where Cassandra lived with her aunt and uncle. I had known the Ashburns all my life, and when their niece came to live with them a little over a year ago, we had quickly become friends.

Lady Cassandra Bellingham was the daughter of the Earl of Worthing, who had sadly died in December of 1806. That was when she arrived in Hertfordshire, grieving and lonely. Her aunt had introduced her to Jane and me, thinking we were of an age and would all be friends. She had been right, of course, but Cassandra and I were especially close, though she was nearer in age to Jane.

“Promise you will stay near me, Lizzy.”

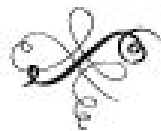
“I promise I will not leave you alone unless you are dancing. Will that do?”

“Your mother would never allow that and you know it.”

I shrugged. “I can make the attempt. I shall enlist Jane and Charlotte to assist me, how does that sound?”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “Very well. Let us speak of something else now, please.”

I dutifully changed the subject and enjoyed the spring day with my friend, even though I was filled with thoughts of tomorrow’s ball.



Our carriage left for Netherfield a little early as had been requested. My mother could not stop exclaiming about the decorations and about the fancy coaches she had seen entering the area earlier, carrying the Ashburns’ overnight guests. The Ashburns were well connected; Mr. Ashburn was a wealthy

landowner and had a house in Town and another estate in Yorkshire, as well as several savvy investments, if my father was to be believed. His wife, Mrs. Ashburn, was the daughter of a baronet, and her sister (Cassandra's mother) had married an earl, and many of their family from that branch had come for the ball. It would be the grandest affair Hertfordshire had ever seen, my mother was certain of it. She rattled off Mrs. Ashburn's grand connections and the suspected value of Mr. Ashburn's assets faster than the carriage wheels could trundle down the drive.

Mrs. Ashburn had been Cassandra's mother's sister, who had sadly perished in childbirth with her second child, who had also not survived. Mrs. Ashburn had only sons herself, and she had always taken an active interest in Cassandra's life. Cassandra was the only child of her father, who had chosen not to remarry after his wife's death, though why I did not know, and neither did Cassandra. When Lord Worthing died when she was seventeen, her cousin had inherited the title, she had been shipped off to Hertfordshire, and now here we were. Having a coming out ball for a girl who was nearly nineteen and would have preferred not to have one at all.

I did not understand why Cassandra did not want a ball. She enjoyed dancing and was not shy in company. I supposed it was likely as she said. She would know no one there and they would likely all see her as a means to an end. As her father's only daughter, she had a dowry of forty thousand pounds and a small estate in Wiltshire. She had no need to marry if she did not wish to, but her family hoped for a grand match. Her

father's cousin, the new earl, wrote to her regularly about this friend or that who would make a good alliance; someone he could work with in the House of Lords, or even in the Commons if he was respectable enough.

Cassandra felt like a piece on a chess board and I could not blame her for not looking forward to the market disguised as a ball. No wonder she preferred out little local assemblies where no one expected anything except a dance.

I quickly found my friend and she pulled me into an abandoned parlor where it was quiet.

“Lizzy!” she squealed.

“What are you so excited about?”

“You know some of the guests have already arrived?”

“Yes, the ones who are staying overnight. Why?”

Her eyes glowed and her cheeks were flushed. “There are a few young men among them.”

“Oh,” I said, drawing out the word. “I see. You have met a gentleman you like.”

She squeezed my hands and smiled broadly. “Lord Trenton is very charming and handsome. His father is the earl of Wessex and my uncle approves of his family.”

“But?” I could tell there was more she was not saying.

“But I really like Mr. Cranston.” She sighed and leaned back against the door. “He has the most beautiful smile.”

I giggled. It was impossible not to. “Do you think he likes you in return?”

She gave me a look. “I did not say I liked him.”

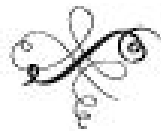
I returned her incredulous expression.

“Very well. I think I like him. I do not know much about him, but he has already asked me to dance tonight.”

“That is good. If he steps on your toes, you will know you should pay Lord Trenton more attention.”

“Lizzy!”

We laughed and made our way back to the others.



The ball had been going for hours and my feet were aching. I had met Lord Trenton, and as promised, he had been charming and handsome, but I got the sense he was not truly interested in my friend. Which was well and good because she was practically smitten with Mr. Cranston. He had a smile that could charm, and he knew it. I would not hold it against him, though. I had a nice smile myself and had used it to my advantage on more than one occasion. One could hardly be blamed for working with what one had.

I did not know his situation, but I presumed the Ashburns did. They were very conscientious when it came to their niece, and I could not imagine them inviting anyone to the ball who did not meet their exacting standards.

As promised, I had stayed close to Cassie throughout the evening, as had Jane and Charlotte, though it had not been necessary. Mr. Cranston had been very attentive. When he was not dancing, he was attending Cassandra.

I had just finished a dance and was looking for somewhere to sit. The ball could not go on too much longer. We had already had supper and the moon was high in the sky. But none of the guests had left and no announcements had been made, so I wandered into a sitting room I hoped would be empty, looking for a moment of respite. The room was dark, the embers in the fireplace barely glowing, but I was sure nobody was there. There was a row of windows and a narrow door along one side that opened onto a terrace. Moonlight shone through and I could hear the vague murmurs of people in the gardens—Mrs. Ashburn had set up torches outside—and the music drifted through the house.

I sank into a chair near a window and leaned back, enjoying the peace of the moment.

I had been sitting thusly for a few minutes when I heard a strange sound. I heard the shuffle of steps just outside the window, and hushed voices that sounded urgent. I pricked my ears and could distinguish a man's voice, though not his words. He sounded upset, though perhaps he was only emotional. There were more shuffling steps and a pot fell off a table and shattered, the sound crashing into the silence.

There was a woman's gasp, and then I heard something that made my blood turn cold.

Cassie's voice, whimpering quietly, asking someone to please let her go. I immediately leapt to my feet, looking about for assistance. There was no one nearby, so I took up the poker from the fireplace and moved to the narrow glass door, opening it easily. I saw a shadowed figure in the corner, a woman's skirts visible about his legs. His posture seemed menacing, and just as I was moving towards them, I heard a loud rip and a gasp.

The man laughed darkly, and he said, "Now we will get along just fine, you will see."

"I think not," I said, pitching my voice as low as I could. I held the poker out straight until it pressed into his back.

He stilled, pulling away from my friend and turning towards me slowly. "This is no concern of yours," he said, his eyes reflecting the moonlight.

I was shocked to see the face of Mr. Cranston, no longer smiling and charming, but filled with menace and brutality. I took a deep breath and looked him in the eye.

"I think it is. You may not importune my friend and think no one will stop you."

He smiled then, an evil, cruel smile, and said, "And what do you plan to do, little girl?"

I bristled at that, as he had hoped I would, and raised my chin a little higher. "It is clear what you are doing. You are trying to force my friend into a situation wherein she will have no choice but to marry you or be ruined."

He smirked, the brute.

“But that will only work if there are witnesses. If you are believed. If she is actually compromised.”

He turned to look at Cassie and I saw her gown, torn straight down the front and her trembling hand holding it up, tears racing down her cheeks as she stared at us.

“I would say she looks compromised—”

Before he finished his sentence, I swung the poker with everything I had, hitting him in the head.

His hand flew to his hair and he pulled it away, staring at the blood on his fingers, then took out a handkerchief and pressed it to the top of his head as he turned back to me, cursing all the while. “You little—”

I swung again. Clearly, he had not been expecting it for he merely stared at me as the poker made contact with his face. Blood exploded from his nose and his free hand tried to cover it as he stumbled to the side.

“Come, Cassie!”

She stared for a moment, then finally moved towards me. I dragged her through the door I had come out, closing and locking it behind me, then went to the door leading to the hall. I peeked out and when I saw it was clear, we ran across the main hall and into a small closet beneath the stairs.

“Stay here. I will return in a few minutes.”

She nodded blankly, her face still pale and wet. I squeezed her hand and darted out the door. I made my way up the stairs to Cassie's room as quickly as I dared. Thankfully, her maid was laying out her nightclothes on the bed.

“Nancy! Thank Goodness. Your mistress needs you.”

Nancy followed me down the stairs without question, and soon the three of us were crammed into the closet together.

“Oh, my lady!”

Cassandra burst into a fresh round of tears, and I whispered to Nancy that I would be back shortly and left Cassie in the capable hands of her maid.

I made sure the stairs were clear, then checked the hall. When the last partygoer re-entered the ballroom, I motioned to Nancy to bring Cassie out.

“I will get her upstairs, Miss. We will see you shortly.”

I saw that Nancy had wrapped her shawl around Cassie to cover her torn gown and her arm was wrapped about her protectively.

“I will find Ash and join you as soon as I can,” I said. I watched them for a moment to make sure the way was clear, then made my way back to the ballroom.

Ash—his name was Joseph Ashburn, but everyone called him Ash—was Cassandra's eldest cousin and terribly fond of her. He was tall with hair so light it was nearly white (which likely contributed to his nickname) and made finding him in a ballroom an easy exercise.

Once I saw him on the far side of the room, I made my way to him quickly, collecting Charlotte as I went.

“Mr. Ashburn,” he looked at me funnily as I never called him that, “I am in great need of your assistance in the hall.”

He must have noticed something in my eyes, for his smile was gone in an instant. “Lead the way, Miss Bennet.”

Charlotte came along without complaint and Ash marched behind me like a sentinel, his features hard and unyielding. Once we were safely in the hall, I told them what had happened and Ash stormed off to find his brothers and then Mr. Cranston. Charlotte and I went up to Cassie’s room, coming to an agreement with our stories.

In the event Mr. Cranston tried to say he had compromised Cassie, the two of us would say no such thing had happened. We had been with her the entire time. Perhaps Mr. Cranston had consumed too much punch and confused her with someone else, or mayhap he imagined the entire thing. The punch *was* rather strong, after all.

When we entered Cassie’s room, we found her sitting on the floor in front of the fire, sobbing in the arms of her maid. Nancy and Cassie had been childhood playmates—Nancy had been the housekeeper’s niece—and it was only natural that when the time came for Cassie to have a maid of her own, Nancy had been trained for it. Thus they had a different relationship than most.

“We have not found Mr. Cranston yet, though I imagine Ash will be rid of him shortly,” I told them.

They nodded.

“However, I think it best if you come home to Longbourn with me. Mr. Cranston may still be nearby, and if you see him before he leaves, I do not wish your face to give you away,” I said softly.

“Very well,” she whispered.

I hated seeing my friend like this. She was usually so strong and vibrant and happy. Mr. Cranston should pay for what he had done to her.

“I will order the Bennets’ carriage and tell your aunt,” said Charlotte gently. She stroked Cassie’s hair. “Is there anything I can bring you? Do you wish for your aunt?”

“I do not know what she will say,” said Cassie, her voice shaking. “What if she wants me to—” her voice choked on the thought that her family would wish her to marry her attacker.

I had been afraid of the same thing and that is why I had gotten Ash and not her uncle. “I do not think she would force Mr. Cranston on you, but I am not certain. I think it best if we keep this to ourselves, at least for now.”

I thought Mrs. Ashburn loved her niece more than her reputation, but it had never been put to the test before now and I was not anxious to see what would happen if it suddenly was.

“I will pack a bag for you,” said Nancy, moving with an efficiency that conveyed confidence and assurance.

I stroked Cassie’s hair, holding her tightly to my side. “You will spend a few days at Longbourn with me, until all the

guests are gone, and all will be well.”

“What will we tell them?”

“Nancy can tell them you are tired after a night of dancing and that you have a headache. It is not so unusual. Most of them are leaving tomorrow anyway, are they not?”

She nodded. “Some were not due to leave until the following day.”

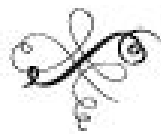
“Well, we will tell them you are ill. Or that you were called away. They will sleep most of tomorrow, then leave first thing the next morning. It is only one dinner you will miss. It is not so very bad.”

I was not sure of anything I was saying, but I did not want her to worry about social obligations when her faith in mankind had just been shattered.

“Thank you, Lizzy,” she whispered, as her hot tears fell on my arm. “You saved me.”

“Shh. You are more than welcome, my friend. You would do no less for me, I am certain of it.”

She burrowed further into my arms and wept quietly, and I held her until Charlotte returned to tell us the carriage was waiting.



Cassie spent three days at Longbourn. The first she did not leave my room and I am not even certain my mother knew she was there. Jane and my parents slept well into the afternoon the day after the ball, and Cassie took a tray for supper that evening. The following day she joined the family for breakfast, but as we had been fixtures in each other's lives for the last year, that was not so unusual.

"Good morning, Lady Cassandra," said my father when we joined him at breakfast. "I did not know you were here. How are you today?"

His expression showed a kindness I did not often see there and I wondered how much he truly knew.

"I am well, Mr. Bennet, thank you."

"I am glad this business with the ball is over. It was a lovely party, of course, but I am always glad when the visitors return from whence they came and I have the house to myself again."

I was now certain my father knew something and he was telling us in a roundabout way that Mr. Cranston was no longer at Netherfield.

"Papa, did you enjoy the ball?"

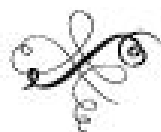
"Yes, it was quite entertaining." The look on his face told me we would discuss this in more detail later.

A note arrived for Cassie from her aunt, asking her to please come back for dinner, but as a rather impressive bruise had bloomed on her collar bone and another on her neck, we decided it was better to risk her aunt's wrath than be seen in

such a state and face the questions that would inevitably follow.

She remained wrapped up in a shawl at Longbourn, talking to Mary about her coming out the following month, and helping my sister Kitty with her sketches of a design for a gown. She finally went home when Ash came to fetch her and assured us that no one else knew what had happened, and her aunt was not truly angry. He had told his brothers Mr. Cranston had importuned a lady and they had taken him to his room, watched while his valet patched him up and packed his trunk, then escorted him to his carriage.

It had been nearly four in the morning when he left, so Ash thought he had gone straight on to London. I did not care where he went, as long as he never returned. Mr. and Mrs. Ashburn knew something had upset her, but they did not know any details or who was responsible. Cassie was relieved, and I was torn. At some point, someone would have to tell them that Mr. Cranston was no longer welcome in their home. Hopefully Ash would take care of it—he was good at that sort of thing.



Cassie remained subdued for the next two months, until her aunt finally demanded to know what had happened. She was horrified Mr. Cranston had behaved thusly—he was the son of an old friend of hers and she would have to sever the connection. She railed at his audacity, then packed up

Cassandra and told Mr. Ashburn she and her niece would spend the summer at the seaside and asked her husband if he would please escort her. I was delighted when an invitation to join them arrived at Longbourn and happily packed my trunks for a summer away.

After an idyllic two months on the shore, Mrs. Ashburn sat us down and announced that the family would be relocating to the estate in Yorkshire her husband had inherited the year before. It was further away from Town and its undesirable inhabitants, and closer to her family and Cassie's cousins, which I imagined was the true reason they were leaving. I was sad to see my friend go, but I hoped that Cassie would be happy in her new environs. We promised to write and on our last night at the sea, we walked along the shore, sharing secrets as dear friends are wont to do.

“I do not know if I shall ever marry, Lizzy.”

“Why do you say that? Surely not all men are bad.”

“I am sure they are not. But I am less sure of my ability to recognize a good one when he comes along.”

I squeezed her arm where it was looped through mine. “You are young yet. There is plenty of time to decide.”

She hummed. “We shall see.”

My heart hurt as I thought about Cassie's experiences. She was so wealthy, and so very well connected that she would always wonder if a man was truly interested in her, or merely wished to be connected to the Worthing title and line his

coffers with her fortune. I did not have her money or connections to tempt a man, but I was quite pretty and Jane was stunning. How could we be sure a man's intentions were honorable?

I looked up at the dark sky, watching the stars winking down at us, and wished with all my might that I might know the character of a man before I wed him—his true character, not the face he presented to the world. I had no idea how I could go about it, but I wished nonetheless, and hoped the same for my friend and sisters. May we all find worthy men, with good hearts, and the kind of decency one only read about.

I laughed a little to myself. I was feeling quite fanciful this evening.

“What is funny?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said, “I was merely being whimsical.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Darcy



Pemberley, August 1811

By some miracle, it was August and Richard was still safe. His last letter had been dated the seventeenth and he had no bad news to report. He was weary and hungry and suspected he had lost a great deal of weight due to his clothes nearly falling off him, but was otherwise well.

I was more relieved than I could say. I had had a terrible feeling that something awful would happen, and given my other abilities, I took those sorts of feelings seriously.

Georgiana had just returned from the seaside where she had spent the summer with our cousin Maryann and the horde of monkeys she called her children. She had produced three in the six years since her marriage, and was expecting another in the winter, though I was not supposed to know that. Someone ought to tell her husband to give the poor woman a respite, but it would not be me. I could not even think of that conversation without feeling ill.

Georgiana had recently come out of school and I had hoped to set up an establishment for her, but so far, I had had no luck in finding her a suitable companion. Several women with good references had come my way, but when I interviewed them, they had proven to be less than honorable. One had wondered how many things she could pilfer while she was here. Another was rather too interested in my person, yet another had marital designs on me as she was a young widow, and an elderly woman had thought my sister and I both spoiled brats, but she would put up with us for the right price.

Most shocking of all was a woman with impeccable references and a truly depraved mind. I felt she had a darkness about her as soon as we met, and her thoughts quickly revealed her to be in league with Wickham, a dastardly man I had known since my childhood and who was the epitome of a bad egg. She was scheming to relieve my sister of her dowry and assist Wickham with his revenge in one fell swoop, and I was so incensed I ended the interview early and sent her off with a flea in her ear.

I quickly had my investigators look into Wickham and tasked them with keeping up with his whereabouts—and buying up his debts. It was time I dealt with my old playmate once and for all, as he clearly had no intention of leaving me and my family alone.

At the beginning of September, we returned to London. Georgiana had grown again and needed new gowns, and I wished to be nearby when Richard returned at the end of the month.

I had not been in Town two full days before Bingley was knocking on my door. Bingley was a cheerful fellow I had met a few years ago, and as he had a happy mind and a kind feeling about him, we became friends. He looked at me as a sort of big brother, and as I had no younger brothers myself, I enjoyed that aspect of our friendship. Sometimes I felt he relied too much on my advice, but he steadily became more confident, so I did not let it bother me overmuch.

“Darcy, I have found an estate to lease!”

“Oh?”

“It is perfect. Only twenty-five miles from Town in Hertfordshire. The house needs a little work, but nothing too great, and the land seems prosperous. And I negotiated a price I am quite pleased with.”

Seems prosperous? Oh dear. “Please tell me you at least looked at it before you took the lease?”

“Of course I looked at it! I am not daft.”

I felt my shoulders sink in relief. Bingley did have a reputation for being impulsive. “When do you take possession?”

“Michaelmas. I have come to invite you to visit, and bring your sister if you like. I would appreciate your advice on the running of an estate if you can spare it.” *Please come. I am afraid I’ve made a terrible mistake and if I fail, I will never be able to look at myself in the mirror again.*

Blast. Sometimes hearing the pleadings of one's friends was too much. Now I felt obligated to go, even if it meant spending time with Bingley's less than desirable sisters. Mrs. Hurst was not so very bad, but she had a dullness to her that grated on my nerves. Miss Bingley was everything I despised in society. She was a grasping, social climbing harpy who pretended to be my friend but secretly thought I was a bore and arrogant to boot. The only thing that excited her about me was Pemberley and its coffers, and the clothes and jewels I could buy her. At least Mrs. Hurst thought I was handsome. Miss Bingley found the idea of touching my person distasteful, but it was a price she was willing to pay for access to the first circles she was so desperate to be in.

It was insupportable.

That family was more than a little odd. Bingley was as pure as sunshine on a summer's day. Apparently he had gotten all of the goodness in his family, Mrs. Hurst all of the dullness, and Miss Bingley all the sniping. If they did not all have the same auburn hair and grey-green eyes, I would think they could not possibly be related.

"When would you like me to join you?" I asked.

"I thought I would go first, make sure everything is ready, then come to Town to collect you and my sisters, and Hurst, of course."

"Is Mrs. Hurst going to be your hostess?"

"No, Caroline will."

“Miss Bingley? Why not Mrs. Hurst? She has more experience and she is the elder sister.”

He sighed. I knew what he would say before he said it, and that was without reading his mind.

“Caroline wishes to do it, and I do not see why she should not. Hurst may take Louisa off to Wiltshire and Caroline would have to do it then, anyhow.”

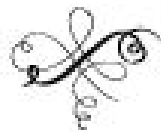
I sighed. This was likely a losing battle. “I think Mrs. Hurst is the better choice, but you should do as you think best.”

He was thoughtful for a moment, then asked, “Will you bring Miss Darcy with you?”

“I do not know. I have not yet found a suitable companion for her, so I may leave her with my cousin or perhaps my aunt.”

“Lady Maryann seems to enjoy her company.” Bingley blushed every time he spoke of my pretty cousin. She was just the sort of lady he preferred. Cheerful, fair of hair and face, and full-figured. Continually carrying babes had that effect on a woman.

I withheld my laugh. It would not be fair to taunt him. “Yes, they get along well. I will speak to Georgiana and see what she wishes to do.”



As luck would have it, I found a companion for Georgiana a few days later. Mrs. Annesley had excellent references and a calm presence. She was well versed in everything a lady ought to know, and she was good-humored and kind-hearted. Her thoughts about myself were a little wary, and she wondered if I was an overbearing brother or a bit lost in what I was doing. Little did she know I was a bit of both. But I found her concern for my sister heartening and we agreed to a two-month trial period.

She was correct to wonder if I could be overbearing. I knew it was a tendency I fell prey to more than others, and given the sheer number of people who thought it about me, there must be some truth to it.

It was just that I spent all my time making decisions! Settling disputes, setting budgets, approving or denying claims and requests. Then there were the investments and the conservation of Pemberley. And my sister—my most important responsibility of all.

I had promised my father on his deathbed that I would guard her with my life. It was a dramatic thing to say, but deathbeds lent themselves to such statements. I also promised him that I would make him proud and take care of Pemberley as he would have done. He surprised me by saying he thought I would do even better than he had—a compliment indeed coming from my father—and then he had died a few minutes later, so I never knew if he really meant it, or if he had been delirious with pain and laudanum.

Regardless, Georgiana now had a companion and I could comfortably leave her with my cousin without worrying I would overtax Maryann.

I made plans to go to Hertfordshire at the end of September, hopefully after Richard's return. Bingley would be there a week before me, and his sisters and Mr. Hurst would arrive the week after. The Hursts' offered a seat in their carriage, but listening to Miss Bingley scheme for twenty-five miles sounded torturous.

Traveling alone was one of the many adjustments I had made to my life due to my gift, but one of the less arduous ones. Since I was a lad, I had been careful. I could not respond verbally unless I was certain a comment had been spoken aloud—this meant I responded slower than I should, especially if I was not looking at the mouth of the speaker. I'm sure this lead many to think I was deficient in some way or not paying attention, but needs must.

I must also ensure I was well rested before any situation which I suspected would be a trial—such as riding in a carriage with Miss Bingley; I had to keep a close grip on my patience and temper, as losing either could be catastrophic.

It was exhausting.

My gift has long since ceased to feel like one and become more of a burden. I did not enjoy walking into a room and hearing a cacophony of voices announcing what they think of me.

I have long since known that many find me to be a bore. Too reserved. Too silent. Unwilling to participate in their insipid games and conversations. And there are a disturbing amount of thoughts about my hair.

When I was younger, such thoughts were painful. I acutely recall being fourteen and gangly, walking into my mother's drawing room and hearing the thoughts of one of our neighbors. Apparently, I was all knees and elbows and my nose was too big for my face, and my hair looked like I had been dragged through a hedge backwards. She also canvassed my skin, my breeches, and compared my feet to skiffs.

I flushed a deep red and never spoke to that particular neighbor again after that day.

I have since learned how to tune out the voices. Generally by playing music in my mind. Music has been the great savior of my life. It is the only things that softens the air around me and drowns out the thoughts I wish I could not hear. Georgiana having such a musical bent has been a surprising gift. When she fills the house with song, I can relax, the feelings of those near me are suppressed, and their thoughts nearly muted. It is a wondrous thing.

Alas, there would be no such reprieve at Bingley's new estate, which is why I now rode my horse, alone, to ensure I arrived a full week before his sisters. If I was going to spend a few months with the Dull Duo, I wanted to be as prepared as possible.

CHAPTER FIVE

Elizabeth



Longbourn, October 1811

My mother was insufferable! Someone had finally let Netherfield—it had been lived in by a cousin of Mrs. Ashburn for a time, but for the majority of the last two and a half years, the house had been vacant.

Apparently, it had been leased by a young man from Town, though I had heard a rumor he was originally from the north. One never knew what was true, but the local gossip said that he was a single man of good fortune and family, his sister would keep house for him, and he was bringing a large party from Town of six people, or perhaps fourteen, depending on which gossip one chose to believe.

I was not half as excited as my mother. My experience with Cassie—or Lady Cassandra as she was better known—had taught me that a so-called gentleman was often anything but. Thanks to my friendship with her, I had seen much more of the world than I otherwise would have. I had gone with her to the seaside each summer for the last three years; I had visited her

in Town a few weeks during the spring of this year and the one before it, and I had even gone to Yorkshire to see her new home and spent nearly two months there. I was feeling quite well-traveled and worldly, more so than I otherwise would have had I not had such a well-placed friend.

And of course I knew something my mother did not know. This last summer when Jane and I accompanied Lady Cassandra to the seaside, her cousin (the earl who had inherited her father's title) and his children joined us. His children happened to be a daughter a little younger than myself (and I liked her quite well, which is always a relief), a son a little older than Jane (who I did not like as well as his sister, but he was not offensive, merely dull) and his eldest son, a young man of seven and twenty.

John Bellingham, the Viscount of Wilmington, was a man of great sense and an even greater love for my elder sister. He had nearly dropped his teacup the first time he saw her. He was always flustered when she was about, and the two of them spent half the summer whispering to each other in corners.

They had left the seaside with the agreement that he would come to Hertfordshire in a few months' time if they still felt the same way for one another. They could decide how to proceed after this next meeting, when supposedly the thrill of new love would have faded. Cassie would keep them abreast of the other's plans and include a note or two in her letters, but otherwise they were to have no contact for three months.

Of course this was not the idea of the young lovers. Jane would have accepted had he asked at the seaside, and Lord Wilmington (Jack to his family) would have asked, but his father insisted on the separation. Having had an unhappy marriage himself, he wished for better for his children and I could hardly fault him for that. He did not know our family well, but the Ashburns did, which seemed good enough for him. I had thought he would be displeased by Jane's lack of fortune, though he did not seem to mind it. He said he had spent most of his life as a modest gentleman and it was nothing to be ashamed of. He had not known if he would ever inherit his cousin's title. After all, many had expected Cassie's father to remarry and sire a son. Nothing was certain until the previous Lord Worthing's health had begun to fail him.

Still, the new Lord Worthing wanted his children to take their time choosing a companion, and they were young. He would give the marriage his wholehearted blessing if they waited a few months, examined their feelings honestly, and then courted properly. Jane planned to go to Town at the end of November to facilitate the courtship. They had been apart five weeks now and she seemed more in love with him than she had been before. Lord Wilmington had sent her a book of poems through Cassie and she had walked around in a smiling haze for days after she received it.

Our mother was not aware of the plan—I had begged Jane not to tell her. Our mother meant well, but as soon as she heard the word 'viscount,' she would pester Jane nonstop. In the event the courtship or marriage did not happen, Jane would be

subjected to endless haranguing from our mother and she did not deserve that. She did not like to keep a secret from our parents, but I convinced her that it was no very great secret. After all, until the waiting period was over and the viscount presented himself to our father, there was nothing to tell.

However, without this knowledge, our mother was insistent that one of us would do for Mr. Bingley, the new neighbor at Netherfield. Perhaps Mary would like him. I was not particularly interested myself. Until Cassie tired of me, I would enjoy traveling and visiting with her while I was able. I had no desire to give that up to move into a house three miles from my father's.

“Well Ruby, we shall have to distract Mama's attention somehow.”

My cat looked back at me with understanding and butted her head against my hand. I ran my fingers along her fur, letting her soft purr soothe me.

“Do you think Mary would wear a gown of mine if I suggested it?”

She meowed and wrapped herself around my arm. The assembly was tomorrow, and there was not much time left to make adjustments. I stood and sorted through my closet, taking out the gowns that would look best on my next youngest sister.

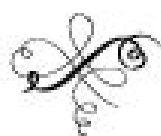
“What do you think?” I held up a pink ballgown that I had not worn in some time because it had become a little tight at

the bust. (Apparently, my womanly attributes had not fully come in until I was nearing twenty—it was terribly annoying.)

Ruby blinked back at me, her green eyes glinting in the light.

“I know, she will likely say no, but I must make the effort.”

I chose one more gown and headed to my sister’s bedchamber, hoping for the best.



I piled into the carriage with my parents and three of my sisters. Jane was two and twenty, I had turned twenty a few months before, Mary was eighteen, and Kitty was only sixteen, though she frequently reminded us she would be seventeen in a few months’ time. I was of the opinion she should not be out yet. She was moody and immature, and often burst into giggles at inappropriate moments. But it was not my decision and my concerns had fallen on deaf ears.

At least Lydia was not with us. She had turned fifteen at the end of August and acted like a spring colt, prancing and gamboling about everywhere with no concern for what she might run into. My mother generally put us out at fifteen, even if we did not wish it and were far from ready. (I would very much like to know who is ready to be out amongst adults at fifteen!) But due to the way our birthdays fell, most of us did not attend an assembly until we were fifteen and a half, and I daresay we were each more mature than Lydia. At October’s

assembly, Lydia would only be six weeks past her fifteenth birthday, and that was a disaster in the making.

When I learned of my mother's scheme to put five daughters out at once, I was at the seaside with Lady Cassandra and the Ashburn family. Mrs. Ashburn was appalled that so many girls would be out at the same time while unmarried, unengaged, and uncourted. I shamelessly took advantage of her horror of the situation and begged her to write to my mother, stating her concern for the plan and how it was not done in higher society.

Mrs. Ashburn was like an aunt to me, and we enjoyed a close relationship, so she was happy to assist. Jane was likely to be married in the new year, then it would be me and Mary and Kitty. Once one of us married, it would be more appropriate for Lydia to come out. Even that would be frowned upon by some. Mrs. Ashburn, angel that she was, assisted further by suggesting that she host another of my sisters for the season next year (knowing about Jane's exceedingly suitable suitor). She wrote that Mary and I would make excellent companions, and perhaps the year after that, she could take Kitty. Of course, the family would have to adhere to London standards, and that meant not coming out until seventeen.

My mother could hardly say no to such a scheme. She agreed and Lydia, unsurprisingly, threw a tantrum fit for a fractious three-year-old. My father dryly retorted that such behavior was likely to convince them to let her out sooner, which of course made Lydia wail louder. I learnt of all of this

through Mary's letters. She was a diligent and accurate correspondent, if a little pedantic.

Lydia had wailed incessantly until Jane and I returned from the seaside, and then she turned her ire on us. We must be to blame for ruining all of her fun. Jane, angelic as usual, tried to comfort our sister, saying the time would pass before she knew it and that she had a trip to London to look forward to. Lydia was inconsolable, though she did refrain from sobbing too loudly in Jane's ear.

One afternoon a fortnight after we returned, when I had slept poorly and had an aching head, Lydia tracked me down in my chamber and started in again, telling me how terrible and selfish a sister I was, how I clearly did not want her to have any fun, how I was cruel and mean and thought only of myself. I could take it no longer. I shut the door tightly and turned on her in a whirl.

“Lydia, cease this caterwauling at once! You sound like a fishwife!”

It was not the first time I had raised my voice to her, but I had not done so in many years as I was now out in society and supposed to behave as a lady. Her mouth hung open in shock.

“If you were conscious of your own good, you would think of what you could do here. You will be the only daughter not out. You might ask father to send you to school.”

She made a face.

“You might devote yourself to the study of music.”

Her nose wrinkled again.

“Many a man has fallen in love with a beautiful singing voice.”

That got her attention.

“You could study French. It is the language of love.”

She looked thoughtful.

“Your friends are not out either, so it is not as if you are missing out on a great deal. And then when you *do* come out, there will be more money for gowns and parties as at least two of us will be married by then.”

She clearly had not thought about that.

“Who knows? With fewer people in the house, father might be willing to send you to Town, or even take you to Bath.” I doubted he would do so, but he *might*.

“And depending on who your sisters marry, you could visit them and have greater society.”

She looked truly interested now, so I pressed on.

“Just think, you could visit Jane at her grand home and be introduced as her youngest sister, newly out. You would be mysterious and elegant. It would not be the same if you had been out for four years already.”

She made a pouting face for a moment and I marveled at how easy it was to read her thoughts in her expressions. And how odd it was that she had not yet said anything.

Knowing it was a risk, I drove my final point home.

“I for one am in no hurry to marry,” I said casually.

“Why ever not?” she blurted. “You are twenty!”

I gave her a look that elder sisters have been giving their younger sisters since the dawn of time. “Think, Lydia. Mama gave birth to Jane within a year of her wedding, and she had five children in eight years. Not even a full eight!” I laughed hollowly. “No thank you! I like my trim figure and I wish to travel. One can hardly go out at all if one is always with child.”

Her skin paled a bit and I could tell she had never connected marriage with children before. Silly girl. She was so focused on besting her sisters by marrying before them or being more sought-after, she had not thought about what such a young marriage would mean.

“And everyone knows that the younger you are, the more children you will have,” I added, just to drive the point home.

Her eyes grew wider still. “I had not thought, that is, I was not...” Her voice trailed off and I took pity on her.

“Lydia, there is not great hurry. If you truly wish to be a wife and mother now, wait a few months and then I will speak to father and tell him to find you a husband.”

She gasped and looked at me with horror.

“However, there is another way. You could focus your attention on something that interests you and become very good at it. If not music or languages, perhaps drawing. You have a wonderful sense of fashion. You might design gowns,

or even furniture if the fancy took you. Then, after a little time has passed, you might talk to our parents about a partial come out.”

“What is that?”

“You might attend family dinners or dinner parties with neighbors we know well. Not large balls or places that will be filled with strangers, but if everyone is known to us, I think you might be allowed to attend. If you are very well-behaved that is.”

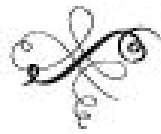
I could only hope I was getting through to her. I thought I was, but with Lydia it was difficult to tell. She seemed to listen sometimes, and then she turned around and did exactly as she wished. Regardless of the result, I knew I had to try. I had a terrible premonition that something bad was headed towards my sister. It was likely the result of an intelligent mind witnessing her ridiculous antics and then putting two and two together, but I could not shake the feeling of foreboding.

I had to save her if I could—save her from herself. And save the rest of us as well. If Lord Worthing came to Longbourn and saw five daughters out, the youngest only fifteen and behaving like a wild beast, he might withdraw his blessing of Jane’s marriage. I did not know the viscount well enough to know if he would go against his own family for her—the family he loved and enjoyed a close relationship with—and I was in no hurry to find out. He had only known Jane a few months, and while I was certain he loved her, it was

understandable that he might question his choice if his very reasonable father were against it. Any sensible man would.

It was for the good of everyone at Longbourn that Lydia be checked, and no one else was going to do it. I had to make the effort.

She left my room looking thoughtful and subdued, and I could only hope I had succeeded.



The assembly was a crush. Nearly everyone within five miles of Meryton was there. Charlotte, a dear friend from a neighboring estate, quickly latched onto my arm and dragged me away to a corner.

“Lizzy!”

I finally got a good look at her and exclaimed, “Charlotte! You look lovely. Is that a new gown?”

She huffed. “It is. Are you certain it looks well? I do not look like a stuffed peacock?”

“You do not look like a peacock! How could you think such a thing? This color is lovely on you. Your eyes are bright and your cheeks are rosy. You look very well, truly.”

She sighed. “My mother heard that there will be eligible gentlemen here this evening and she could not resist.” She fiddled with a feather in her hair. It was a little bit much, but it

did not look too bad, and overall, the look was in fashion and suited her well.

Charlotte had lovely chocolate-colored eyes and long black lashes, and her hair was thick and shiny in a shade a little darker than her eyes. Her skin tended to tan more than others (there were rumors of an Italian in her family, but nothing was confirmed) and with the current fashion for pale and limp, Charlotte's robust appearance was not in style. I thought she was rather pretty, but even I could admit her nose was a tad large for her face. But it was only one feature, and a strong nose was needed for certain hairstyles. She looked significantly better in a turban than I ever would, though our mothers would never agree.

I wished she could find someone who would appreciate her for all her wonderful qualities and think she was pretty as well, but I had little faith that such a man would wander into Meryton. Besides, no matter how much I might wish it, Charlotte herself did not. She was always going on about how unromantic she was and how she only wished for a comfortable home and a respectable husband. I was trying to respect her wishes, but it was difficult when I could not understand them. Why wish for an indifferent partner when one could wish for true companionship?

“Here, let me.” I reached up and adjusted the feather in her hair so it was a little less conspicuous. “There. Now you are perfect.”

She laughed. “Oh, Lizzy, you tell the sweetest lies.” She linked our arms and we made our way to the refreshment table, watching for the mysterious Netherfield party like everyone else.

CHAPTER SIX

Darcy



Meryton, Hertfordshire

Here I was again, at another party I did not wish to go to, only this one was for Bingley and not my cousin. Another room filled with desperate hopes and grasping thoughts. Speculation of myself and Bingley would be rampant, and I would spend another evening hearing rumors of my wealth, my connection to an earl, my estate or that I owned half of Derbyshire. I owned less than a third of the county, but who could be bothered with details like that when there was gossip to be had?

The first half hour proceeded as expected. I was introduced to a dozen country nobodies and nodded and replied as was expected of me. Thankfully, the room was not too stuffy and the moods of the people around me were generally cheerful and festive. It seemed there had been a good harvest and the locals were celebrating accordingly. Having had enough of the delights of Hertfordshire society, I made my way to the refreshment table between dances, hoping to find something to

drink and a quiet corner to stand by myself while the others danced.

I was walking past a group of young ladies, bracing myself for the wave of anxiety and scheming that usually wafted off such groups, when I was surprised by a deep feeling of serenity. There was also compassion, happiness, and curiosity. More than a little taken aback, I turned to look at the group. Of the three young women, the fair-haired one was outrageously pretty. I immediately knew Bingley would be half in love with her before the night was out. She had wide blue eyes and alabaster skin, her cheeks plump and soft. She almost looked like a doll, so perfect was she. I thought the feeling of serenity likely came from her.

The slightly shorter brunette beside her had the same nose and cheeks, the same graceful neck—sisters, most likely. This one felt lively and soothing all at once, like stepping into a rushing brook on a hot day. Refreshing but invigorating, too.

I liked it.

She glanced my way and I could feel the curiosity coming off her like warmth from a fire. She was discreet, but I recognized a searching glance when I saw one. *He is certainly tall.* Ha! That was one of the more innocuous things I had heard about myself.

The other lady with them was slightly older and significantly shorter, with strong features and a sturdy, practical air about her. She felt similarly to Mrs. Reynolds,

Pemberley's longstanding housekeeper, and I was inclined to like her. She would not suffer fools gladly.

It was finally my turn to receive a glass and I thanked the attendant, then made my way to a dark corner where I was less likely to be seen. These sorts of outings were often overwhelming for me, with so many moods and thoughts bombarding me, and a little distance would give my mind a break.

I had been hiding thus for a quarter hour when I became aware of a tempest in my midst. There was a great feeling of agitation; anger and ire directed at the dancers and at the party in general. The feelings were heated and strong, a loathing for the present company so evident that I wondered if a brawl would break out. I looked about me, wondering which man was in his cups enough that he had allowed his baser feelings to show. But there were no men near me. There were gentlemen crowding the card room across the way, and a handful on the edge of the dance floor, but everyone seemed cheerful and peaceful. I closed my eyes and focused on the anger. I latched onto it like a tether and followed it back to its source. Opening my eyes, I was shocked to see a young woman, slight and mousy, calmly watching the dancers. I felt myself gaping, and wanting to be sure, I focused on her emotions once again.

Her dislike of her current situation was so strong it felt like a physical blow, yet she remained unruffled on the surface. I found the juxtaposition disturbing and quickly moved away, her feelings beginning to upset my stomach.

I found myself against another wall and took a deep breath, feeling serenity wash over me again. Ah. The blonde one was nearby. I looked about and saw her a few feet away, speaking with Caroline Bingley. Normally, Miss Bingley's feelings were so strong that they overwhelmed everyone else's, but this mysterious woman's aura overcame even Miss Bingley's grasping tendencies.

I breathed slowly for a few minutes, enjoying the peace, until thoughts began to intrude. Miss Bingley was mentioning my name again—though thankfully her feelings were less strong as she did not know I was nearby—and boasting of how I escorted her about Town to all the best parties. She was wildly inaccurate, but I was not about to interrupt her conversation.

Poor dear. It must be awful to be the subject of such speculation and gossip. Well. It would seem the blonde beauty had thoughts to match her feelings. I would have to find out who she was and make a friend of her. I had learned long ago that truly kind people were hard to come by, especially in the upper circles, and when one found them, it was best to make a friend of them. Before I could finish my thought, Bingley had approached her and whisked her off for a dance.

I could say this about Bingley: he was nothing if not predictable.

Halfway through the dance, my friend approached me, wondering why I was not dancing.

“Darcy! I hate to see you standing about in this stupid manner! You had much better dance!”

“Bingley, I am not in the mood, as I told you earlier.” I would claim a headache, but I was using that excuse too frequently lately and I did not want people to think I was ailing.

“Why ever not? I have never seen so many pretty girls in my life!” he cried, entirely too loudly.

“You are dancing with the prettiest girl in the room.” The truth was that I would have gladly danced with *her*, serene and kind as she was, but she was currently engaged.

“She is an angel!”

I refrained from rolling my eyes. I had known he would fall in love with her. “Do lower your voice, Bingley.”

“Sorry. Now, let us find you someone to dance with.” He looked about the room, rubbing his hands together as if he relished the thought of tying me to a witless harpy for half an hour. Oh no. His eyes lit up. “My partner’s sister is just there. Let me ask her to introduce you. She is very pretty, and I daresay quite agreeable.”

I looked in the direction he was nodding towards and saw the angry young lady from earlier. The one who had nearly made me lose my punch with her energetic dislike of everything around her.

“No, absolutely not.” My voice was likely harsher than it should have been, but I could not dance with her. I would

hardly be able to follow the steps!

“Why ever not?” Bingley seemed genuinely confused, bless him.

I sighed. It was not his fault the girl was a gorgon, nor that I could read her feelings as plain as the nose on her face. “I simply know I will not like her, that is all. I do not wish to waste my time, or hers.”

He looked surprised at that, and I focused on the music to avoid hearing what he thought of me for saying such a thing.

His shoulders slumped and I felt his disappointment in me crash over my senses. Music could not drown that out.

“Very well,” he said, “I will leave you be.”

He turned away to rejoin his partner and I made my way to a new corner, wishing this night would be over.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Elizabeth



Longbourn, the next day

Not like me! How dare he? I was eminently likeable! Everyone said so. I was one of the most liked girls in Meryton! Even in London, where nobody was disposed to like anybody else, I was well liked! My aunt and uncle Gardiner liked me, as did their friends. I was invited to teas and dinners and always asked to dance every dance. And I had been called on by my fair share of gentlemen as well.

Cassie's entire family liked me! Even the earl and his children liked me. Lord Worthing himself had said I was charming. Charming! Me! Take that, Mr. Dismal from Gloomy-shire!

I stomped about the garden, swinging my bonnet from its strings. What right had he to say he knew he would not like me just by looking at me? We had not spoken a single word to one another! He was clearly a stupid man, for only a person with a deficient mind would decide they disliked a person on such flimsy criteria.

Charlotte found me thus and I told her what I had heard Mr. Darcy say the night before.

“You are not going to do anything foolish, are you Eliza?”

“What do you think I would do? I am hardly going to accost the man in the street and demand he converse with me before declaring me unlikeable.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I am simply suggesting you not antagonize him. He is a man of great consequence, you know.”

“Yes, yes, I know. The greatest estate in Derbyshire, master of all he surveys. Is he in line for the throne, do you think?”

Charlotte tsked at me and changed the subject. “Have you heard from Lady Cassandra lately?”

“Yes, actually. I received a letter from her yesterday asking if she might stop here on her way home from Town. Mr. Joseph Ashburn will escort her.”

“I presume you will tell her yes?”

“I must check with my mother, but yes. Cassie is always welcome here. And Ash is still single, so I cannot imagine Mama declining his request to stay.”

“It is curious he is unmarried still.”

“Is it?” I replied. “He is not yet thirty.”

“True, but he is good-natured and the eldest son. He will inherit the estate in Yorkshire, will he not?”

“As I understand it, neither Stillington Hall nor Netherfield are entailed, so they may allow him to choose and let his younger brother have the other. I am not privy to their plans.”

“Still, regardless of which estate he inherits, he will still inherit an estate in good standing.”

“Perhaps he has not met the right lady yet.”

Charlotte looked speculative. “I wonder that he has not shown an interest in you or Jane. You were all great friends growing up.”

“As were you.”

“Not until I was thirteen. You forget we have not always had Lucas Lodge.”

“I remember, dear Charlotte. I am merely reminding you that you were friendly with the Ashburns as well. And you forget that Jane and I have few connections and small dowries.”

She linked her arm through mine as we continued through the garden. “It is a shame that women may not go into a profession as men do. If you see a woman working, it is at a shop or as a seamstress. We cannot join the church or the army, or become barristers like men do.”

I looked at her in surprise. “Would you join the church if you could? Or would you prefer to pick up a musket and fight Napoleon? Make sure you join the infantry and not the cavalry—I’m afraid your riding skills do not extend to charging into battle.”

She smiled at my teasing. “I have no desire to take up arms or join the church, though I do think *you* would enjoy following the drum.”

I was too surprised to answer. Would I enjoy such a life?

“But I think I would make a good barrister.”

That made me stop and stare at her. “Truly?”

“I have an organized mind and I like to think I am a fair person. I would make an excellent judge.”

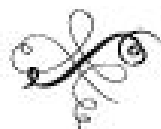
I smiled at her teasing, but she had a point. “You are correct. You would make an excellent judge. And a wonderful barrister. Perhaps we could speak to a member of parliament and suggest they allow women to practice.”

“I’m certain it would be a popular measure.”

“Undoubtedly. The robes are not so different from gowns, after all. And we could wear the same wigs as the men. They would hardly know the difference aside from us being so much better at it than they are.”

“And that is precisely why they will not allow it.”

We dissolved into laughter and went on to speak of the assembly and Cassie’s upcoming visit.



Longbourn, Hertfordshire

10 October, 1811

Dear Cassie,

Of course you may stay at Longbourn on your way to Yorkshire! I would be cross with you if you drove within a few miles of Meryton and did not even stop for tea. When I asked my mother, she was all atwitter that you and your cousin would be staying at L. I hope you are not too offended, but she is more excited about your cousin than yourself, though I'm sure it is only because of his eligibility and does not reflect on your personalities in the slightest.

She immediately ran off to tell my father, who seemed annoyed with her interruption as he always does. But it turned out to be a good thing as he had only just read a letter from his cousin, a Mr. Collins in Kent, who had requested leave to come visit us. His visit would have coincided with yours, so Papa bestirred himself to reply to the letter less than a fortnight after it arrived, a circumstance I can assure you has made him very cross indeed.

Mr. Collins is the distant cousin set to inherit Longbourn. Mama continues to say that she does not understand it, and while we have explained it to her countless times, I cannot help but agree with her a little. Mr. Collins knows nothing of this estate, or any for that matter, and because he happened to share an ancestor with my father three generations ago, he will inherit. It is all rather ridiculous. Jane ought to inherit, though I would never tell my mother such a thing. She would not let it go and would petition my uncle Phillips to do all he could to break the entail, which from what I understand, is very difficult and might even involve parliament. Or maybe

that only applies to lands gifted by the Crown? I do not understand the details of it all, though I probably should as it affects my life in so material a way. Perhaps you know a charming young barrister who could explain it to me?

Do give my love to all your cousins. I know I will see Ash soon enough, but I cannot help it that Henry is my favorite. I shall ask him to explain the entail in more detail next time I see him. How is Christopher? I must say I am surprised he has not taken up residence at Netherfield. Or does Ash want it? Oh, nevermind! I shall pester you with questions when I see you in a few weeks.

You will never believe who has taken Netherfield! A young man called Mr. Bingley is in residence with his two sisters and the elder's husband, a Mr. Hurst. Do you know them? They also brought along a Mr. Darcy from Derbyshire. He is a terribly unpleasant man, but if half of what I heard of him is true, he is probably a friend of your cousin's, or at least known to your family. The upper circles are rather small, are they not?

He was horribly rude at the assembly. Mr. Bingley suggested me as a dance partner, and Mr. Darcy took one look at me and told his friend he did not wish to dance with me as he was certain he would not like me and did not wish to waste his time. Can you imagine? Not like me! We have not spoken a word to one another, but I can say for certain that I most certainly do not like him. We shall have to endure our mutual disdain as long as he is visiting, which will hopefully be brief.

Mary wore the gown I loaned her, but she was still miserable. She did not dance once, though Charlotte's brother braved her glower to ask her. He seemed rather insulted that she said no and I spent an entire dance trying to cheer him so he would not complain about us. I do not know what to do about Mary. She has no interest in anyone or anything beyond Fordyce and oppressive dirges. I would say she needs a friend but I do not know who would be willing to take her on! Perhaps what she needs is a holiday and a change of scenery. She has not left Longbourn for two years now. I will suggest it to my father.

I cannot wait to see you!

Your friend,

Elizabeth Bennet

CHAPTER EIGHT

Darcy



Unfortunately, Bingley had committed us to several other outings in the area, the first of which was a dinner party at Haye Park, home of the Goulding family. As I understood it, they had a reputable stud and there should be some interesting conversations about horses if nothing else. If I were not in dinner wear, I would ask for a tour of the stables.

I had always liked animals more than people. They were less complicated and entirely honest. If a horse did not wish you to be on his back, he bucked you off. If a dog did not want to walk beside you, she could and would run away. There was no falseness, no calculation. An animal either liked you or it did not. It did not care about the size of your estate or how much money you had in the four percents.

The dinner was not overly crowded, but there were at least twenty people there, none of whom I remembered except for Bingley's blonde angel. Miss Bennet, I think she was called. I was introduced again to many people I had likely met at the assembly a few days prior, but I could not recall most of their names. I did recall the sounds of their voices in my head—

only slightly different from the sound in my ears—and the feelings that surrounded them.

One woman was well dressed and rather pretty for her age, but there was a great hecticness about her. She was excited and anxious by turns, and only occasionally happy. Such active auras were rather tiring, and I hoped we would not be seated near one another. Her husband had a lazy energy about him, and a sort of disdain for the general party, though he also had an odd sort of fondness for the nervous woman with him. They were an odd couple, and the idea of knowing them better gave me a slight headache.

After a round of pleasantries in the drawing room, we moved into the dining room where I was glad to find I was seated next Miss Lucas. She was the practical woman I had met at the assembly and I had secretly hoped she would be seated near me. Miss Lucas was intelligent and sensible, and she had a feeling I had long associated with integrity and a general sense of goodness. Had the hostess read my mind? It made me smile to think it. Unfortunately, on my other side was a young lady who was terrified of eating next to me. A Miss Long who seemed to have no great share of intelligence or beauty.

He is likely too high to consider anyone here. It is a shame. He seems clever enough and he is quite handsome.

I smiled at Miss Lucas's thoughts. She was not wrong entirely. I likely was too high for anyone present, but what she did not know was that I would not hesitate to take a bride of

lesser standing and little dowry if I thought she would make the best mistress of Pemberley and the most loving wife. I had had the affection of kind women my entire life, first my mother and Nanny, and now my sister and cousin, and I could not bear the idea of being with a woman who felt nothing for me. Of course I wished to love her in return, though I had yet to meet anyone who stirred my blood in the way I hoped a lifetime lover would.

During the third course, I became aware of a strange sensation coming from my right. It was not Miss Lucas, she was as peaceful as ever. I leaned forward slightly to see past her and saw a dark-haired woman I recognized from the assembly, though I did not know her name. She had a playful feeling about her that made me want to smile, but there was also agitation growing by the minute. It became so strong my neck started to itch, and after sorting through various voices, I honed in on hers. *How can he sit here as if he has done nothing wrong? Does he have no shame?*

I had no idea what she was referring to. What had I done wrong? As I ruminated, her voice intruded in my thoughts at an uncomfortable volume.

I am exceedingly likeable! Everybody says so!

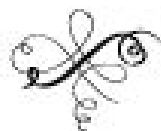
Whatever she was upset about bothered her greatly. Her expression remained neutral as she ate her food, but her mind was a riot of negative thoughts, all centering on me. Had I said I did not like her? When? I did not even know her name!

The gall of him! I simply know I will not like her. Hmph.

She imitated a man's deep voice in her mind and I had to withhold my smile. She was amusing in her anger. But when had I said such a thing?

Then it all rushed back to me. I had said that to Bingley at the assembly a few days ago, when Bingley was badgering me to dance with an angry little woman who made my head ache. I was not sure who that lady had been, but I knew she was not the lady currently hating me in her mind. Why did she think she was?

I shook my head. Perhaps they had been standing near one another, or perhaps she had simply overheard and thought it was her when it was not. There was nothing I could do about it at the moment, so I tried to ignore her and turned to Miss Long, gentling my voice so as not to send her into a fit of nervousness.



By the time the gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the drawing room, I had a great respect for Miss Lucas and an appreciation for her practical, if somewhat ruthless, thought process. She was considerably better company than most of the men present. I made my way to where she stood with the dark-haired woman who was put out with me, hoping Miss Lucas would introduce us. My time in Hertfordshire would go more smoothly if I was not accosted with angry young ladies at every party.

“Mr. Darcy, have you met Miss Elizabeth Bennet?”

“I do not believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

Miss Lucas performed the introductions and I tried to put on my most disarming smile, but I was not particularly good at smiling. Fitzwilliam had told me I looked as if I had a splinter in my foot when I tried to look approachable, so I doubted my success.

Miss Elizabeth stared blankly back at me, then smiled tightly when Miss Lucas bumped her with an elbow.

“Will you play tonight, Miss Lucas?” I asked politely.

“I may, though I am not a particularly good performer. Miss Elizabeth is more talented by far.”

Her friend shot her a look, but she spoke calmly. “Miss Lucas exaggerates. I am decent enough, but unlikely to impress those who are accustomed to hearing the best performers.”

“Do not be modest, Eliza. You are the best player in the area. Why do you think everyone is constantly asking you to play?”

Miss Elizabeth looked as if she were gritting her teeth.

“Who is your favorite composer?” I asked, trying to move the conversation along. We spoke for a few minutes more, then Miss Elizabeth’s thoughts intruded, though I had been successful at blocking them out for the last few minutes.

Why do gentlemen always think their attentions are welcome, even when the lady gives no encouragement?

She must have been thinking about me in some capacity, but her eyes were on the other side of the room. I looked that direction as casually as I could and saw Bingley sitting rather too close to the serene blonde woman he had danced with at the assembly. Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth's elder sister. I stretched my senses as far as I could and detected discomfort and embarrassment coming from the lady. Ah. She did not wish for Bingley's attention, but she was likely too polite to turn him away outright, and Bingley was too enamored to notice her subtle disinterest.

I excused myself and made my way across the room. "Bingley," I said once I had reached the sofa, "I just heard Mr. Goulding has a foal he is willing to part with. You will never guess who its sire is."

Miss Bennet's relief washed over me like a gentle spring rain. She looked at me with gratitude and I tipped my head subtly. We spoke of horses for a few minutes more until the instrument was opened.

Miss Lucas was correct—she was not a great performer, but she acquitted herself well enough. Next was someone called Miss Mary. The moment my eyes landed on her, I realized she was the angry woman from the assembly. Tentatively, I felt her emotional state. I was relieved to find she was not angry at the moment, but she was prideful, and not in the way a parent is proud of a child; more like an entitled young man who thinks

himself better than others for no verifiable reason. She felt herself above her company, though I could not begin to understand why. She was not more than a few bars into the concerto before it became painfully obvious that she was a middling player. When it was over, she stood with a satisfied smile and swept from the room, taking her disdain and delusions with her.

Miss Elizabeth sat at the instrument next. She chose a simple tune, and I agreed with her choice. It was better to play something simple well than something intricate badly. When she began singing, I almost took back my earlier thoughts. Her voice was positively angelic. Clear and high, she sang with fervor and joy. All around me, the room lightened. Spirits were lifted and a sense of peace and happiness pervaded the company. Her music tripped into my heart and soothed my agitated feelings that always came about with such a large party. It washed over me smoothly, like fresh spring water on a hot day.

How could such a lovely, cheerful person harbor so much resentment towards me?

Miss Bingley was the last lady to exhibit, her sister joining her to play a complicated four-hand piece. They played everything as they should, and the notes were all correct, but the piece lacked feeling and it was clear they were not enjoying the music itself. Any pleasure they had from the experience came from proving themselves superior to the other ladies present. It was a black, sticky feeling and I shrugged my shoulders to dislodge it.

Before they finished, I made my way out the door at the rear of the drawing room and onto a small terrace. The night was cool, but not overly cold, and I took a deep breath of the much needed fresh air.

That was when I realized I was not alone. Miss Elizabeth Bennet stood on the other side of the terrace, face turned up to the heavens. Her feelings were warm and steady, a deep contentment settled over her like a woolen shawl.

“Miss Elizabeth,” I said softly. I had moved closer to her without thought. “I very much enjoyed your performance.”

She startled and turned to me with wide eyes. “Thank you.”

“It is clear that you greatly enjoy the music you play.”

She was surprised by my statement. “I do. But then who truly dislikes music?”

I shrugged. “There are those who do not care much about it either way, and those who wish to listen but not perform.”

“I suppose.”

She looked at me curiously, and I knew this was the moment to clarify her thoughts of me. “I believe I owe you an apology.”

“Oh?” One brow ticked up above a sparkling eye and I could not stop myself from smiling at her.

“Yes. I believe you overheard me say something at the assembly that was not meant for your ears.”

“Because you did not wish anyone to know of your mannerless behavior?” Her anger was beginning to rise but it did not choke me like anger often did. It coursed through me like a raging river, leaving me disoriented and off balance, but feeling alive at the same time.

“No. You are correct that I should not have spoken so in a public forum. It was rude of me. I wished for Bingley to leave me alone with my headache, but he is in the habit of insisting when he wants someone to join in his fun.”

Her expression changed and she tilted her head to the side. “You had a bad head?”

“Yes, but that is neither here nor there. I should not have spoken as I did at all, but especially not in a room full of people.” She was receptive to my words, so I pushed onwards. “But you must know that I was not referring to you.”

“You weren’t?”

“I was not.”

“Then who were you referring to?”

I could not say it was her younger sister, for that would bring a problem of another sort. I chose to prevaricate slightly in service of the greater good.

“I was not introduced to her, but her feelings about the assembly were not kind.”

“You heard her speaking ill of the people there?” Her face was alit with curiosity.

“Yes.” I had not heard her, per se, but it was a similar thing, so I agreed. “She did not wish to be there and made her displeasure known. I did not think that boded well for a dance partner.”

“No, it would not.” She sighed. “I agree that you should not have spoken so at a crowded assembly, but I am relieved to hear it was not me you were referring to. Perhaps it is vain of me, but I am generally considered a likeable sort.” She smiled in a teasing fashion and I felt heat creep up my neck.

I bowed slightly. “I am certain you are a highly sought after dance partner and dinner companion.”

Her laughter rang through the air and I stared at her stupidly for a full minute as she beamed at me.

“Shall we start anew, Mr. Darcy?”

“I would like that.”

She smiled again and curtsied. “I am Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn.”

“Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, at your service.” I bowed over her hand.

“We shall be friends, you and I. I can tell already,” she said, conviction in her voice.

“Oh? How can you tell?” I could not help it. I was vastly amused.

“My friend Charlotte Lucas likes you, and she is an excellent judge of character. I trust her judgement.”

“I see. Then I hope I live up to your and Miss Lucas’s expectations.”

She looked at me in amusement for a moment before excusing herself and rejoining the party. I stood looking out at the garden for several minutes before I realized I had not read her feelings or her mind at all whilst we had conversed. Singular.

CHAPTER NINE

Elizabeth



I next saw Mr. Darcy at Lucas Lodge. Sir William enjoyed hosting, and he took every opportunity to prove that he was now a member of the gentry. It would have been bothersome had Sir William not been a genuinely kind man, though a little enamored with titles.

The Netherfield party was the last to arrive. I imagined that Miss Bingley was the sort who liked to make a grand entrance. She certainly took every opportunity to appear superior. Had she known that half of Meryton was secretly laughing at her inappropriate attire and the other half was dim-witted, she might have behaved differently.

Mr. Bingley wasted no time in moving towards Jane, and I stayed by her side, knowing how uncomfortable his attentions would make her. I would make sure to mention Mr. Bingley's interest in my next letter to Cassie. Perhaps her uncle would relent and allow his son to call on her sooner in light of this development. According to my friend, Jane's suitor was as steadfast as he had ever been, and eagerly counting the days until he could be reunited with her.

There was a new addition to the neighborhood. A Colonel Forster of the militia was in Meryton in preparation for the regiment to encamp there over the winter. My younger sisters were terribly excited by the news, as you can imagine, but I was not particularly pleased. My father would likely curtail my walks if he gave it much thought, and Lydia's whining would grow to unbearable levels. I hoped my parents could remain strong and not allow her out while an encampment of young, lonely men was only a few miles away.

I maneuvered our little group closer to Colonel Forster and Sir William, hoping Jane and I could make our escape. Mr. Darcy joined us—I think he understood Jane's lack of interest—and with him came Caroline Bingley. It was blindingly obvious that she had set her cap at Mr. Darcy, and just as clear that he wished nothing to do with her. His unease with her nearness was almost palpable, and I felt a pang of compassion for him. He had assisted Jane in escaping Mr. Bingley. We could get him away from Miss Bingley, surely.

Seeing Charlotte headed our way, I stepped towards her and whispered in her ear. "Please ask Miss Bingley to play and offer to turn her pages if she tries to ask Mr. Darcy to do it."

She looked at me quizzically and I knew I would have to explain this later.

"Very well, Eliza."

"One good turn deserves another," I added.

"Ah." She did not know precisely what I was about, but she understood that the fox wanted away from the hound.

“Miss Bingley,” she said loudly, “I so enjoyed your performance at Haye Park. Would you do us the honor of playing for the company?”

Miss Bingley smiled in what seemed to be pleasure and acquiesced. By the time Miss Bingley realized she was losing Mr. Darcy’s company, Charlotte had borne her halfway across the room. Charlotte really would make an excellent mistress of an estate. She was a conscientious hostess and more diplomatic than the daughter of such loquacious parents had a right to be. If only Mr. Bingley would turn his attentions to her. A woman like Charlotte might be the making of him.

“Jane, would you join me for a moment?” I took her arm and smiled at Mr. Bingley. “Excuse us, gentlemen.”

I felt Mr. Darcy’s eyes on us as we went away and silently willed him to follow me into the corridor, though I knew it would not work. It did not stop me from trying.

“Thank you, Lizzy. I do not know how to put him off kindly!”

“You are too kind, Jane. You may be polite and still tell a gentleman you do not wish for his attentions.”

“How?” She was genuinely distressed.

“Well, you might say,” I hesitated. “Hmm.” She was right. It was difficult when the man had declared nothing. There was nothing to reject. “You could mention that...” No, that would not work. He was seeking her out and she was being friendly and neighborly. She did not *dislike* him. But the entire

neighborhood was aware of his interest and mere politeness did not seem to be working. Our father ought to have taken care of it, but that was unlikely to happen.

“See? It is not so easy!”

“Perhaps I may be of service.”

We both jumped at the sound of a deep voice behind us.

“Mr. Darcy!” I cried. “You startled us.”

“Forgive me.”

“It is good you are here,” I said. “I was actually hoping you might be able to assist.”

He blushed at that, though I could not imagine why.

“Do you wish me to tell Bingley his attentions are unwelcome, Miss Bennet?” he asked.

Jane blushed to the roots of her hair. “I do not wish to offend him or wound his feelings in any way.”

“I am certain he will be well. You have only recently met.”

I thought there was something he was not saying, but I could not imagine what it was. Did he know something about Mr. Bingley we did not know?

“I would appreciate your assistance, Mr. Darcy,” said Jane quietly. “He is perfectly gentlemanly. I would like to be friends with Mr. Bingley. I simply do not...”

“I understand. Leave it with me.” He smiled kindly at my sister and I was struck by how different he seemed now from when I had first seen him at the assembly.

“Thank you!” Jane said, relief all over her face. Kitty appeared in the corridor and asked for Jane. “I will join my sister. Thank you again.” Her smile was beatific and Mr. Darcy returned it, watching her walk away.

Oh, dear. He did not offer to assist because he wished to have Jane for himself, did he? I would have to set him aright.

“Lucas Lodge has a small maze on the east side of the house. Have you seen it?” I asked.

“No, I have not had the pleasure.”

“Shall we take a stroll there now? There is still enough light.”

He nodded, a questioning look in his eyes. I ignored it, asked for my cloak, and led him out a side door. I had spent so much time at Charlotte’s over the years that I was almost as familiar with it as I was Longbourn.

We were at the entrance of the small maze when I took a deep breath and began. “Mr. Darcy, I understand this is an awkward topic, and perhaps it is not entirely my place, but—”

“You wish to warn me off your sister?”

“Yes. How did you know that?”

He looked over the garden. “Lucky guess.”

“Hmm. Well, Jane is not available. I cannot say more, but she has no desire to be pursued by anyone at the moment.”
Anyone except John, I thought.

“I understand, Miss Elizabeth. Your sister is not the first to have her heart stolen by one man only to be pursued by another. I will not say a word. And so you know, I had no intention of pursuing your sister. She is a lovely lady, and I am sure she will make an admirable wife, but I am not interested in anything beyond friendship.”

“Why ever not?” I cried. I blushed scarlet, realizing what I said after it had leapt out of my mouth.

Mr. Darcy laughed lightly and I could only be grateful I had not offended him.

“I am not offended, do not worry.”

“How do you do that? It is like you know what I will say before I say it.”

He reddened again, then said, “Not always.”

Now it was my turn to look away. “I apologize. Jane is my favorite sister, and so very good. She is also five times prettier than any other girl in Hertfordshire. I am not accustomed to men *not* being interested in her romantically.”

“I understand. She is your sister and you were offended on her behalf.”

“I would not say offended. More like surprised and shocked into bad behavior.” I gave him my most teasing smile and was pleased when he returned it.

“You are wrong, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Oh?”

“Your sister is not five times prettier than you.”

I felt heat rise to my cheeks. Was Mr. Darcy *flirting* with me? “Is that so?”

“Two at the most.”

My mouth dropped open and I stared at him until I saw his lip twitch, a smile finally breaking out. He was teasing me!

“Bravo, Mr. Darcy. I did not think you had it in you.”

“Be careful, Miss Elizabeth. I may surprise you again tomorrow.”

I could not stop the laugh that bubbled forth at that. “I look forward to it, sir.”

CHAPTER TEN

Darcy



That had been entirely too close. I had responded to Miss Elizabeth before she had spoken, a mistake I had not made in years. If I was not more careful, she would begin to suspect something was amiss. She had a way of talking to me that emptied everything out of my mind and made me respond in ways I was not familiar with. I had actually *flirted* with her! I never flirted! I ceased being careful when I was with her and was simply myself.

It was dangerously heady. And completely dangerous.

I did not have long to dwell on my mistakes, for we had not been back at Netherfield above half an hour when a rider was heard outside. Soon I was reading an express from my cousin, Lady Maryann. Richard had returned and he was injured. Shot again, this time in the leg. He was currently at their parents' home in Town and asking for me. She begged for my presence as soon as possible.

I wasted no time informing my valet and ordering my trunk packed. I did not know when I would return to Netherfield—or

if I would—so I made hurried goodbyes in the drawing room, ignoring Miss Bingley's perturbed look and vicious thoughts.

I was on the road at first light, Bingley having kindly offered me his carriage. It was becoming too cold to ride for a long distance, and I did not want to be on horseback whilst agitated. Being thrown from my mount was the last thing my family needed at the moment.

As I settled into the squabs with no one but my snoring valet for company, my thoughts drifted back to the night before.

We had entered the hall late, Miss Bingley spending a ridiculous amount of time on an overdone headpiece that became disfigured in the carriage. Lucas Lodge was a modest estate, about a quarter of the size of Netherfield, and home to Sir William Lucas, a loquacious man who had no ill will in him, but a great deal of eagerness and anxiety. I found him somewhat tiring to be around, but he was not nauseating as so many others were.

I had enjoyed the company as the majority of them had no designs on me, and I had forwarded my friendship with Elizabeth Bennet, something I was more than a little surprised by. She had said we would be friends, and I had no reason not to believe her, but it had been a very long time since a lady had genuinely wished to be my friend and nothing more. Miss Elizabeth seemed to be sincere, though. I had detected no desire or plotting in her feelings or thoughts. The way she had defended her sister had been quite impressive. She had been

horribly uncomfortable, but she was willing to do it for her sister's sake. It was a trait I could admire and made me like her that little bit more.

To my surprise, I quite liked being teased by her. My abilities being what they were, it was difficult for anyone to say something that I was not already aware of. But Miss Elizabeth seemed to have a habit of speaking as she thought, which was surprisingly enjoyable. I was sure there were situations where such a trait was undesirable, but so far, I liked it.

My thoughts wandered back to Richard. Maryann had said the wound did not look too bad and was not festering, which eased my mind a great deal. He was sleeping a lot, as was expected, and had already told his mother to stop fussing over him. It was a good sign, but I would not be truly at ease until I saw him.

I hoped to convince Richard to travel to Hertfordshire with me. Bingley had already issued the invitation and my cousin generally disliked being in Town immediately following a campaign. I imagined that the noise was jarring to his overstimulated senses, but it was only my speculation. Bingley's house would be a welcome respite, even if it did come with Bingley's sisters. Hopefully Lord and Lady Matlock would not demand his presence at their estate and he could spend the autumn with me in Hertfordshire. We could return to Town for the Festive Season or even travel to Pemberley if the weather was fine. He would face no schemes

from his mother or demands from his father while he was with me.

I sighed. It was difficult to be Richard. My father had been demanding, but he had also taught me everything I needed to know to meet those demands, and he had showered me with praise when I accomplished something I had been working towards. I distinctly remember running into his study when I was eight years old, desperate to tell him about a jump I had just mastered with my pony, Roger. (I had been six when I named him and not very imaginative.) My father had listened with rapt attention, then expounded for several minutes on how proud he was of me; he praised my dedication and effort, my tenacity. I remember standing taller, wishing I could make my father feel such pride every day. Of course, that was a tall order, but I never forgot how much I valued his opinion, nor how very proud he was of me.

Richard knew no such relationship with his own father. I could not imagine what that would have been like as a child. My parents had always been kind to him—it was my mother, his aunt, who had taught me to jump and had encouraged me to tell my father. She had taught Richard as well. She was always good to my cousins, but she was not the most outwardly demonstrative person.

For those who cannot read minds, of course.

My first ever memory is of my mother, cooing in my ear, telling me how much she cared for me, how happy she was I had been born, how perfect she found me.

I can hear her voice in my mind, sweet, but deep, the way water in a brook tumbles over rocks.

My father was loving, but he was not overflowing with affection like my mother was. Though he liked that I looked like him, and in a fit of romanticism, he told me he loved that I had my mother's eyes. That he liked seeing how I was the embodiment of their bond—the best of each of them. Sadly, I cannot remember if this was something he actually said, or a thought he had which I had merely overheard. Regardless, I had known I was loved.

The first time I heard my mother described as cold, I was five years old. I overheard one of the maids speaking to another in one of the guest chambers.

I could not understand what they meant. My mother was the warmest woman I knew. She did not think I was always in the way like the housekeeper did, and she was not malicious like one of the maids who stoked the fire in the nursery was. I stayed away from that one—she had an unkind nature.

I snuck out of the guest chamber before the maids noticed me and found Nanny. I asked her if my mother was a cold woman and she seemed conflicted. She told me my mother was a very grand lady and that we could not expect her to act like others. Lady Anne was the daughter of an earl, after all. She was special.

I did not understand. Did they not know how lovely my mother was? How soft and kind and sweet-smelling? How could they not see?

When I was eight, I understood. My father had a steward, Mr. Wickham. He was a kind man and I had nothing ill to say of him. He had a son, young George, who was a little more than a year younger than me. We had played together a few times, and at first I liked him, but after a few weeks, it became apparent that he was dark on the inside—black as midnight, with no stars for relief. He said terrible things about me. He wanted to throw rocks at my horse so I would fall off. He wanted to shove me down the stairs and hoped I would break my leg or preferably my neck.

He was not a good boy, and I told my father so. He did not believe me, saying that George would never say such things to me and was I certain I had not dreamt them? My father was genuinely confused, but I was not. George was a rotten egg and I would have nothing to do with him.

Nanny told me I had done the right thing. She did not like George either. I could not understand my father's blindness—not until it was forced on me in the most jarring way.

I was playing with my tin soldiers with one of the neighbor boys. His nurse had brought him to Pemberley and we were happily spending an afternoon in the Long Gallery, waiting for the rain to stop so we might go outside. Nanny was telling Griggs, my friend's nurse, about something that had happened between me and George the week before. I remembered it perfectly. George had been fiercely angry and said hateful things about me. I had removed myself from the situation.

When Nanny told the story, she left out several critical parts. I interrupted her conversation and told her what was missing. She looked at me like I had sprouted horns and told me she would assuredly remember that had she heard it. Was I certain it had happened at that time and not when we were away from her? I assured her I was not confused; that was what he had said. I had heard him clearly.

Nanny continued to stare at me, then said what she had remembered from the incident, and I began to wonder. Had I imagined it?

That was when I started to pay attention. I watched whoever I was interacting with carefully, making sure I heard every word they said and remembered it accurately. I made a most unusual discovery. Many people were saying things without opening their mouths at all. How they accomplished such a feat I did not know, but I studied them even more carefully to find out.

And then I realized the most peculiar thing of all: I was not hearing things they were saying. I was hearing their thoughts.

Being the young lad that I was, I spoke with my nanny about this discovery. She had been with me since my birth and was arguably the most important person in my childhood. I had no reason not to tell her. She was disturbed at first, and did not quite believe me, but as I look back on it, I realize she must have suspected something for some time because she did not take much convincing.

She began a course of training for me, as she called it. She taught me to look at someone's mouth to see if they were speaking, and to delineate between thoughts and sounds. The differences were subtle, but we practiced repeatedly until I could tell the difference between her voice calling me across the lawn and her thoughts doing the same. She was my most trusted confidant until I went away to school a few years later, and even then, I wrote to her more than anyone else.

She is now happily retired in a cottage at Pemberley, and I visit her frequently when I am there. It is a relief to be with someone who understands me so well. My cousin Richard is the only other person who knows of my affliction, and that was the result of childish carelessness. Thankfully, Richard is a good man and a better friend, and if he is annoyed with me, he only lets me hear it for a moment before he removes himself from the room so I do not have to be inundated with his angry thoughts.

As the carriage raced towards London, I could only hope that the man I loved like a brother would be well and have no long-lived effects from this. And that he would finally resign his commission. My cousin had given enough to the army. It was time they gave his life back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Elizabeth



I had quite surprised myself when I befriended Mr. Darcy. He was not normally the sort of person I would choose as a friend, but as I got to know him better, I realized he did in fact have a sense of humor. He merely kept it under close regulation. I had never met someone who seemed so in control of himself and his actions. Even his facial expressions were well-regulated. It must be exhausting to always rein oneself in. I could not imagine living like that every day.

The militia arrived a few days after the party and as I had feared, my sisters lost their heads over the redcoats. Well, Mary and Jane did not, but Lydia began a campaign against each of my parents, begging them to allow her to come out. Did they not see all the fun she would miss by staying home? It appeared that our talk had not had lasting effects. I could only sigh and hope my father would stay strong.

“Surely, the fact that she is already behaving thusly over the soldiers is a black mark against her coming out.”

Ruby looked at me with her big green eyes and meowed.

“I quite agree. She is not ready, and that fact is being demonstrated more every day. And Mother is encouraging her! It is disgraceful for a woman her age to coo so over an encampment of soldiers. Do you not agree?”

She purred and butted her head against my ankle.

I scratched behind her ears. “Listen to me, talking to a cat like a batty old woman.”

Ruby purred again and wound between my feet. A knock sounded and I whispered, “Shh. Mama is not supposed know you are inside!” I tried to shoo Ruby under the bed as I called out, “Who is it?”

“It is Jane.”

“You are safe, Ruby.”

I opened the door for my sister and closed it tightly behind her.

“Lizzy, this just arrived from Netherfield.”

She held out a letter and I took it. Jane was invited to Netherfield to dine.

“Do you wish to go?”

“I do not know. I would not mind knowing Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley better.”

I held my tongue at that. I would mind very much.

“But I do not wish to encourage Mr. Bingley.”

“But this says he will be dining out.” I scanned the letter again. “And that Mr. Darcy went to London three days ago.

Hmm.”

That was the day after the party at Lucas Lodge. Had he had a chance to speak to Mr. Bingley? Jane voiced a similar concern.

“We cannot know. Since Mr. Bingley will not be there, you could go if you wish.”

“My mother wishes me to go.”

“Oh, Jane, you know you should always open letters in private,” I teased.

“It was delivered when she was sitting next to me. What could I do?”

“Very well. She wishes you to go?”

“Yes. On horseback.”

“On horseback!” I looked out the window at the grey sky. “It looks like rain. It has rained every day this week.”

“I know.”

I squinted my eyes. “That is her plan, is it not? You will go on horseback and then be forced to stay the night.”

“Or be sent home in their carriage.”

“Did Mr. Darcy not take the carriage to Town?”

“Kitty said she saw it returning to Netherfield, remember?”

“Ah. What do *you* wish to do, Jane?”

“I would just as soon not go. I imagine the entire thing will be awkward. But I do not want to be rude, and they are new to

the neighborhood. The ladies may be trying to make friends.”

More like acolytes, I thought. “Jane, you are the one who will be in the awkward situation, not Mama. If you do not wish to go, simply decline the invitation.”

I could see the conflict on her face. She was not comfortable defying our mother. Thankfully, I had had a lifetime of practice. “Do you want me to tell Mama? You could lie down in your room and I could tell her you have a headache.”

“You should not dissemble for me, Lizzy.”

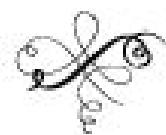
I shrugged. “I can also tell her you do not wish to go and that you have no interest in Mr. Bingley, but you know what will happen then.”

Jane grimaced. Our mother would be insufferable.

She sighed. “I will ask Papa for the carriage.”

“You should do it quickly before Mama speaks to him.”

Her eyes widened and she leapt up, hurrying to the door. “Thank you, Lizzy!”



In the end, our father did call the carriage—our mother was visiting with her sister in the drawing room and did not hear the request—and I ended up accompanying Jane. She was uncomfortable visiting Netherfield, and it was apparent enough that our father noticed and insisted I go with her.

So we found ourselves trundling across the lane, feeling rather differently about how the evening would progress.

“I think we should not mention our connection with the Ashburns. If they ask, we might say we are friends with the former residents of Netherfield, but we should not bring it up, or Cassie, if they do not ask directly,” I said.

“I doubt they will canvas us on every friend we have,” said Jane with a look.

I sighed. Thorough canvassing was *exactly* what the Bingley sisters would do. Papa was right to send me with Jane. She was a sheep being led the wolves. If given the chance, they would devour her in a trice.

Unfortunately, I was correct. The Bingley sisters asked about our aunts and uncles, about our father’s family and how long they had lived at Longbourn—six generations—and whether our father had gone to Cambridge or Oxford—they pretended compassion when we told them it was Oxford. Insufferable ninnies.

As expected, when it came time for us to leave—every minute having felt like an hour—the rain was still coming down. Only it was nothing like the light mist we had arrived in. Now it poured down in sheets, the drive already covered in ruts and puddles. We stood at the window, waiting for Miss Bingley to return from calling our coach, and watching the rain obscure the landscape. Jane and I looked at each other in concern. The road between Netherfield and Longbourn was packed dirt. Meryton was a small market town. It only had one

cobbled street, and the rest of the way, our carriage would sink into the soft ground. It had been raining for days, after all. We had felt the wheels sinking into the earth on our ride here.

“Shall we risk it?” asked Jane.

That she was willing to board a carriage in heavy rain and with night quickly approaching spoke volumes for how she felt about staying at Netherfield.

“Let us ask Amos.” Amos was our driver and he had been with the family since my grandfather’s time. He would know what was best to do.

Jane moved to the newly returned Miss Bingley and asked if a boy could run to the stables and speak to the coachman. Before she had finished her sentence, we heard shouts from outside.

Curious, I went back to the window. There was Mr. Bingley, soaked to the bone, riding alongside a carriage. A very familiar carriage.

“Cassie!” My voice was low, but Jane heard me and followed as I flew into the entryway, wrenched open the door, and raced down the steps. Cassie was being handed down by Mr. Bingley when I reached the portico.

“What are you doing here!” I cried. “We expected you at Longbourn the day after tomorrow!”

She smiled briefly, but her eyes were tight. “I will tell you all in a moment. We must get the colonel inside.”

I looked past her and noticed Ash, my childhood friend, helping another man from the carriage. I had never seen him before, but I recognized the man behind him. Mr. Darcy had one arm beneath the strange man's shoulders, supporting him as he gingerly stepped out of the carriage, Ash helping to lower him to the ground. Mr. Darcy then passed out a pair of crutches and the colonel began to hop awkwardly towards the steps. Thinking he would not like an audience, I grasped Cassie's arm and led her back into the house. Jane was waiting in the entryway next to an open-mouthed Miss Bingley.

"Lizzy, would you introduce us please?" asked Cassie.

"Of course. May I present Miss Bingley? She is keeping house for her brother here at Netherfield. Miss Bingley, Lady Cassandra Bellingham."

Cassie nodded at Miss Bingley, who stared open-mouthed before remembering her manners and sinking into a curtsy fit for the daughter of an earl. Cassie hugged Jane, then stood back and held one of my hands and one of Jane's.

"You must be wondering what I am doing here two days early."

"Yes, but let us get you settled first," said Jane.

Miss Bingley finally remembered she was the hostess and ushered us into the parlor near the front of the house. The fire was built up high and Cassie moved to it immediately, warming her hands.

“Miss Bingley,” she said, “the colonel is injured and will require special accommodation. I do not know if Mr. Darcy’s man arrived with his note. He was only a few hours before us.”

Miss Bingley looked stricken and hurried out of the room.

“I will tell you quickly, since I do not know how much time we have alone,” said Cassie.

“What has happened?” I asked.

“We were on our way to Meryton when we came across a carriage with a lame wheel. Naturally, we offered to help. Ash was acquainted with Mr. Darcy, and when we found out we were headed to the same place, we offered them a ride in our carriage. Colonel Fitzwilliam is his cousin. He was recently injured while on campaign and has been recovering in Town. Mr. Darcy was bringing him to Netherfield to recuperate in the fresh country air. He said he sent a note to Mr. Bingley this morning, but I don’t think it arrived.”

She looked at the door Miss Bingley had rushed out of and I nodded. “I do not think it did. There has been nothing since Jane and I have been here, and we arrived at half past four.”

“You may have a note at Longbourn from me when you return. Ash needed to leave Town and we decided to come early. If your mother cannot accommodate us, we may stay at the inn.”

“Nonsense! Of course we can accommodate you! If it is too much for the servants, Ash can take the first guest room which

is always prepared, and you can stay with me.”

“Thank you! I thought it would not be a problem, but wanted to be prepared.”

“You are very welcome, no matter the circumstances. You know that,” said Jane.

“How are the roads? Will we be able to make it back to Longbourn tonight?” I asked.

Cassie grimaced. “The roads were slippery only half an hour ago, and the rain has increased.” We all glanced out the window where the water was coming down in sheets. “I believe staying at Netherfield for the night would be the safer option.”

“Of course you must stay!” cried Miss Bingley.

I had not heard her re-enter the room.

“That is very kind of you, Miss Bingley. I thank you,” said Cassie graciously.

“It is no trouble at all! You must stay as long as you like. Where are you headed to?”

Cassie smiled prettily. “Only to Longbourn, so not so far away. My cousin and I are on our way to Yorkshire, and we wished to stay with our old friends on the way.”

Miss Bingley’s face pinched. “You know the Bennets well?”

“Oh, yes! When I lived at Netherfield, we were nearly inseparable.” Cassie smiled at me and Jane, and I withheld my laughter at the strange color Miss Bingley was taking on.

“You lived at Netherfield? Did you have the lease before my brother?”

Cassie laughed in what I called her Society Way. It was quiet and soft, but carried a wealth of meaning—coupled with her expression, it said the Daughters of Earls do not reside in leased estates.

“No, Netherfield belongs to the Ashburn family. My uncle is Mr. Ashburn. He has another estate in Yorkshire where he is residing at the moment. My cousin who has accompanied me is his eldest son.”

“I see,” said Miss Bingley.

I was sure she did. I could practically see her adding up the numbers in her head. The Ashburns had two estates, and if they were willing to live away from Netherfield, the other estate must be even grander than this one. It was, of course, but it was vulgar to mention it. As the eldest son, Ash was quite the catch, and judging by the look on Miss Bingley’s face, she well knew it. Perhaps she wished to widen her net beyond Mr. Darcy in the event he never offered for her. I must warn Ash to be careful around her.

“Tell me, Miss Bingley,” said Cassie, her voice smooth and cultured, “is the green room still a guest chamber or are you using that part of the house as the family wing?”

Miss Bingley seemed surprised by the question, but she quickly recovered. “It is in the guest wing, my lady. Would you like it?”

“That is kind of you to offer. I was actually thinking it may be ideal for the good colonel. It is a large apartment with plenty of space between the furnishings, which will make it easier to get about on crutches, and it has an adjoining room his cousin might stay in if he wished to be near him.”

“Of course, I should have thought of that. Excuse me.”

She bustled from the room and I looked at Cassie with a sly smile. “The blue room is just as spacious, as is the rose room and the lily room.”

She shrugged. “I know, but I wished to remind her that I know the house better than she.”

Jane looked confused, but I smiled knowingly. “You are taking the correct tack. She will be insufferable if you allow it.”

“Which is precisely why I refuse to allow it.” She rose and moved to the door. “Now, I would very much like to change out of these travelling clothes. Did Miss Bingley happen to mention which room I would stay in?”

“She did not. We may ask Mrs. Nicholls,” suggested Jane.

We found the housekeeper coming down the stairs and she lit up when she saw Cassie. “Lady Cassandra! It is good to see you, my lady.”

“And you, Mrs. Nicholls.” Cassie took her hands and pressed them, a strange move for a person of her rank, but Cassie was good to those she cared for, regardless of their

rank. “How have you been?” she asked sincerely. “Is your niece still with you?”

Mrs. Nicholls seemed touched Cassie had remembered her family and that she had taken in her late sister’s daughter. “She is, my lady. She is below stairs now. I am training her up to be a maid.”

“That is very kind of you. I am sure she appreciates your attention.”

Mrs. Nicholls beamed. “I’ve just prepared the lilac room for you and the adjoining rooms for the Miss Bennets. Shall I show you up?”

“I remember the way,” said Cassie with a smile, “but thank you. Would you send up tea when you have a chance? I am cold from the road.”

“Of course, my lady! It is so good to see you back at Netherfield!”

We all smiled at the housekeeper and trotted up the stairs, our familiarity with the house making it feel like old times. “I wish you still lived nearby,” said Jane wistfully.

“Sometimes I do, too, but you know I love Yorkshire. And I enjoy traveling too much to stay in one place for long.”

We found our rooms without any trouble and helped Cassie to change. Her maid, Nancy, was on the carriage with the luggage. We hoped it would arrive soon, but it might be morning before it made it through the rain.

“Tell us why Ash had to leave Town so suddenly?” I asked.

“Lizzy! It is none of our affair,” chided Jane.

Cassie laughed. “It is no great secret, but my cousin would not appreciate it if we bandied it about.”

“Of course he would not,” Jane said.

“He danced with a lady who thought rather more of it than it was, and he then accidentally called on her the next day.”

“How does one accidentally call on someone?” I asked, though I was sure that if such a thing could be done, it would be Ash who did it.

“He was accompanying a friend of his to some outing or other, but the friend wished to make a stop on the way. The lady he wished to call on happened to be the sister who set her cap at Ash. He did not know this, of course, so when she sat too close and batted her eyes, he did not know what to do.”

I could not help but laugh. Ash was terrible at flirting. He hadn’t the slightest idea of what he ought to do.

“Next thing I knew, he was storming into the house and saying we were leaving early. I was already packed, so it was no great trouble. I sent off a letter to you and we were gone within the hour.”

“That seems rather drastic for a little flirtation,” I said.

“Surely the lady did not have her hopes raised after only one call,” added Jane.

“I do not know whether she did, but I do know that her elder brother is one of the fiercest fencers at Ash’s club, and he did

not desire to face him after disappointing her hopes.”

We all had a good laugh at that, and soon we were returning to the drawing room.

“Lizzy,” whispered Cassie, “I was not entirely truthful earlier.”

“What do you mean?” I returned.

“We did not leave Town because of Ash.”

“Oh?”

She shook her head and glanced at Jane where she walked in front of us. “I received your letter yesterday telling of Mr. Bingley’s interest in Jane. John was present when it arrived, and, well, he knows all.”

“I thought you would tell him.”

“Yes, well, he did not take the news that Jane was being pursued by a wealthy young man very well at all. He nearly came to Hertfordshire himself, but Ash convinced him we would keep an eye on her. He only agreed to stand down if we would come straight away.”

My brow lifted and I looked at her in disbelief. “Mr. Bingley is hardly going to propose this week! They barely know one another. He admires her, true, but I do not know how deep his feelings run.”

“Nevertheless, John was unhappy to hear the news. He will likely petition his father to shorten the separation. It has been over two months now.”

“It will be three months on the twenty-eighth of November. Jane has been counting the days,” I replied.

“I for one cannot wait for this madness to end. John is old enough to know what he wants, as is Jane. Uncle ought to let them marry and be done with it already.”

“I am happy to hear Lord Wilmington has remained steadfast.”

“Of course he has! He is the sort who was born that way. I always knew that once he loved a woman, he would love her forever. It is his way.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

We entered the drawing room long after everyone else had gathered. Ash smiled brightly at me and I joined him by the fire, eager to hear his news and catch up with an old friend. Miss Bingley glared daggers at me and I shot her a quizzical look. She was aiming for Mr. Darcy, that was clear to everyone. Why did she care if I spoke with a childhood friend?

I sighed quietly.

“What is it?” asked Ash.

I glanced at Miss Bingley, then said, “Nothing I cannot handle.”

He followed my gaze. “Are the new residents of Netherfield not as pleasing as they could be?”

“Not by half.”

We shared a laugh until Miss Bingley told us she had ordered a light supper with a few warm dishes added for the newcomers. Ash took my arm and led me to the dining room, and we avoided one another's eyes to keep us from bursting into laughter each time Miss Bingley said something outrageous. It would be a long evening.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Darcy



It was not until I saw the Miss Bennets in Netherfield's entry that I realized I had not spoken to Bingley about ceasing his pursuit of Miss Jane Bennet. I hoped he had not made a nuisance of himself in my absence.

I had been so distracted with my cousin and his injuries that I had thought of Hertfordshire only as a place for him to recuperate and little else. Well, that and Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She had been in my thoughts more than such a short acquaintance would warrant, and I was not entirely certain why. She was pretty, to be sure, and I enjoyed her personality and her lively nature. She had a pleasant feeling about her—warm and playful and happy.

Was that enough to warrant my thoughts continually straying back to her? Having my attention caught so completely by a woman was unusual for me, and I spent the ensuing hours working it over in my mind.

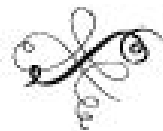
Before supper when she spoke to Mr. Ashburn, their intimacy had been obvious and I had felt an odd sensation in my chest. My jaw ticked and my fists clenched. Was I jealous?

It would be the first time I had ever felt such a way over a lady, but I supposed it was possible.

At supper, she was as lovely and playful as she ever was, deflecting Miss Bingley's barbs like a seasoned lady of the ton. Afterward, Miss Bingley suggested music and Miss Elizabeth took Mr. Ashburn's arm again. He turned her pages while she played. He sang with her. Laughed with her. Looked at her like he knew all her secrets.

Were they attached to one another? Was there an understanding between them?

I was running myself mad with wilder and wilder scenarios, and I had only realized I thought of Miss Elizabeth romantically that afternoon! This would not do. When the next song came to an end, I excused myself to see to my cousin and made my escape upstairs.



Apparently I liked Miss Elizabeth more than I had thought for I dreamt of her that night. In my dream, she was my wife and we were at Pemberley. I chased her through corridors as she laughed, the ribbons on her gown trailing behind her. I caught up to her in our chambers and clutched her to me, kissing her almost desperately. She met me passion for passion and I woke covered in a sheen of sweat, panting and shaken.

What was this madness? I barely knew the woman! I should not be thinking of her in such terms, and certainly not

dreaming of her!

My mind had other ideas. I thought of her as my valet shaved me, and as I dressed for the day. She was on my mind when I made my way to breakfast, and envy was an ugly monster when I saw she was already sitting with Mr. Ashburn.

He greeted me cordially and I returned it with a nod, schooling my features to be as neutral as possible. I was not successful, for I heard, *what a fierce scowl he has!*

Mr. Ashburn seemed amused with my discomfort, but his next thought shocked the scowl off my face. *At least he is handsome when he is disgruntled. Nothing ruins a pretty face faster than an ugly frown.*

I turned to the sideboard to hide my surprise. Ashburn's thoughts had a warmth to them I had long associated with attraction. It was not the first time I had known a man was attracted to me, but it was surprising in this particular instance. If he was promised to Miss Elizabeth, she would be in for a heartbreaking marriage.

Suddenly, all my jealousy and confusion turned to anger. Would he marry her? To protect his secret? To act the part of his wife while he did as he chose behind closed doors? Would he treat her as a brood mare and look the other way as her spark died away and low spirits overtook her?

I shook myself to rid my mind of its tumultuous thoughts. Plenty of people married for practical concerns and only tolerated their spouses. Many openly disliked one another. It was considered a boon if your life companion was a friend. In

that way, Miss Elizabeth and Ashburn were set up to be successful, as they seemed to be good friends already. But did she love him? If she did, it would break her heart that he would never feel the same way. Friendship would be cold comfort for such a wound.

Knowing I was being foolhardy, I asked Miss Elizabeth to walk with me after breakfast. It was cold out, with a biting wind, and the ground was still muddy from the day before. She looked surprised but agreed to join me. Ashburn gave me a knowing look and smiled at her as she left to gather her things.

“Lizzy is the only walker in the house intrepid enough to go out in such weather,” he said fondly.

“Yes, Miss Elizabeth does not shirk from a little wind.”

I nodded and left the room, wondering what had come over me. Ashburn’s smirk followed me out into the entryway where I asked for my coat. If we hurried, we could be outside before anyone came down.

Thankfully, Miss Elizabeth joined me before I had finished buttoning my coat. She suggested the rose garden because of its gravel walks and I nodded my agreement, not trusting my voice.

When we stepped into the windy garden, I offered her my arm and once she had taken it, I tugged her closer to protect her from the wind I had foolishly brought us out in.

“What did you wish to say to me, Mr. Darcy?” she asked after we had gone some distance from the house in silence.

“Why do you think I wish to say anything?” I knew what I wished to say. ‘Don’t like him, like me. I think I am besotted with you and I am infinitely better for you than he.’ If I could roll my eyes at myself, I would. I was an idiot.

She looked at me in that way she had that told she knew I was being ridiculous and said, “So you merely wished for fresh air? That is why we are out in this gale?”

The few tendrils of her hair not tucked in her bonnet were blown about in the wind, and her skirts whipped about her legs.

“Forgive me, you are correct. It is foolish to be out in such weather.”

I turned back towards the house but she pressed my arm and pulled me back. “I do not need to return just yet. We can make it a full circuit about the garden.”

“Very well.” We walked on in silence, and I could feel her eyes glancing towards me every few steps. Her curiosity prickled at my senses. She wondered what I was about, I knew. But how could I say what I wished to say.

Whatever he has on his mind, I wish he would just come out with it, she thought.

Very well. If that was what she wished. “Miss Elizabeth, forgive my presumption, but I must ask. Is there an understanding between you and Mr. Ashburn?”

Her brows shot up in her face and her mouth opened. Clearly, she had not expected me to say *that*.

“I know it is none of my affair,” I continued, “I only wondered...” Botheration, this was an enormous mistake! Her embarrassment was no match for mine—a pale pink creature next to the blood red monstrosity now sitting on my shoulders.

“Your ears are red,” she said. I detected a smile in her voice, and she began to feel playful again. “I can imagine you are feeling as embarrassed as I am.”

“Rather more so, I think.”

She laughed lightly. “We have agreed to be friends, have we not?”

I looked at her skeptically. “We have.”

“And friends speak of all sorts of things. There is nothing to be embarrassed about. And while you are correct that it is none of your affair, because we are friends, I will tell you that there is no understanding between Mr. Ashburn and myself. What attachment there is between us is friendly in nature. Almost familial, really.” *And he would never be attached to any woman, let alone one he looks on as a sister.*

Ah, so she did know his nature. I could not help but smile in relief. “I am glad to hear it.”

She gave me a sly look, then said, “One might wonder why you wished to know such a thing. It is very personal, after all.”

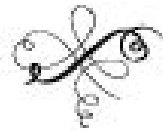
Heat rushed to my face and I heard blood pounding in my ears. I had not thought this through at all and now I would pay for it in humiliation.

“Forgive me, Mr. Darcy,” she said, her voice soft. “I should not tease you. Let us return to the house. It is cold.”

I nodded and led us towards the door. Without thinking about what I was doing—that seemed to be the theme of the morning—I tugged her a little closer and placed my hand over hers. She smiled shyly, her face turned to the ground, but I could feel the warmth of her pleasure like a cup of hot chocolate on a cold night.

When we reached the door, I turned to face her, ensuring no one could see her or the space between us. I lifted her hand to my lips, brushing a quick kiss on her glove. Her startled eyes met mine and I smiled softly (or what I hoped was softly) and stepped away.

“Thank you for the walk, Miss Elizabeth.”



What had come over me? I had practically declared myself! I never behaved thus. Never! I was the model of self-control. I walked into my cousin’s room with my thoughts twisted up and my emotions barely better.

“What has you in a lather?” Richard always had been direct.

“I am not in a lather.”

He scoffed. “You look like a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. What is it?”

“I think I am courting.”

He stared at me blankly. “You think?”

“I never said the words, but...”

“You had better tell me from the beginning.”

And so I did. I told him how Elizabeth had intrigued me, then befriended me, and how I had made an ass of myself. I told him how I had held her arm entirely too closely, though perhaps the weather could be blamed for that, but no one but myself was responsible for the way I kissed her hand and gazed at her like a mooncalf.

After I finished speaking, Richard stared at me for a solid minute before he burst into laughter.

“It is not funny, Richard. I have raised her expectations.”

He laughed harder.

I walked over to the window and watched the wind in the trees while he regained his composure.

“To think, the lady who would finally reach through that protective wall of yours would be a girl nobody’s heard of, in a tiny town in Hertfordshire.” He laughed again. Apparently he found himself terribly amusing.

“I am not in love with her,” I said.

“I never said you were. But that you immediately felt the need to defend that point tells me a great deal.”

I sighed. “Do stop taunting me, Richard. What am I to do?”

“Do you not wish to pursue the lady?”

“I don’t *not* wish to pursue her.”

“But you believe she thinks you have begun?”

“It is likely, yes.”

“How do you not know?”

“It is hard to listen to her thoughts.”

He lifted a brow. “What do you mean?”

“When I am with her, I am so distracted I cannot pay attention.”

He looked confused. “Do you normally need to pay attention in order to hear?”

“No, often it feels as if someone is shouting at me and it is impossible to ignore. Though some are quiet and I must listen carefully. Miss Elizabeth’s thoughts are perfectly clear, but when I am with her, I am so focused on other things that I simply do not pay attention to her thoughts.”

“I see.”

“What?”

“You are besotted.”

I frowned.

“Admit it. You are falling in love with the lady.”

I sighed. “I may be.”

“Then why are you worried that she has expectations?”

“I am not worried about that so much—more that I completely lost control of my actions. It is unlike me.”

Fitzwilliam smiled. “Love ought to make you feel a little out of control. What good would it be if it didn’t?”

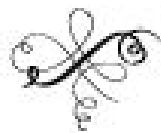
“I simply want to have my own mind decided before I encourage the lady.”

“I cannot fault you for that, but she may not even have expectations. There may be nothing to encourage.”

He was teasing me, but he was right. I had no idea what she thought of me in that respect. It was unpardonably stupid of me not to have paid attention to her thoughts.

“Her feelings were warm,” I said, feeling the need to defend myself.

“That is something, then. Listen closely next time. See what you find.”



The rain started up again as everyone else descended for breakfast, and it was decided that the Longbourn party would wait a few hours before sending a groom out to test the roads. As luck would have it, the roads remained impassable for a carriage. A groom came back with a small trunk lashed to his horse so the Miss Bennets would have something different to wear and Bingley invited everyone to stay for another night.

Watching Bingley attempt to get close to Miss Bennet was more than a little amusing. She was constantly accompanied by her sister, Lady Cassandra, or Mr. Ashburn. I began to

think the latest arrivals had come specifically to guard over her, so conscientious were they. Finally, Bingley let up and I was able to take him into his study and tell him, as gently as possible, that Miss Bennet did not wish for his attentions.

“Whatever makes you think so?” he cried.

“It is clear to me in her expression and manner, but her sister also mentioned that Miss Bennet is not desirous of being pursued at the moment.”

“Is there someone else?”

“I think there may be, though no one has said anything of it to me.” That was true at least.

“Hmm.” He was thoughtful for a moment, then said, “I am thinking of hosting a ball here at Netherfield.”

How his mind moved from one thing to another! “What makes you wish to do that?”

“I have never hosted one before, and everyone has been so kind and welcoming to me here. Seems like a good way to repay the hospitality.”

I shrugged. “It would occupy your sisters.” Now that I thought of it in those terms, it was a splendid idea. “I think a ball would be a wonderful way to declare your status to the neighborhood.”

“And what status would that be? Lease holder?” he said with a grin.

I rolled my eyes. Bingley was a silly sort sometimes. “Landholder and estate owner. You do not own yet, but you could afford Netherfield if you wished, or an estate similar to it. Hosting events such as a ball would be expected of you if you owned an estate. This will be good practice.”

“Very well. I am convinced. There shall be a ball at Netherfield!”

I smiled weakly. I did not like balls, but I did like the idea of dancing with Miss Elizabeth.



I next saw my quarry at tea that afternoon. I disliked thinking of her in those terms, but Richard had referred to her as such earlier in the day and the word had stuck with me.

She was lovely in a pink gown, and I could not help but notice how she held her teacup, and nibbled on a tiny cake, or the way she smiled at her sister and her friend. On more than one occasion, she shot a tiny smile towards me, a private smile I thought was for me alone. I was feeling quite pleased with myself until I saw Ashburn watching me from his place by the fire, an amused grin on his face. He seemed intent on sporting with me and I did not enjoy it.

Thankfully, Bingley had withdrawn from his pursuit of Miss Bennet. I had known he was not truly attached. How could he be? They had barely spoken to one another. He would be distracted again by the next pretty face that came his way and

all would be well. Deciding to rid my mind of distractions but not wishing to retreat to my rooms, I sat at the writing table in the corner to pen a letter to my cousin, Lady Maryann.

Dear Cousin,

Richard has settled in well and appears to have suffered no ill effects from the journey. He is currently resting in his room, but declared earlier that he would join the party for dinner. We shall see if that proves to be the case.

Netherfield is rather more full than I had thought it would be. Two ladies from a neighboring estate were trapped here by the rain and stayed the night, Miss Bennet and her younger sister Miss Elizabeth. Their estate is called Longbourn. Do you know of the family, perchance?

We had a bit of excitement on the road to Hertfordshire, but do not fret, all is well, and we are all healthy and whole. The wheel hit a deep rut and was too damaged to continue. We thought we would be stuck on the side of the road for hours, but thankfully a carriage passed by shortly and offered us assistance.

It happened to hold Mr. Joseph Ashburn, a gentleman I have a trifling acquaintance with, and his cousin Lady Cassandra Bellingham, daughter of the late Lord Worthing. Do you know them? Lady Cassandra seems to be a kind lady, and she was very good to Richard in the carriage.

Bingley has decided to host a ball, and I imagine he will invite all his Town friends. I will suffer through it somehow, though I imagine I will be in my room before supper.

How are you faring? How do the little ones? Tell little Harriet I have not forgotten my promise. I will build a snowman with her this winter if it snows enough in Town. Or do you think you might come to Pemberley? You know you are always welcome if you wish to escape the noise of London.

Tell me how the children fare, and I will keep you abreast of Richard's progress.

Yours,

FD

Maryann could leave Town and go to her husband's family estate, but his parents were still living and her mother-in-law was in no hurry to relinquish the mistress duties. She would enjoy herself more at Pemberley or even at her own parents'.

"Mr. Darcy, who do you write to so secretively?" asked Miss Bingley, her voice coy and grating.

"It is no secret. I write to my cousin, Lady Maryann."

"Oh yes, she must be concerned about her brother. How does the good colonel today?"

This was the first she had asked after him today, though I had seen her multiple times. "He is well enough. Hopefully he will be able to join us for dinner."

"Wonderful!" She smiled thinly.

There was no love lost between Miss Bingley and my cousin. Richard was the son of an earl and a commander of

men. He was not to be trifled with. Miss Bingley had found that out the hard way on more than one occasion.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Elizabeth



Miss Bingley was insufferable. How anyone could stand to be near her for more than a few minutes I did not know. Every time I looked at Cassie, I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. Cassie was everything Miss Bingley wished to be and held a position she could never attain. Watching Miss Bingley try to impress my friend was almost painful—or it would have been if it had not been so funny.

At least Mr. Bingley had stopped chasing after Jane—that was something to be grateful for. Though now his sister kept trying to throw him into company with Cassie. Her interference was not appreciated.

Colonel Fitzwilliam felt good enough to join us for dinner. He moved with the aid of a crutch and his cousin's arm, but he got about well enough. He was placed to my left during dinner and I found him to be a pleasant companion with plenty of conversation. His mind was well-formed and he had traveled extensively. Our conversation flowed happily and I had never enjoyed a dinner at Netherfield more.

The same could not be said for my friends. Ash was to one side of Miss Bingley, Mr. Darcy on the other. She seemed to be pursuing them both equally, which was an odd thing to witness. Especially since both gentlemen were exasperated with her but she was too absorbed with her own interests to notice. Eventually, they began a conversation amongst themselves and she added a comment here or there.

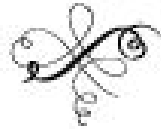
Cassie was next to Mr. Bingley with Mr. Hurst on her other side—clearly by design. Everyone knew Mr. Hurst barely spoke to anyone during his meals. He liked his food to reach his mouth without the interruption of conversation or human interaction. Cassie was polite when Mr. Bingley spoke to her, but she had no interest in him whatsoever other than as a neighbor to her friends and a tenant in her former family home. She was always kind, but I knew they would not be friends. Cassie liked more substance in the people she associated with. While Mr. Bingley was perfectly pleasant, he was a bit bland for her tastes. And of course she was not looking for anything romantic, and I was sure Miss Bingley wanted my friend for her brother. Marrying into the nobility was all she had ever wanted. Well, short of being born into it, but it was too late for that.

Poor Jane was between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Hurst. I was certain Mr. Darcy would have had more success conversing with her, but every time he tried, Miss Bingley pulled him back into her conversation. He eventually gave up and poor Jane ate her meal in silence, a look of patient forbearance on her features.

Across from Cassie on Mr. Bingley's other side, I was as far from Mr. Darcy as I could possibly be. There was no doubt that this was by design, as Miss Bingley had watched me with a gimlet eye for the last day. I do not know if she had seen Mr. Darcy and I walking together earlier, or if she merely felt something was afoot, but she watched me too carefully for me to be comfortable.

Mr. Darcy. What was I to do about him? Seemingly out of the blue, he had shown a surprising interest in me. I was not entirely certain how I felt about it. He seemed to be a perfectly decent man, and he was handsome to be sure, but handsome was not everything, as I well knew. My father had married my mother for her beauty and lived to regret it nearly every day of his life. I would not make the same mistake. I thought Mr. Darcy was likely a good man—I had seen nothing to give me pause and his care for his cousin was commendable, but I did not know him well as yet. It would take more than a few dinners to know if I wished to receive his attentions, though I feared I had done exactly that in the garden earlier. I had accepted his invitation because I thought he had something to tell me—perhaps that he had spoken to Mr. Bingley about Jane—but he seemed to wish to warn me off Ash. It was odd when I thought about it. Ash was an old family friend. I had known him since my childhood. If anything, Ash should be warning me off Mr. Darcy!

I would solve nothing this evening, but Mr. Darcy was a conundrum I was curious to understand.



After dinner, the ladies adjourned to the drawing room and Miss Bingley opened the instrument. The gentlemen returned whilst she was mid-song, and Mr. Darcy whispered in my ear, “You look lovely tonight.”

I turned to him in surprise. He was standing behind me, his eyes on the instrument. How he could keep such a constrained expression, I did not know. I half-smiled to acknowledge the compliment, but he was no longer looking at me.

“I am relieved Fitzwilliam is doing so well,” he said, his voice low.

I nodded in agreement. “As am I,” I whispered.

“What was that?” he asked.

I kept my voice low so as not to interrupt Miss Bingley’s concert. “I am glad your cousin is doing well after his injury.”

Mr. Darcy looked at me strangely, but before I could say anything, Miss Bingley finished her song and we applauded politely, then she looked at me with a glint in her eye I could not like.

“Miss Eliza Bennet, would you play for us?”

“Of course,” I murmured. “Do join me, Cassie.” Two could play that game. If Miss Bingley was talented, Cassie was a virtuoso. I had never heard anyone better and we had spent many happy afternoons playing and singing together.

“Of course, Lizzy. Why do I not play while you sing?”

I smiled at my friend. She knew exactly what Miss Bingley was about, and like the true friend she was, she would not allow me to be embarrassed in public.

She played a song we both knew by heart and we performed well. Colonel Fitzwilliam requested another and we continued on in that vein for a half hour, until we could politely step down and the card tables were brought out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Darcy



Finally, the interminable evening came to an end and the ladies retired. Richard and I joined Bingley in the library for a drink. Thankfully, Hurst and Ashburn went up to bed.

“You seem to be faring well, Colonel,” said Bingley.

“I am feeling much better,” he replied. “I thank you for the invitation to stay. Town is not an ideal place to recuperate.”

“Of course. Think nothing of it.”

Bingley was an affable sort. It was too bad Miss Bennet was not interested in him. They might have made a good couple; well, if they could rein in Miss Bingley.

“Tell me about Lady Cassandra,” Bingley said a few moments later.

I groaned. Leave it to Bingley to chase after a woman a mere day after he has given up on the last one.

“Do not make that face, Darcy!” he cried. “It is not for my benefit I ask.”

“Oh? Who will benefit from these questions then?”

“Your cousin, of course. Did you not notice he and Lady Cassandra in deep conversation after dinner?”

I turned to face Fitzwilliam and saw the tips of his ears were red. Well, this was interesting. “I had not noticed, Bingley. Thank you for bringing it to my attention.” Fitzwilliam glared at me and I just smiled. “As it happens, I do not know the lady at all. I met her only two days ago. Her cousin is a slight acquaintance, but I have heard good things of the family.”

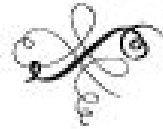
“I have heard the same, but I do not know them at all,” said Bingley. “Neither does Caroline, though she knows of the family.”

“Can a man not have a conversation with a lady without it turning to silly gossip?” grumbled Fitzwilliam.

“It is a friendly conversation after dinner!” cried Bingley. “We are hardly trumpeting in the streets.”

Fitzwilliam sighed and I could not contain my chuckle. Perhaps Lady Cassandra would be a good option for him. She seemed nice enough, and I was encouraged by her friendship with the Bennet sisters. I also liked her energy, though there was an extreme caution about her I did not often come across in ladies of her standing. For some reason, she did not trust easily, and she was especially wary of men. My gut clenched a little thinking about what that likely meant. Someone had wronged her, or frightened her terribly. Judging by the way her cousin stood guard over her, and both Miss Bennets, I would wager it was the latter.

Bingley ribbed Fitzwilliam good-naturedly for a few more minutes, then it was off to bed. I did not lie down so much as collapse on the mattress, though I would have been hard-pressed to say why I was so tired.



I walked along the stream at Pemberley, searching for something. A voice laughed ahead of me and I quickened my pace.

“Come now, Fitzwilliam! You are not even trying to catch me!” called the voice.

I lengthened my stride and moved along the stream, eagerly seeking the lady who was beckoning me. I knew that voice, but I could not recall who it belonged to. Finally, I came to a clearing where I expected her to be but there was no one there.

“Elizabeth!” I called.

A laugh came from the woods to my right, but no one appeared.

“I shall not make it that easy for you,” she replied.

I stepped out of the clearing and into the wood where I thought the voice had come from. A blur of pink streaked by some ways to my left and I pivoted to chase after the running lady. I caught up to her at a willow along the banks, both of us laughing and breathless.

“There. Was that so hard?” she said, a teasing smile on her lips and a sparkle in her eyes.

I wrapped my hands about her waist and pulled her closer. “I concede. Chasing is not only fun for children.”

She laughed gaily and slipped her arms about my neck. It was a simple gesture, as if she did it every day, without hesitation. It was apparent we were completely comfortable with one another, a point made achingly clear when I bent my head to hers and kissed her, pressing her body against mine. Her mouth was an explosion of sweetness, tasting of the strawberries we had eaten before our walk. Her tongue was velvet against mine and I groaned, wondering how I had gotten so lucky. She whispered endearments into my mind as she kissed me, the crush of emotion almost too much to take.

This woman loved me. Really and truly loved me, with her entire being.

And I could not get enough of her. I felt a sort of madness, a need to be near her, as close as humanly possible. I kissed across her jaw, down her neck, her soft cries and breathy words daring me to do more, to be bolder. I ran my hands over her body, skating over her curves with the familiarity of a lover.

I knew this woman. Biblically.

“Oh, Fitzwilliam,” she whispered, her hands clutching at my shoulders. No, not clutching, pushing back my jacket.

“Mr. Darcy. Mr. Darcy!”

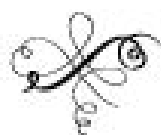
I woke with a start, seeing my valet standing beside the bed.
“What is it, Higgins?”

“You asked me to wake you, sir.”

“Yes, of course. I am awake now.”

My valet walked away and left me with a sweat covered body—amongst other things. Damnation! I had not had such a dream in years. And even when I had, the dreams had not been so vivid, so real.

I shook my head and took a deep breath, then forced myself to prepare for the day. The guests would likely leave today as it had stopped raining last night. I should go down and make my farewells.



When I entered the breakfast room, only Miss Elizabeth Bennet was at the table. Instantly, my mind was flooded with images from my dream. When I had first awoken, the woman from my dream was hazy and unidentifiable. I knew I had called her name, but I could not remember it. Now, seeing the way her eyes sparkled in the morning light, I knew it was she.

I said a terse good morning and moved to the sideboard, silently filling my plate.

“The rain has finally stopped,” she said after I had sat down across from her.

It would have been unforgivably rude to sit at the other end of the table, but I had been tempted. I did not wish to avoid her per se, merely to gather my wits before being thrust in her company.

He is odd this morning, ran through her mind.

I sighed. Today, my gift felt like more of an annoyance than anything else.

“It is good the rain has stopped. The north field does not have the best drainage and more rain would have made the situation worse than it already is.”

She looked at me blankly, clearly having no idea how to respond to such a statement. It was hardly polite breakfast chatter.

“You might mention it to Mr. Ashburn. He takes an interest in such things.”

As he should. It is his property, I thought acidly.

I looked up a few moments later to see Miss Elizabeth watching me with an odd expression on her face.

“I hope you slept well?” Another inane comment. I really should not be let out without supervision.

“Yes, well enough. I had a strange dream, though,” she said.

I choked on the egg I was chewing, going into a terrible spluttering fit and turning red in an undignified manner. Miss Elizabeth had looked away at first, but now she had risen from her chair and was standing beside me, smacking my back

rather hard. I lurched forward from the impact. She was stronger than I would have thought.

Finally, the offending bit of egg left my airway and I raised a hand to let her know she could stop beating me, sucking in ragged breaths.

She stood beside me for another moment, then slowly returned to her chair. Her mood was all worry and concern, and while I was embarrassed—a coughing fit rarely puts one’s best foot forward—I was touched that she cared.

“Are you well, Mr. Darcy?” she asked, her voice gentle.

“I am now, thank you, Miss Elizabeth.” And because I could not resist, I added, “I had not suspected you of being quite so strong.”

She smiled, a blush rising to her cheeks. “I have always been an active sort.” She did not elaborate, and sensing her embarrassment, I said no more.

The remainder of the party joined us, and within an hour, the Miss Bennets were packed into Ashburn’s carriage and on their way to Longbourn. I maneuvered things so that I handed Miss Elizabeth into the carriage. Before she stepped up, I whispered to her, “Would a call tomorrow be welcome?”

She looked at me with surprise, then nodded, saying, “Yes, you are welcome at Longbourn.”

I smiled as I thought about it. I had gone about things in an odd way, and I had likely confused the lady as well as myself, but there was still time to right the ship.



Fitzwilliam accompanied me to Longbourn the following day. I suspected he was going to see Lady Cassandra, but I did not press. Thankfully, we were able to leave on our own. It was more like we snuck out, but that was only because I had heard Miss Bingley saying (in her mind, of course) that she would play in the music room while I wrote letters in the study, presumably to lend pleasant background ambiance.

I had taken the opportunity to pack up my cousin and escape Netherfield.

Longbourn was loud and cheerful, a true family home in every sense. Lady Cassandra and Mr. Ashburn seemed perfectly at home there, behaving almost as if it was their home and not the other way around. When we entered the drawing room, Mr. Ashburn was sitting still as a statue, having his profile drawn by Miss Kitty Bennet. I felt some sympathy for the man. I had done the same for Georgiana many times and it was a tedious affair.

Lady Cassandra sat at a table with the eldest Miss Bennet and a younger lady I did not recognize. I presumed she was the youngest Bennet daughter who was not yet out. They were picking apart a bonnet and adding new ribbons and flowers to it.

After the butler announced us, Miss Bennet rose and curtsied prettily, re-introducing us to her sisters and asking the

youngest to fetch Elizabeth and her father before going upstairs. The young one did not like being dismissed, but Miss Bennet looked at her sternly and the girl scurried away. I was pleased to see she had some backbone to her.

Soon enough we were sitting near the fire, Lady Cassandra next to my cousin and Miss Bennet serving tea. Eventually, Miss Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet joined us.

“Forgive me, gentlemen. My daughter and I were in a chess match I wished to finish before joining you.”

We told him it was no concern and were informed Mrs. Bennet was out, though no one mentioned where. Not that we minded.

“I did not know you played chess, Miss Elizabeth.”

“I play with my father, and sometimes with Miss Lucas.”

I smiled at that. “I should not be surprised. Miss Lucas is an intelligent lady.” I realized a moment too late that I had implied she was not intelligent, and I sat staring at her like a fool whilst trying to think of how to fix my faux pas.

“Would you care for a game, Mr. Darcy?” she asked, a teasing glint in her eye. “We have a board near the window.” She gestured to a pair of chairs with a small table between them set in front of a window on the other side of the room.

“I would enjoy that, thank you.” I followed her woodenly, ignoring my cousin’s chiding comments and unhelpful laughter.

You should take this opportunity to flirt with the lady. Though try not to insult her when you do it, he thought. I glared over my shoulder, but he was looking at the ladies, not me. I sighed. It would be nice to be able to talk through someone's mind sometimes, not just listen.

I settled into the table and arranged the pieces, then looked to Miss Elizabeth. "Your play is first."

She looked at me in a strange fashion, as if she were trying to understand difficult mathematic equations, and then finally turned her attention to the board. She had watched me oddly for a few days now.

Of course! It was my behavior in the garden. I was an idiot for not thinking of it sooner. She must wonder what I was about.

"Miss Elizabeth, I believe I owe you an apology," I said, moving my first piece.

"Oh? Whatever for?" She looked at the board thoughtfully, then made her move.

"I believe my behavior has been..." I hesitated. "Unclear."

She looked at me then, but said nothing.

"It was not my intention to confuse you or to be..." A cad? A simpleton? A clod? "Ungentlemanly."

She was smiling now. "You were perfectly gentlemanly, Mr. Darcy. I would have tolerated nothing less."

I smiled awkwardly, wishing this sort of conversation was easier or that I was less clumsy. “I would like to call on you, Miss Elizabeth. You specifically, not the household. Would that be amenable to you?”

Her eyes sparkled when she smiled then. “I would like that very much, Mr. Darcy.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Elizabeth



“**S**omething strange is afoot, Ruby.”

My cat’s green eyes glittered up at me, her head tilted to the side as she listened.

“I know you will not believe me, but the strangest thing has occurred.”

“Mrroow.”

“I know. It is very odd indeed. Would you believe me if I told you I think I am beginning to hear Mr. Darcy’s thoughts?”

Ruby tilted her head so far it was nearly upside down.

“I know! I can scarce believe it myself. I did not believe it when it first happened. I thought he was talking to me, or that I was imagining what he would say. But it is becoming hard to deny. Can you imagine?”

She hopped onto my bed and curled up before the pillow.

“No, I did not think so.”

I paced my room for the next twenty minutes, wondering if I had lost my mind completely. I finally came to the

conclusion that I was imagining things. I was developing tender feelings for Mr. Darcy and it was only natural that I should wonder what he was thinking. My imagination had simply run away with me.

Though why I would imagine what he thought about his cousin, or that Longbourn was a cozy home, or his curiosity about my family, I did not know.

But I did know that people could not hear one another's thoughts. They simply could not.



“Lizzy, can you talk for a moment?” Cassie asked.

She was in my doorway in her wrapper and nightshift, a candle in her hand.

“Of course. Come where it is warm.” I held open the blanket and she climbed into the bed beside me. “What troubles you?”

“What do you think of Colonel Fitzwilliam? The truth, please.”

“Do I not always tell you the truth?”

She gave me a look that told me to be serious and I sighed, sinking back into the pillows. “I think him an affable man. He seems kind to me—there was nothing about him that gave me pause. He has a great deal of conversation and a well-formed mind. I believe he is very well educated, and there is a

generosity about him that I quite like. I think he may be a bit haunted from his time on the peninsula. I have noticed he tenses when there is a loud noise or a sudden movement.”

“Yes, I noticed that as well. I have seen it before. Hopefully it will lessen in time.”

“I hope so. One of our stable hands behaved similarly when he returned from the war. He did get better eventually. Though it required a great deal of patience, I believe.”

“Yes, of course,” she said absently.

“Do you like the colonel?”

“I do not *not* like him.”

“And?”

“I believe I *could* like him, if I allowed myself.”

I rubbed her back gently, knowing exactly why she held herself back. “Why do you not get to know him slowly, see if he is worthy of your attention and affection first, and then allow yourself to like him?”

She nodded slowly, her expression thoughtful. “It is a wise suggestion. If only I could know his true character before I have entangled myself!” she cried, flopping back onto the pillows. “There are times I wish I could read a man’s thoughts. I am sure there is a great deal I would not want to know, but it would allow me to know his character.”

My mind was whirring with ideas. If I could truly read Mr. Darcy’s mind (I still scoffed to myself when I thought of it), I

could know what he thought of Colonel Fitzwilliam. It would not be the same as knowing the man's thoughts himself, but it would be very close. They had known one another since they were children. Surely, if there was something unsavory in the colonel's character, Mr. Darcy would know about it.

I turned my attention back to my friend and stroked her hair gently. "You do not have to decide today. There is no rush to get to know him either. You may see him daily for a year before you decide. No one is forcing you."

"I know. You are right." She sighed again. "May I sleep with you tonight?"

"Of course!"

She snuggled down into the bed and I stroked her hair, as I had done those awful nights all those years ago. Finally, sleep claimed me, my mind still turning over ideas like a carriage wheel trundling down the lane.

**

The next day, I put my plan into motion. I was likely losing my mind and fit for Bedlam, but on the off chance I was not, I could help my friend. Mr. Darcy and the colonel called shortly after breakfast and I accosted them in the entryway as they were handing their things to the butler.

"Thank you, Larson. I will take the gentlemen back."

The butler nodded and left us alone, the gentlemen looking at me with curiosity.

"Are there games afoot, Miss Elizabeth?" asked the colonel.

I quite liked the mischievous look in his eyes and smiled back broadly. “You shall see, Colonel. But first, we thought you might like a little music. Come with me.”

I turned on my heel and headed to the back of the house where I knew they had never been before. Longbourn did not have a proper music room. There was a small parlor near the drawing room where the best pianoforte and an ancient violin nobody played resided. It was convenient when we had guests and when we did not, my sister Mary often commandeered that space. In the back of the house, there was another small parlor that featured a less grand pianoforte, but it was serviceable and still had a nice sound, and it had been recently tuned. The small room had a divan, two smallish chairs, and a table we used to serve tea. Jane and I often spent time there when our mother did not need us. Thankfully, our mother did not like the room—it was not grand enough for her—and my younger sisters were not fond of it either.

There I went with the gentlemen in tow. Jane and Cassie were at the instrument, Cassie playing as my sister turned her pages.

“We have company,” I said, as if they had not known why I raced out a few minutes before.

Cassie ceased playing and stood, smiling shyly at the colonel. Oh, dear. She already liked him more than she should.

The gentlemen sat in the chairs, swallowing them with their bulk. Had they always been so small? I looked to Jane and we

set our plan in motion. She would ask the gentlemen polite questions, typical of a morning call, and I would observe.

Cassie would speak with the colonel of course, but as the only one without romantic entanglements, we relied on Jane to lead the conversation.

Mr. Darcy seemed surprised by my quietness, but I smiled at him in reassurance and focused all of my energy on trying to hear his mind.

Good lord, I was mad! Had I really thought I could hear a gentleman's thoughts? I was looking right at him, and I heard nothing. Really. What had I been thinking?

And then it happened. In my mind's eye, I saw a forest, thick with greenery, and a stream to one side. There was a woman ahead, and she was skipping away, laughing over her shoulder. I lengthened my stride, only I realized it was not me, but Mr. Darcy who was hurrying down the path. And the lady he chased was... me.

My brows rising to my hairline, I looked at Mr. Darcy squarely in the face. He looked back at me, all calm composure and unruffled self-possession. *He is entirely too unflappable.*

“Do you enjoy walking, Mr. Darcy?”

He looked surprised by my question and turned towards me, away from where Jane and Cassie were speaking to his cousin. “I enjoy a good ramble as much as the next person.”

“In the forest?” I felt my brow ticking up, my lips twisting into a teasing smile. I could not help myself.

“Sometimes, yes.”

“Our young cousins enjoy exploring the woods with Elizabeth,” added Jane. “They are always wishing to play a hiding game or tag. Of course, Elizabeth is the only one quick enough to catch them.”

She smiled sweetly at me and I pursed my lips. Jane was the sweetest of my sisters, but she was not entirely without mischief, and I was being paid back soundly for all the teasing I had done in front of Lord Wilmington this summer.

“Are you fleet of foot, Miss Elizabeth?” asked the colonel.

Mr. Darcy was smirking now, his satisfaction evident from across the table.

“Fleet enough, sir.”

He smiled and turned back to Cassie, while my traitorous sister smiled and sipped her tea as if she had not just embarrassed me in front of guests.

I was jolted from my thoughts by those of Mr. Darcy. He was running again, chasing after me in the forest, but this time he was moving much faster, his long legs eating up the ground. I laughed as I ran ahead of him, though I could tell by my gait that I was not truly trying to get away. He caught me, his strong arms wrapping about my waist and pulling me against him, my feet lifting off the ground.

It was a strange sensation, seeing the events through his mind's eye, but knowing how it would feel to me if it were actually happening. Well, *imagining* what it would feel like—with a great amount of input from the gentleman sitting across from me.

The forest began to look hazy, and Mr. Darcy buried his face in my neck, nuzzling and kissing as I laughed breathlessly. (In his mind, not in the parlor.) His hands skimmed over my hips, then my ribs, then one large hand skated over my breast, capturing it and molding it between his fingers as he groaned in my ear.

“Mr. Darcy!” I called out before I could think what I was saying. My face was flushed, my heart beating wildly in my chest. To think, he was thinking of me in those terms! Imagining his hands on me—it was inconceivable. A liberty he had not been permitted. How dare he trespass on my person in such a way!

Suddenly, I realized the entire room was staring at me. The colonel looked amused, Mr. Darcy startled, and Jane and Cassie were staring at me as if I had lost my mind.

“Yes, Miss Elizabeth?” asked Mr. Darcy, his voice annoyingly calm. He looked the same as he always did, his expression clear, his skin the same shade it always was, while I resembled a ripe apple.

“Forgive me, I forgot what I wished to say.”

I trained my eyes on the floor, unable to look at anyone if I had any hope of reining in my embarrassment. Jane and Cassie

restarted their conversation with the colonel, but I could feel Mr. Darcy's eyes on me.

"Are you well?" he said quietly. I looked up to see he was leaning forward, looking at me with concern in his eyes.

"Well enough."

He nodded, though he clearly did not believe me.

"How long will you and the colonel remain in Hertfordshire?" I asked, desperate to say something that had aught to do with forests or chasing or embraces of any kind.

"I believe we will stay through the Festive Season, though our plans are not yet fixed."

"I see. Will your family in Town not miss you?"

"They might, but I only truly wish to see my sister. She is staying with my cousin, Lady Maryann, Colonel Fitzwilliam's sister. She is content to remain with them, so I must be content to allow her to remain."

I nodded, my mind not on the conversation at all. It was terribly hot and stuffy in the room. Why was there no air? I gulped my tea, desperate to soothe my throat. Mr. Darcy continued to watch me like an artifact in a museum.

I wish he would not watch me so, I thought.

"Forgive me," he said quietly.

I looked at him sharply. "Forgive you for what?"

He startled, his expression nearly panicked. "Nothing. I misspoke."

I now watched him with the same suspicion he had trained on me the last half-hour. *Does he know I am aware of his little chasing scene?* I was embarrassed before, but having him know that I knew of his private thoughts would make everything ten times worse.

He was looking at me shrewdly now, his eyes narrowed and an unreadable expression on his face. I smiled back, trying to project an image of innocence. Judging by the sharp look on his features, I did not succeed.

What are you playing at, Miss Elizabeth?

I heard the question as clear as day in my mind. It was so unusual I startled in my chair. I looked at him suspiciously as he returned the gesture.

I do not know, I said in my mind. This was the most singular conversation of my life, and I was still unsure if it was actually happening or a bizarre figment of my imagination.

It was Mr. Darcy's turn to startle. His eyes widened, then he said, thought, whatever it was, *It is not all in your imagination.*

I felt myself pale and set my shaking teacup on the table.

I rose from my chair on shaky legs. "Jane, I am going to show Mr. Darcy the shrub in the garden he was asking me about at Netherfield. We shall return shortly."

He sprang from his chair and followed me from the room, ignoring the blank expressions of our companions. Once I had my cloak fastened, I was out the door, pulling my gloves on as I went. Mr. Darcy was hard on my heels.

“There is a summer house there.” I pointed to the back of the property where a small white structure was visible in the distance. He nodded and we continued on at a bruising pace, reaching the summer house faster than I ever had before.

“There is a small fireplace if you wish to light it,” I said, pointing to the fireplace in the corner. “It will not do much, but it is better than nothing.”

He set to work stacking the fire while I beat the cushions of two chairs and fluffed the pillows that rested on them. I scooted one closer to the fire, and before I could do the same with the second, Mr. Darcy moved it.

There was a trunk along the wall that held blankets for when my sisters and I would escape here and I took two from it, handing one to Mr. Darcy as I kept my eyes trained on the floor.

“Thank you,” he rumbled, his voice deep and intimate.

I knew bringing him here was highly irregular, but there was nothing to be done for it. There was something very odd going on, and I had to know if it was true, or if I was in fact going mad and fit for Bedlam.

We settled into the chairs by the fire and I pulled the blanket over my knees, tucking it around me. The room was so cold I could see my breath, but the fire was helping. I stretched my hands out to warm them as Mr. Darcy leaned towards me, his elbows resting on his knees.

“How long have you been reading my mind, Miss Elizabeth?”

I halted my movements, wide eyes slowly rising to meet his. His expression was fierce, and I could suddenly understand how he ran half of Derbyshire. He was powerful, strong and assured, and he could be harsh when he wanted to be.

“I will not be harsh with you,” he said, his voice gentling.

I sat back, heat rushing to my cheeks as I swallowed thickly. “What is happening?”

“I believe you are hearing thoughts, Miss Bennet. No?”

I nodded, my tongue thick and useless.

“Do not be afraid. It is not as dire as you believe. I thought you were frightened because you had never encountered another like yourself, but now I think I misunderstood the situation. Is this new to you?”

I nodded. “I did not think it was real.”

He sighed. “Unfortunately, it is.”

“You, too?”

He nodded.

“How long?”

“My entire life.”

I gasped. “How?” I could not finish my question. I did not even know what to ask.

“I do not know how. I have simply always been this way.”

“Are there many like you?” I was suddenly very concerned about what my thoughts had been in public.

He laughed lightly. “I do not think so. You are the first I have ever met.”

“Oh.” I sank into my chair at that, the heat of the fire finally making itself known. “Is it not exhausting hearing all a person’s thoughts all the time?”

He looked at me with narrowed eyes again. It was unnerving. “All?”

“Yes! And not just thoughts. Images, ideas, strange fluffy impressions.”

His brows rose impossibly high. “Miss Bennet, it is very important that you tell me everything. What you hear, how you hear it, in what circumstances. Everything.”

I swallowed. “Very well. I hear your thoughts, at least I think they are your thoughts. I have also seen many images from your point of view. You were in a large house, listening to music. There was a girl I did not recognize playing the harp. You spoke to an older man, he looked like you. Perhaps your father or an uncle? Earlier it was a forest...” I trailed off.

“And I was chasing you,” he finished for me.

“Yes.” Why was my throat so dry?

“I was remembering a dream I had of you a few nights ago.”

“Oh? A dream?”

He nodded. “How long have you been hearing thusly?”

I shook my head. “Only a few days. It was not clear at first. I thought you were talking to me. Now I wonder if you were thinking even then.”

“At Netherfield? The night you played with Lady Cassandra?”

“Yes. That was the first time.”

“It must have been strange for you.”

“Yes, it was. But I thought it was my imagination at first. I still did, up until an hour ago.”

He smiled sadly. “It is not your imagination, though I wish it was. You will learn to manage it in time. Music helps me to tune out the voices. Perhaps it will do the same for you.”

“I could simply avoid you and solve the problem that way,” I teased.

His gaze sharpened. “What do you mean?”

“I mean if I do not wish to hear your thoughts, I could simply not be around you. Why are you looking at me like that?”

His voice was strained when he finally spoke. “Miss Bennet, are you saying you hear my thoughts, and only mine?”

“Yes. Is that not what I have been saying?”

His eyes widened and he sat back in his chair, a stunned expression on his face. “And you hear every thought? Not only the ones pertaining to you?”

I cocked my head to the side, thinking. “I believe so, though I am sure not all. It is very new. Sometimes I hear nothing at all. And you are often thinking about your cousin. You must be very close.”

“We are. But you are saying that you hear all of my thoughts, and no one else’s thoughts?”

“Yes. Is that not what happens to you?”

“Extraordinary,” he mumbled.

“Mr. Darcy, please explain yourself. I am sure I do not need to tell you how odd this all is. I would appreciate it if you would be straightforward with me.”

“Of course, forgive me.” He sat forward again. “My gift works rather differently. I hear the thoughts of everyone, but only if they pertain to me in some way.”

I slunk down in my chair at that. How awful! To walk into a room and instantly know what everyone there thinks of you... It sounded dreadful.

“It is,” he said quietly, a tortured expression on his face.

Without thinking, I reached forward and took one of his hands between my own. “I am so very sorry, Mr. Darcy. That must be a terrible cross to bear.”

He was shocked by my gesture, but soon caressed my hand with his thumb, then brought his free hand to cover mine. We sat there, watching one another, our hands tangled together, saying nothing. We remained thus for some time, until something began to tickle the back of my mind.

Mr. Darcy was feeling agitated, but not in a bad way. His mind was suddenly excited, nearly feverish, and I felt his attention on me, both through his mind and through my own observations. I looked at him with a question in my eyes and his gaze shifted to my lips.

“I would very much like to kiss you,” he said, his voice soft and warm.

“All right.”

I looked at him expectantly and his eyes lightened. He had not expected me to consent. Then he leaned forward, slowly, and pressed his lips to mine. It was only for a moment, but his lips were warm and soft, and I enjoyed the tingle they left behind.

“I should like to do that again,” I said without thinking.

“You are one of the few people who can surprise me,” he said, a smile in his voice. Then he kissed me again, this time bringing his hands to my face and holding me as if I was precious to him.

“Forgive me,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I should not take such liberties.”

“Probably not.”

“You have a way of making me forget myself.”

I cocked my head to one side. “Is that a bad thing?”

“Not entirely,” he said slowly. “It is refreshing in many ways.”

“Oh?”

“But I do not wish to make you uncomfortable.”

I could not contain the laugh that bubbled out of me. “Of all the things that have occurred lately, kissing is the least disturbing of them.”

He smiled, small and knowing, and took my hand. “You will be well, Elizabeth. I will help you through this.”

“You will?”

“Of course. I could do nothing less.”

“Why?” I was cornering him into a declaration, but I was past the point of caring about such technicalities.

“Because I care about you. Very much.”

“I care about you, too,” I whispered, my throat suddenly tight.

We sat thusly, staring at one another and holding hands. I do not know how much time passed before the fire died down and we left the summer house. Mr. Darcy held my arm indecently close as we walked back to Longbourn, but I no longer cared for such things. We were in one another’s minds! A walk across an open field hardly signified in the face of such a monumental event.

“Tell me about Colonel Fitzwilliam,” I said.

“What do you wish to know?”

“Is he a good man? Trustworthy?”

“He is the best of men. Eminently trustworthy in every way. To what do these questions tend?”

I heard a hint of anxiety in his voice and squeezed his arm. “Do not worry, my dear. I do not like him better than you,” I teased.

I laughed but felt his shoulders relax slightly. I was more than a little proud of myself for being right about his feelings. And I had handled it well, I thought.

Then he squeezed my hand. “You are correct. You said just the right thing.”

“I shall have to remember that you are hearing my every thought.”

“Only the ones pertaining to me,” he said.

I smiled sheepishly, a blush rising to my cheeks. I would not tell him how many of my thoughts were about him, but I was sure it was not difficult for him to conclude.

“Actually, I often do not hear your thoughts,” he said, somewhat unexpectedly.

“Oh? Whyever not?”

Now it was his face that reddened. “You are very distracting,” he mumbled.

I smiled like a cat and quickened my pace. At least I was not the only one whose thoughts were not my own.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Darcy



It was extraordinary! Elizabeth could hear my thoughts! It was disconcerting to know that I was not alone in my own mind, but more than that, it was exceedingly pleasant to not feel alone in the world.

For so long, I had been plagued by my so-called gift. It had haunted me at every party and social event, invaded every private conversation, and gotten between me and nearly everyone I had tried to get close to. It had made me jaded and suspicious. I trusted very few people and thought well of even fewer.

But now, I was no longer alone. I would not have to wonder what my wife thought of me, nor would I be concerned that she would judge my gift or think meanly of me for it. Elizabeth would understand my unique challenges and be a partner to me in a way no other woman could have done. I had no idea how such a thing had come about, but I felt remarkably lucky.

For the first time in more than twenty years, I did not feel alone.

“You are thinking very loudly, Fitzwilliam.”

I startled as Elizabeth’s thought invaded my mind. I was at Netherfield, dressing for dinner, and she was miles away.

“Are you at Longbourn?” I asked.

“Yes. I am preparing for dinner. But someone keeps distracting me. I have ignored three of my sister’s questions in the last ten minutes.”

I could not stop the smile that bloomed on my face at that. *“I have never known thoughts to travel over so great a distance.”*

“We must be very special, then,” she replied.

I was smiling like a fool as I tied my cravat when I realized I had forgotten one important thing. In all the excitement, I had not proposed. I had begun seeing our lives side by side, but I had not asked the question.

“I wondered when you would realize that,” she interjected.

“Only you could make me laugh in a moment like this.”

“I have a feeling that will be a large part of my role in your life.” I could hear the smile in her voice and was suffused with a feeling of warmth.

“And what shall my role in your life be?” I asked.

“I do not know yet. I shall have to give it some thought.”

“I cannot wait to marry you, Elizabeth. Will you please be my wife? I promise to love you madly all my days.” I held my

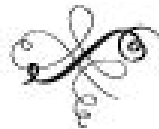
breath, hoping the fervency that had taken over my thoughts and every emotion was not mine alone.

“How could I resist such an honest proposal? I accept, Mr. Darcy. You may call on my father in the morning.”

“I will be there directly after breakfast.”

“We will speak more then. I must go down to dinner now.”

Like a candle being snuffed out, I felt her disappear from my mind. How was she doing that? I had never been able to control my gift so thoroughly, and I had been doing so for years.



Dinner was interminable, as most meals at Netherfield were. My cousin was distracted by thoughts of Lady Cassandra—he was cautiously optimistic that they would make a match. They would make a lovely couple and Elizabeth would be happy to call her closest friend cousin. Charles was talking of horses with Mrs. Hurst, Mr. Hurst was fixated on his meal, and Miss Bingley was prattling at me about something I could not focus on had my life depended on it.

Every thought, every feeling, every sensation was centered on Elizabeth. She was remarkable, and I could not believe she would be mine. She had agreed to my proposal rather easily. Had it been real, or was it another vivid dream?

After dinner, I excused myself to my room, claiming a wish to retire early, and lay on the bed, staring at the canopy, thinking of Elizabeth.

“Are you there?” I asked, knowing I was a milksop and not caring a jot.

“Yes, I have just returned to my room. I could not focus on conversation at all, though I cannot imagine why.”

“I could think of a few reasons.” Was that my voice that sounded so cajoling? I was more accustomed to hearing those tones from Fitz.

“Do they all have to do with you?”

“Perhaps.” I was flirting. Who knew I was capable? I could hear Fitz now, saying of course I would be the one who could only flirt in my mind with a woman who was miles away.

“That would be fair. You have been distracting me terribly all day.” Her voice held a teasing lilt, and I smiled like the cat who got the cream. Elizabeth Bennet was flirting with me. Me!

“You have my apologies.” I was not sorry, but it was the appropriate thing to say.

“You are not, but it is no matter. You can hardly be held responsible for my thoughts.”

“True. I rescind my apology.”

Her laugh pealed over me like bells on Sunday morning and I reveled in the sound.

We were quiet for a moment, then her voice whispered into my mind, *“Fitzwilliam? Do you think we have rushed into a betrothal? We barely know one another.”*

Soft tendrils of unease wrapped around me. *“Do you wish to take back your acceptance?”*

“No. I merely wished to talk with you. I believe we will eventually marry—doing what we are right now is evidence of Providence at work, do you not think? But it is all very sudden...”

“I see. You do not wish to bind yourself to a stranger.”

She sighed. *“I do not wish to injure your feelings.”*

“You are not injuring me. I have held you in esteem for some time now, so it is not so sudden for me. But I gather it is sudden for you?”

“Somewhat, yes,” she said hesitantly. *“Are you angry?”*

“Why would I be angry?”

“Do not most men wish for women to swoon over them by the third meeting?”

“I am not most men.”

“No, you most certainly are not.”

I smiled at that. *“We have a unique opportunity to converse in private. Why do we not learn more about each other in this way?”*

“That is an excellent idea! Why do you not tell me of growing up in Derbyshire? I have never been there, and I

would like to hear about your childhood.”

I did not think it would be very interesting, but I agreed to her request. Over the next hour, I told her of my parents, of my favorite places at Pemberley, and of Nanny, the only one of my caregivers who was still alive.

She expressed a wish to meet her and I promised to introduce them when she came to Derbyshire. She was a little shy when I mentioned her living at Pemberley, but I thought that if I was seeing her in person, I might not have noticed it. It was only being privy to her innermost thoughts that I knew this more vulnerable side of Elizabeth Bennet.

I had cause once again to be thankful to my gift after spending years cursing it. Who knew it would allow me such delightful intimacy with my love?

Suddenly, Elizabeth went silent. I could no longer hear her thoughts or even sense her presence. Was she well? I sat up in bed, worry beginning to overtake me, when she entered my mind once again.

“Pardon me, Fitzwilliam. Nancy, Cassie’s maid, came to borrow something.”

“How do you do that?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“Close your mind to me.”

“Did I do that?”

“You most certainly did.”

“Hmm. Well, Nancy knocked on the door and asked if she could borrow a dressing gown, and since I did not want you hearing about those items of my clothing, I closed the door to our conversation.”

“You closed the door?”

“Yes.”

“Can you do it again?”

Suddenly, she was gone. I sat back against the pillows, in awe of her ability to control her mind. How was she doing it?

“Did it work?” she asked.

“Yes, it did. That is extraordinary! How ever do you manage it?”

“I have no idea! I simply do! Cannot you do something similar?”

“I can make voices smaller, but I cannot turn them off completely.”

She was quiet for a moment, but I could sense she was still there. *“Do you think it might be because you have been receiving all this time, not projecting? You have not had any practice in controlling your own voice.”*

“Perhaps. Let me try to close the door.”

I thought about leaving the conversation, wished for privacy in my own mind, and concentrated on the quiet.

“Do you really mind not having privacy in your own mind?” she asked.

“Well, that clearly did not work.”

She laughed, a sound that never failed to make me smile.
“Perhaps it is Fate’s way of leveling things out between us.”

“What do you mean?”

She laughed again, but this time there was a cynical edge to it. *“Truly, Fitzwilliam? Surely you know you have all the power in our relationship.”*

It did not feel like it. Too late, I remembered even my private thoughts were not private.

“What makes you think that?” she asked gently.

I sighed. *“Elizabeth, I know I have more legal power. I have wealth and influence, and freedom to move about the world. I am aware that being a man makes many things easier for me.”*

“And yet...?”

“And yet, a crook of your finger and I would come running to you. You have my heart in your hand and one tiny squeeze would break me. You own me.”

“Oh!” She was silent for a time, but her thoughts were too jumbled and quick for me to make any sense of them. Finally, she said, *“I care very much for you, too, Fitzwilliam. And I would never hurt you, not intentionally. I hope you know that. My tongue runs away with me sometimes, but I am not mean-spirited. I would never injure a person on purpose. Least of all one I care for as much as you.”*

“Thank you, my dear. That eases my mind.”



The next day, I received a letter from my cousin, Lady Maryann. To my great surprise, the young lady she had been hoping to introduce to Colonel Fitzwilliam, the cousin of her friend, was none other than Lady Cassandra Bellingham.

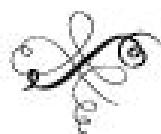
... She is quite the catch, you know. In addition to a splendid dowry, her father left her a small estate in York. I understand it is let to a cousin at the moment, but it would be perfect if she married a younger son. I have heard no real ill of her. There will always be mindless titter, but the worst anyone can say of her is that she is not yet married, though I know she has received two proposals at least, and from eligible men!

My friend (Lady C's cousin) thinks she is merely very particular, and waiting to marry a man whom she truly esteems and admires. These young ladies are terribly romantic, are they not? Anyhow, regardless of her reasons, the lady is available and eminently suitable. And staying only a few miles from you and Richard if I understood you correctly.

Make the most of it, cousin. Richie cannot go back to war—we both know it.

She went on to tell me of her children and their latest escapades. I quickly wrote back that I would do my best to forward the match if that was what the parties involved wished for and would keep her abreast of any progress.

I never thought I would be reduced to playing matchmaker for my cousin, but Maryann was right. Fitz could not go back to war.



I spent the next week conversing near constantly with Elizabeth. We spoke when we arose in the mornings and while we were eating breakfast, when we walked the grounds, when I brushed my horse. She teased me while I wrote a letter to my sister, causing me to blot the page and go through three sheets of paper before I had a fair copy. She once began a conversation while I was in the bath. I tried to hide that fact from her, but it was no use, and she slammed the door on our conversation so quickly my head ached. When I saw her at Longbourn that afternoon, she was red and stammering, and it was a full half hour before she could look me in the eye.

I had felt a rush of feeling for her in the beginning of our strange relationship, but the better I got to know her, the more deeply I loved her. And I was certain it was love now. There was not a doubt in my mind that this all-consuming feeling was anything other than love. What else could it be? She had yet to say the words to me, but she was glowing and blissful when I was near her. Her generally happy aura nearly radiated, and she was always quick to smile at me or take my arm when we walked out.

Fitz and Lady Cassandra's relationship progressed apace. They were both careful and guarded with one another, but any fool could see they liked one another enormously. She was warm and happy when he was near, and he was all attracted agitation and devotion. I privately thought another month would see them engaged, though Lady Cassandra may wish for a long engagement.

Elizabeth has never told me why her friend is so guarded, but when I asked her about it, she was filled with a red rage so intense I knew it was something terrible. She said it was not her story to tell, which is what one always said when the story was particularly awful or damaging. My heart went out to Lady Cassandra. She seemed a kind lady, and she was a good friend to the Bennet sisters.

Bingley's plans for a ball were proceeding nicely. The moment he told me the date, I asked Elizabeth for the first and last dance, as well as the supper set. She agreed, but said it would send a signal to everyone in the ballroom that we were a couple. Of course it would. That was exactly what I intended.

I had not spoken to her father yet—not since Elizabeth expressed her doubts about us not knowing one another very well. I could not argue with that. But we had come to know one another a great deal better over the last week. I would ask her again—in person this time—when I thought she was ready.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Elizabeth



The Netherfield ball was all anyone could talk about. Lydia was unhappy she could not go, and she made such a fuss about it that my father promised she could attend if she behaved herself until the date. She could not dance, but she would be able to wear a nice gown and watch the activity. I held out no hope that she would not sneak a dance, but I could not worry about that any longer. I had enough of my own problems.

Mr. Darcy and I were in regular communication—sometimes it felt like near constant communication—and I knew him much better now than I had only a week ago. I was certain I wished to marry him, and equally certain I no longer needed a long waiting period, but I was not certain how to communicate that to him.

And did not Jane deserve to marry first? She was the eldest, and she had met her betrothed months before I even knew Mr. Darcy existed. Perhaps we could have a double wedding? Somehow, I doubted a viscount could get away with doing such a thing.

Cassie and Ash wrote regularly to their cousin, Lord Wilmington. They assured him Jane was well and that Mr. Bingley had stopped sniffing around her. He was still anxious to see her, and promised to arrive at Longbourn on November 28th, three months to the day from when they had made their promises at the seaside.

Jane would have a lot of explaining to do with our parents, but I thought they would not be too upset. After all, Jane was marrying a lord, and with little trouble or expense on their part. And if they were not happy with her actions, she was of age. She did not need permission to wed.

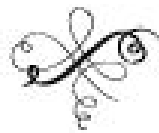
Then there was Cassie. She was falling in love with Colonel Fitzwilliam, but frightened deer that she was, she hardly realized it. We had had many late-night conversations, and she believed that he was a good man and trusted my judgement when I told her the same, but she was cautious still. I could not blame her. She had no parent to look out for her, and she was an enticing target. No wonder Ash watched over her like an overzealous guard dog.

Ash. There was something afoot with him. He would disappear for hours at a time during the day, and he never told anyone where he was going. I had gone so far as to ask Mr. Darcy to read his mind, but as he only heard thoughts pertaining to himself, I found out nothing. I had made an interesting discovery in the process, though.

Mr. Darcy could not only hear a person's thoughts. He could read their mood! He had not told me immediately of it—he

says he was not being secretive, but that it had merely slipped his mind amid all the excitement—but he eventually mentioned it in one of our late chats. It was a terribly useful skill!

He could know if a person was feeling deceitful, or mean-spirited, and act accordingly. Likewise, he knew when someone meant no harm and when they were happy. And because I knew what he knew, if he thought at all about the moods he noticed, I was informed. Altogether, it was an efficient system.



Finally! The Netherfield ball was here at last! Jane and I each had new gowns, and I had our maid spend an extra twenty minutes on my hair. I had a feeling Mr. Darcy would propose again tonight, and I wanted to look my best.

Jane was resplendent, as she always was. Cassie was practically glowing, her smile so wide I could count her teeth. Ash was dashing as per usual, but he wore a mischievous smirk I only saw when he was planning something. I linked my arm with his as we walked down Longbourn's steps.

“What are you up to?” I whispered.

He patted my hand. “Nothing you need worry about. In fact, I believe it is quite good news.”

I raised a brow at that, but he refused to say more. “Very well. Keep your secrets. You are not the only one with secrets.”

He gave me the condescending smile every elder brother has perfected. “Oh, Lizzy! Do you truly think no one knows you are soon to be engaged to Mr. Darcy?” My mouth fell open and he mumbled, “If you aren’t already.”

“What makes you say such a thing?”

“Besides that he calls on you every day?”

I blushed. “He comes with his cousin.”

“Who is after *my* cousin.” He gave me a look that reminded me that Ash was not always fun and games. He and the colonel had that in common. Most of the time they were carefree and cheerful—until they weren’t.

“The colonel is a good man. And he is good to her,” I defended.

“I hope so.”

My mother finally came to the door and we piled into the carriage. I don’t know why I bothered trying to deny I was serious about Mr. Darcy. As soon as we were seen dancing the first together, my mother would begin screeching that we were saved from the entail. All of Meryton would know by the end of the set.

Netherfield was lit up and sparkling, the large house bedecked like a grand lady wearing her finest jewels.

“Miss Bingley has outdone herself,” whispered Ash in my ear as we moved forward to greet our hosts.

“It is lovely. You are dancing the first with Jane?” I asked.

“Yes, unless she would prefer another partner.” He glanced over to the far corner where a man was standing in the shadows.

“Who is that?”

“Do you not recognize your future brother?”

I gasped. “Lord Wilmington is here?”

“Shh. I enlisted the good colonel to help sneak him in. He seemed the sort to like a little mischief.”

“So you approve of him?”

“I do like the man—providing he is good to Cassie.”

“Of course.”

Jane had just finished greeting our hosts when she looked up and saw Lord Wilmington. She gasped, her mouth falling open in a most unladylike way. I tapped her back to prod her forward, and before I had finished greeting Mr. Bingley, Jane was across the room and standing before her betrothed. I had thought she might leap into his arms, but that would have been entirely un-Jane-like—though vastly entertaining.

He soon pulled her behind the pillar and I assumed into the small parlor behind it. Being so familiar with Netherfield was proving to be more helpful than I thought it would.

“Who will you dance the first with now?” I asked Ash. “I believe Mary is available.” I looked around, seeing Colonel Fitzwilliam had already collected Cassie and they were speaking earnestly, heads close together, near the ballroom doors.

“I mean no slight to your sister, but I have made other arrangements.”

He smiled at someone over my shoulder, and I turned to see Charlotte moving towards us. “Charlotte! You look lovely!”

“Thank you, Lizzy! You are turned out well yourself. Is that a new hairstyle?”

“Yes. I have never worn it before, but Jane insisted it would be perfect. What do you think?” I spun about so she could see the style from every angle.

“It is beautiful. Very intricate.”

“I love the braid details just here,” said Ash, pointing at my hair. Ash had excellent taste in gowns and hairstyles. He was not a dandy, but he was very good with details.

“Is he touching your hair?”

I tried not to react to Mr. Darcy suddenly appearing in my mind. *“Where are you?”*

“On the stairs.”

I looked up, and there he was.

“I believe we have lost Lizzy. Enjoy your beau,” Ash teased as he led Charlotte away.

Mr. Darcy marched towards me, the crowd moving seamlessly to make way for him. He stopped before me, whispering, "You are enchanting," before bowing over my hand and kissing it.

"Thank you." My face was burning, and I knew I must be bright red.

The musicians struck the first chords and we moved to join the set. We spoke not a word, moving about one another silently. If Mr. Darcy was thinking anything at all, I did not hear it. Perhaps the music drowned his thoughts out, or perhaps I was too distracted to focus properly.

He kept his eyes trained on mine, his every step sure, his hold firm but gentle. I could not help but think it was an example of our relationship to come. Moving together effortlessly, our steps in sync, our eyes on each other. He was serious where I was playful, grounded where I was light. Yet we understood one another.

Before I knew how it happened, the set ended and Mr. Darcy led me off the floor. I was soon dancing with Ash, then Mr. Bingley and Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr. Goulding and Charlotte's brother. I could barely pay attention to any of them. My mind was full of Mr. Darcy. Finally the supper set came. It was a sprightly dance, filled with hopping and turning about.

"What was Miss Bingley thinking with this dance?" I asked Mr. Darcy. I was hopping like a cat chasing a ball of string.

My hair was beginning to feel loose in places and I was terribly afraid I was about to start sweating.

“She wished to dance the supper dance with me.”

“She asked you to dance?” I interrupted.

“No, but she hinted baldly. I told her I was dancing with you and she said that would send the wrong message to the neighborhood, as we had already danced the first.”

“And what did you say to that?”

“That I understood the message it would send perfectly well, and it was exactly what I wanted to say.”

I smiled at him warmly. Well, as warmly as I could while hopping like a rabbit.

“Then I saw her speaking with the musicians. Now I know why.”

I could not contain my laugh. He looked ridiculous, perfectly done up in his evening clothes and pristine stockings, hopping and turning about like a top.

“Come with me.”

When we were near the terrace doors, I tugged Mr. Darcy behind me and escaped into the cool night air.

I took a deep breath and leaned against the railing. *“This is much better.”*

“Yes. That was enough to make me not wish to dance again for a year.” The look on his face was comical and I could do aught but laugh.

He smiled and walked towards the stairs, holding out his hand to me. “Come. I fancy a walk in the gardens.”

“In the dark?”

“I can see well enough. If you cannot, I will guide you.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will.”

I shook my head but took his hand anyway, letting him lead me down the steps and into the darkened rose garden.

“Someone will notice we are missing,” I whispered.

“Not for some time yet. They will be too busy with supper.”

“You are a very determined man, Mr. Darcy.”

“You have no idea, Miss Bennet.”

Soon we were walking on the gravel paths of the rose garden, the lit windows of the ballroom fading away behind us, and the full moon lighting the way.

“Well, here we are. What—” I could say no more as Mr. Darcy quickly turned around and pulled me to him, pressing his lips against mine. One hand was holding my waist while the other cupped my cheek.

“Forgive me, my love. I am overcome.”

“There is nothing to forgive.”

He breathed heavily, his forehead resting against mine.

“Fitzwilliam,” I said hesitantly. “I would not object if you wished to do that again.”

His eyes lit up, and a bright smile overtook his features.
“You would not?”

“Not at all.”

He kissed me gently then, holding my face in his hands.
“And would you mind doing this every day for the rest of our lives?”

I looked at him with wide eyes. Was this it? Would he propose? Again?

“Will you marry me, Elizabeth?”

“Yes!” Before I knew what I was about, I had leapt into his arms and was practically dangling from his neck. He laughed and twirled me about, his arms tight on my waist. “I love you, Fitzwilliam,” I whispered into his ear.

That earned me another kiss, and I quite lost track of time.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Darcy



By the time we re-entered the ballroom, supper was over and the next set was underway. I looked about for my cousin, hoping to tell him the good news. He was dancing with Lady Cassandra.

“Shall we go to your father?”

“You wish to speak to him here?” she asked, surprise in her voice.

“It is as good a place as any. And he will be suspicious when I lead you out for the last dance.”

“I thought you would not dance again for a year?”

“I will make an exception for you, my dear.”

We made our way through the crowd until we could see Elizabeth’s father in the distance. We were getting closer when we heard a loud screech. Elizabeth stiffened beside me and I looked over the crowd to see what the commotion was.

“I think that was my mother.”

“Oh?” I was careful to contain my thoughts. I did not wish to wound my betrothed minutes after she accepted me.

“It is all right, you may think freely. I know she is vulgar.”

I chose not to respond to that and instead asked, *“What do you think has happened?”*

“You could not be so beautiful for nothing!” rang out over the crowd.

Elizabeth cringed. *“I imagine Jane has just announced her engagement to our parents.”*

“Oh? So she has been secretly engaged? I wondered.”

“They were not formally engaged—they had an understanding. They had only known each other for the summer, so Lord Worthing wanted them to wait before making such a big commitment. He will likely insist on a long engagement.”

“Lord Worthing?”

“Yes. He is Cassie’s father’s heir. His son is Lord Wilmington, and he surprised Jane by coming to the ball tonight. She has spent most of the evening with him.”

“I see.”

Miss Bingley would not be pleased by this news. After all her efforts to keep away from the Bennets, she would learn that Elizabeth would marry me and Miss Bennet was engaged to a viscount who would eventually be an earl. I shook my head. This was precisely why I based my friendships on

character and not status. Positions and titles changed all the time, but truly good friends were where the true value lay.

We finally made it to the Bennets and sure enough, Jane stood before her parents with a tall blond man at her side. Mr. Bennet was looking at the man with a jaundiced eye, but Mrs. Bennet could not stop cooing and fanning herself, moving away as if she would tell someone her news, then coming back to the group because she could not bear to be away from the excitement.

I glanced at Elizabeth and she was giving me a look I was beginning to understand. *“Perhaps we should wait to speak to him until tomorrow. They are overwhelmed as it is,” she said.*

“Good idea. And we do not want to steal any of your sister’s attention.”

“Of course not! That would be rude.”

We smiled conspiratorially at one another and snuck away. We were heading towards the dining room to see what we could find left from dinner when we ran into Miss Lucas and Ashburn.

“Oh, Lizzy! I must tell you my news!”

Miss Lucas pulled Elizabeth aside and I was left to stand about awkwardly with Mr. Ashburn. “Are you enjoying the ball?”

“Yes, it has been enjoyable. You?”

“The same. It has been an eventful evening.”

One of Mrs. Bennet's shrieks cut through the peace and I could not help my wince.

Ashburn laughed. "Mrs. Bennet is not the most mannerly person, but she has no malice in her, and she loves her girls. She will grow on you in time."

I smiled awkwardly, wondering how such a thing would come about, and rejoined Elizabeth as we walked into the dining room in search of sustenance.

"What was Miss Lucas's news?" I asked.

"She and Ash are engaged to be married," she said woodenly.

I stopped and stared at her. "What?"

She sighed. "I know. And more importantly, Charlotte knows." She gave me a look that said we would discuss this in private and I nodded. We made our plates and found seats, ignoring the servants clearing up around us. Thankfully, we had a way to communicate that did not disturb anyone.

"Charlotte knows what she is getting into with Ash. She and I caught him in a... let us call it a compromising position several years ago, so we have known of his preferences for some time."

"I see."

"She and Ash have always been friends, and he wishes for a wife he actually likes. She is not romantic. She is always telling me she wants nothing but a home and children of her own."

I looked at her skeptically at that bit.

“We shall let them figure that part out on their own.”

I valiantly withheld a snort.

“Anyway, he needs an heir and a wife he can trust. Charlotte needs a comfortable home. The more I think on it, the more I think it a fine idea.”

I nodded thoughtfully. *“They will both get what they want and live life alongside a trusted friend. It is more than most have.”*

We continued thusly, eating silently while occasionally smiling or nodding. The servants must have thought we were mad. Thankfully, we were too happy to notice.

I was finally going to speak to Mr. Bennet and secure Elizabeth’s hand. I could not remember the last time I had felt so nervous. My palms were sweating, and my mind raced from one disastrous scenario to the next.

I had arrived at Longbourn, been let into the house by the butler, and deposited into Mr. Bennet’s bookroom to await his presence. I had now been here nearly ten minutes and the man was nowhere to be found. Had I come too early? Elizabeth had communicated to me this morning that her father was awake, but her mother was sleeping—the perfect time to visit.

Perhaps he was testing me. If so, it was working. I felt like a jittery schoolboy. Elizabeth would not be of age for nine long months. If Mr. Bennet denied his consent, or decided to taunt

me by prolonging his decision, which Elizabeth had warned me he might do—the man enjoyed toying with others—it would be months before Elizabeth and I could wed.

I took a deep breath. This was ridiculous. I was Darcy of Pemberley. I did not sit in other men's studies and quake like a child. I would handle this in a straightforward manner like a did everything else, albeit with more finesse.

“Good morning, Mr. Darcy.”

I stood abruptly to greet Mr. Bennet. I did not know how long he had been standing in the doorway to the study, but it could not have been long, for I had not noticed his thoughts, though at this moment he felt highly amused by me.

“Good morning, sir.”

“I gather you wish to speak about something in particular.”

“Yes.” This was the moment. I squared my shoulders. “I have come to ask for the hand of your daughter Elizabeth.”

He smiled with a strange glint in his eyes and moved past me to sit behind his desk. “And what makes you want to do that?”

I nearly spluttered. What a question! “I love her. She is perfect for me in every way, and I believe I can make her happy.”

“All men feel that way when they first make an offer. But how will you feel in five years' time if she has not given you a son? Or in ten years when you grow bored? Or when she has lost the bloom of youth?”

“Pemberley is not entailed and if I must, I can choose a cousin or nephew to inherit. The only requirement is that the heir have Darcy blood.”

He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “Go on.”

“Miss Elizabeth is beautiful, but it is not why I love her.”

“It cannot hurt.”

“Well, of course not, but still.” What was the man about? “She is intelligent and interesting. I love the way her mind works. I do not think I could ever grow bored by her, any more than I could grow bored with watching the sun rise over Pemberley.”

He tilted his head back as he considered me. I could not hear his thoughts, but I chalked it up to my agitation. I could still feel his emotions and he was contemplative, though still mildly amused.

“Very well. Explain your situation.”

I relaxed a fraction and told him of my income and investments, and what I intended to settle on Elizabeth. The eldest son would be the heir, unless he was unfit for some reason, and I had a living in my gift that would be appropriate for a younger son. We canvassed the dowries I would provide for my daughters and the pin money I would give my wife.

Thankfully, knowing others’ thoughts and reading their feelings had some advantages. Every time I was approached with a request to invest, I knew whether or not the person was sincere, and if things changed for the worst, I knew that, too,

before it became catastrophic. My investments were nearly as profitable as my estate and growing every day. I was more than able to provide for my family.

After a half hour, I was released from the book room and found Elizabeth waiting for me in the corridor.

“Well?” she asked. “What did he say?”

“You were right. He enjoyed toying with me. But he gave his consent in the end. We may marry in two months’ time.”

She let out a happy squeal and embraced me swiftly, then pulled me by the arm to the back of the house. We were once again in the small parlor where I had first heard her speaking to my mind. She shut the door quietly and turned to face me, her expression expectant.

“Tell me everything.”

I laughed and made myself comfortable, then proceeded to tell her all about my conversation with her father.

“Oh, I forgot to mention. My cousin asked Lady Cassandra for a formal courtship. I know it is uncommon, but he felt she needed the reassurance that his intentions were honorable.”

She smiled brightly. “I know. She told me last night that he promised to propose within three months if she would promise not to run away before he could finish the sentence. Cassie is very happy. She likes him a great deal, but she does not trust easily.”

“It is a big decision. One can hardly blame her.”

She smiled dreamily and took my hand. "I am very happy, Fitzwilliam," she whispered.

I leaned down to kiss her, but before I could touch my lips to hers, I heard loud footsteps in the corridor and leapt up, striding across the room to stand by the fireplace.

"Ah, there you are, Elizabeth," said Mr. Bennet with a smirk. The old man knew exactly what he had interrupted. "Your mother is coming down. I imagine you would like to tell her your news."

"Yes, of course, Papa."

"Are you staying for breakfast, Mr. Darcy?" he asked me.

"I will, thank you." I supposed I could find something to do while I waited for Elizabeth to speak to her mother.

"Why do we not play a game of chess while Elizabeth speaks to her mother?"

I whipped my head towards Mr. Bennet. His words were so close to my own thoughts I found it mildly eerie. "Very well," I said hesitantly. "Let us have a game."

Elizabeth was about to excuse herself when Mr. Bennet smiled sardonically and said, "Relax, Mr. Darcy. It is not as if I am reading your mind."

He laughed darkly and moved back down the corridor.

My eyes met Elizabeth's, wide with horror. "You don't suppose...?" she asked.

"My God, I hope not."

Then we burst into laughter.

The End

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Elizabeth Adams is a book-loving, tango-dancing, Austen enthusiast. She loves old houses and thinks birthdays should be celebrated with trips—as should most occasions. She can often be found by a sunny window with a cup of hot tea and a book in her hand. She writes romantic comedy and comedic tragedy. You can find more information, short stories, and outtakes at eadamswrites.com.